

Islam for the indentured Indian: a Muslim missionary in colonial South Africa*

Nile Green

UCLA

green@history.ucla.edu

Abstract

Tracing the migration of Muslims from India to South Africa's Natal colony in the late nineteenth century, the article focuses on the missionary activities of Ghulām Muhammad “Sūfī Sāhib” (d. 1329/1911). Placing Ghulām Muhammad in a new religious marketplace of competing religions, and versions thereof, the article examines the strategies through which he successfully established his form of Islam among Natal's indentured and merchant Muslim classes and used the fabric of religion to bind together a distinctly “Muslim” community from the heterogeneous individuals and groups brought from India by commerce and the plantation economy. As a founder of shrines no less than madrasas, Ghulām Muhammad demonstrated the ways in which a customary Islam of holy men, festivities and hagiographies flourished and responded to the demands and opportunities of modernity. Building on the popular appeal of customary piety, Ghulām Muhammad consolidated his success by providing a range of social services (education, healthcare, burial) for the Indian poor of Natal, to create an effective public platform for the norms of Shari‘a in South Africa.

Introduction: Missionary religions in colonial Natal

In the late nineteenth century Natal offered fertile ground for a wide variety of missionary organizations. As the religious dimension of the great scramble for Africa in which Muslim networks were no less active than their Christian counterparts, as in other regions of the continent many such missionary societies targeted black Africans. With the emergence of a large Indian community in Natal through the immigration of indentured labourers from Calcutta and Madras, Natal was also able to tempt missionaries with more familiar quarry by way of Indians on whom the effectiveness of their proselytizing arsenal had already been tested in the subcontinent. Around this Indian community there developed a missionary market in which Hindu and Muslim organizations operated alongside their

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Christian competitors, many of the latter being missions transferred from India rather than exported directly from Britain. These organizations should also therefore be located among the patterns of religious circulation that characterized the Indian Ocean, for alongside the origins of the Muslim and Hindu missions on the Indian side of the ocean many of the Christian missionaries who came to Natal had been trained in India and Ceylon, from where they received financial support in addition to that from Europe. With these dual sources of supply, Natal saw a disproportionately high number of Christian missions devoted to its Indian population.¹ With their funding and methods already in place from India, and with their long-standing contact with the “low” castes who made up much of the indentured workforce, Christian missions were swift in their pursuit of the shiploads of labourers. In Natal’s great port of Durban, Christian missionaries were well ahead of their competitors, establishing the first school for Indian children in Natal as early as 1867. By the early 1870s several more Christian mission schools and charitable institutions for Indian children had opened in Durban.² Hindu and Muslim organizations were slower in their response, perhaps in reflection of the relative newness of the idea of Hindu and Muslim religious professionals pandering to the poorest and in terms of traditional prestige the least rewarding sectors of Indian society. But once established, the Hindu and Muslim competition proved effective and the swift success of these counter-missions led to serious concern among the Christian organizations that had dominated the Natal market of lost souls for several decades.³ So it was that in the early twentieth century members of neo-Hindu groups like the Āryā Samāj began to travel to Natal in the wake of the British missionary societies, axiomatically viewing the “Hindus” among the region’s labour force as their own congregation and at the same time as none the less ripe for instruction and reform.⁴ Although the Āryā Samāj had been founded in Bombay in 1875, it took until 1908 for their representative Swami

- 1 See J. M. Arnold, *Kind Words and Loving Counsel to the Malays and Other Muslims* (Cape Town: Murray & St. Ledger, 1879), J. B. Brain, *Christian Indians in Natal, 1860–1911: An Historical and Statistical Study* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1983), 193–235 and C. Villa-Vicencio, “Mission Christianity”, in M. Prozesky and J. de Gruchy (eds), *Living Faiths in South Africa* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995).
- 2 See Brain, *Christian Indians*, p. 198 on Catholic mission schools; pp. 202–4 on Methodist mission schools; pp. 212–5 on Anglican mission schools and p. 223 on Baptist mission schools. Anglican missionaries were relative latecomers to Natal’s indentured workforce, only establishing themselves there in 1883 (albeit with the well-funded and influential St Aidan’s Mission), several decades after the Catholic and Methodist churches.
- 3 See S. M. Zwemer, “The Moslem menace in South Africa”, *Missionary Review of the World* 37 (October 1914).
- 4 See A. Diesel and P. Maxwell, *Hinduism in Natal: A Brief Guide* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1993) and T. Naidoo, *The Arya Samaj Movement in South Africa* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992). On Sufi-inspired responses to Āryā Samāj proselytization in India at this time, see Y. S. Sikand, “The *Fitna* of *Irtidad*: Muslim missionary response to the *Shuddhi* of Arya Samaj in early twentieth century India”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 17/1, 1997.

Shankarānandajī Māhārāj to arrive in Durban and preach the society's principles. Still, the Samāj was part of a larger trend, and four years later the new spirit of large-scale religious identifications found expression in the formation of the South African Hindu Māhā Sabhā.⁵

No less successful was the series of Muslim missions dispatched to the Indians of Natal. Among these, the earliest and most influential was that of Ghulām Muhammad “Sūfī Sāhib” (d. 1329/1911), who forms the focus of this essay.⁶ For all his energy and influence, Ghulām Muhammad was a man of his age, catching the same current of trans-regional identification through religion that swept other such religious movements to the crest of history as the smaller world of the twentieth century turned once-distant “co-religionists” into new and indubitably imagined communities based on the paradigm of religion. Through Ghulām Muhammad's promotion in Natal of Urdu as an “Islamic” language, and his creation in Natal of a sacred community geography and the rituals to accompany it, he helped formulate a distinctly Muslim identity among South Africa's Indian migrants that would mark a boundary based on religion between members of the Tamil and Konkani labouring class, as well as provide a focus for the charitable activities of the new Muslim merchant class that developed in Durban during the 1890s.⁷ In a process that was reflected among East African Ismailis at the same time, Ghulām Muhammad thus formulated a “Muslim” identity for the disparate Indian minority in Natal.⁸ In this respect, his role in the promotion of Urdu in Natal was particularly important, sponsoring overseas the role that the language was acquiring during this period in India as the proper language of the Indian Muslims conceived as a discrete community or “nation” (*qawm*), an “Islamic” language for the subcontinent that in an age of both religious and

5 Naidoo, *The Arya Samaj Movement*, 62–3.

6 The earliest source (in Urdu) on Ghulām Muhammad's life is Shaykh Dā'ūd bin Sulaymān, *Riyāz-e-sūfī* (Bombay: Mustafā'ī Steam Press, 1331/1913; facsimile reprint Durban, 2001). (All subsequent page references are to the Durban edition. I am extremely grateful to Naeem Khan Sabiri of Durban for supplying me with a copy of this text.) Several modern accounts of Ghulām Muhammad also exist. G. R. Smith, “A Muslim saint in South Africa”, *African Studies* 28/4, 1969, consists of a short study based largely on oral testimony collected in Durban during the 1960s. This oral tradition is expanded with documentation from Ghulām Muhammad's shrine by Shah Mohamed Saeid Soofie and Shah Abdul Aziz Soofie, *Hazrath Soofie Saheb and His Khanqahs* (Durban: Soofie Saheb Badsha Peer Darbar, n.d. (c. 2002)). I have also previously discussed Ghulām Muhammad in “Saints, rebels and booksellers: Sufis in the cosmopolitan western Indian Ocean, c. 1850–1920”, in K. Kresse and E. Simpson (eds), *Struggling with History: Anthropology and History in the Western Indian Ocean* (London: Hurst & Co., 2007). More generally, see A. R. Hampson, “The mission to Muslims in Cape Town”, *The Moslem World* 24/3, 1934 and W. J. Van der Merwe, “Missions to Muslims in South Africa”, *The Moslem World* 26/3, 1936.

7 On this class, see V. Padayachee and R. Morrell, “Indian merchants and Dukawallahs in the Natal economy, c. 1875–1914”, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 17, 1991.

8 See A. Shodhan, “Legal formulation of the question of community: defining the Khoja collective”, *Indian Social Science Review* 1/1, 1999.

vernacular nationalism was more “ownable” and accessible than Arabic.⁹ Here Ghulām Muhammad followed more specific currents of linguistic change in his own Konkani community in India, in which the use of Urdu spread significantly during the early twentieth century, partly as a result of migration from the Konkan coastline of western India to its economic centre at Bombay.¹⁰ Again, Ghulām Muhammad’s activities should be seen in their context, for due to the disruption that indentured migration had caused to the caste and *birādarī* system, language was also emerging as an identity and community marker among other Indians in South Africa at this time.¹¹ Although early posters advertising the rituals of Ghulām Muhammad’s mosque, madrasa and shrine in Durban were also printed in Tamil until around 1915, it was Urdu that was chosen as the language of instruction and dissemination among Ghulām Muhammad’s followers.¹² From the start of Ghulām Muhammad’s mission in the mid-1890s to more recent times, even with the spread of English among Natal’s Indians (perhaps in response to it) Urdu has remained the liturgical language of the prayers and chants that accompany the devotional rituals that he and his heirs sponsored. In this as in so many other aspects of his movement, Ghulām Muhammad reflected the wider trends of “counter reform” seen most famously in the evolution of the Barēlwī movement in India during Ghulām Muhammad’s lifetime and its gradual relocation in the diaspora in the decades after the death of its founder Ahmad Razā Khān (d. 1340/1921).¹³

- 9 On later organizations for the promotion of Urdu in South Africa, particularly the *Bazm-e-adab* originally founded in 1932, see Anon., “Origin and development of Islam and Islamic education in South Africa since the seventeenth century”, typescript, Durban Cultural and Documentation Centre, file Religion: Islam (95/173) and “Hajee Sayed Mohideen Abdul Rahman [obituary, dated 15th May 2003]”, Durban Cultural and Documentation Centre, file Literature. On the “sacralisation” of Urdu in the modern era more generally, see T. Rahman, “Urdu as an Islamic language”, *Annual of Urdu Studies* 21, 2006.
- 10 See O. Khalidi, “Konkani Muslims: an introduction”, *Islamic Culture* 74/1, 2000, 140–42.
- 11 See R. Ebr.-Vally, “Migration of an identity: South Africans of Indian descent”, in P. Gervais-Lambony, F. Landy and S. Oldfield (eds), *Reconfiguring Identities and Building Territories in India and South Africa* (Delhi: Manohar, 2005), 227.
- 12 Early printed invitations for the celebration of the death anniversary (*‘urs*) of Muḥn al-dīn Chishtī in Durban and Ghulām Muhammad himself are preserved (uncatalogued) at the Soofie Saheb Archives in Riverside, Durban. On print culture and religious reform among Tamil Muslims in the same period, see J. B. P. More, *Muslim Identity, Print Culture and the Dravidian Factor in Tamil Nadu* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2004).
- 13 See U. Sanyal, “Generational changes in the leadership of the Ahl-e Sunnat movement in north India during the twentieth century”, *Modern Asian Studies* 32/3, 1998, and *idem.*, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barehwi and His Movement, 1870–1920* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999). I consider the Barēlwī movement as “counter reformist” through its effort to change customary devotional Islam even as part of its strategy to defend elements of this “Indian” Islam from the criticism of other reformist organizations.

A missionary venture on the trade roads of Empire

According to his Urdu biography *Riyāz-e-sūfī*, printed in Bombay in 1331/1913, Ghulām Muhammad Sūfī Sāhib (“Soofie Saheb”) was born in 1269/1852 in Ibrahimpatan, a small ocean port in the Ratnagiri district of the Konkan coast of the Bombay Presidency.¹⁴ Despite this, on the Certificate of Domicile issued to him in 1909 at Port Natal during one of his several sea-journeys between India and South Africa, his age was recorded as being forty-six years, suggesting a year of birth around 1863, that is, almost a decade later than that recorded in his biography.¹⁵ It is unclear what sense is to be made of these conflicting and near-contemporary accounts of Ghulām Muhammad’s age, though it seems possible that he may have declared himself younger than he was in order to ease the official process of his right of domicile in Natal Colony in light of the Immigration Restriction Act (Natal) of 1897, which laid restrictions on the age of Indian migrants.¹⁶ His place of birth is rather less contentious and, since a great many Ratnagiri Muslims migrated to Bombay in the second half of the nineteenth century, it seems safe to conclude that Ghulām Muhammad was born in Ibrahimpatan but later moved to Bombay from that town in the Ratnagiri District as *Riyāz-e-sūfī* claims.¹⁷

In line with such colonial records as the Ships Lists that recorded statistical information on the indentured migrants and which, through their references to “identifying marks”, sought to identify Indians by their bodies no less than their still flexible names, Ghulām Muhammad’s Certificate of Domicile provides us with a more intimately physical description of this Muslim missionary than is traditionally found in the Islamic biographical literature of which *Riyāz-e-sūfī* forms an example. Thus we know that Ghulām Muhammad was five feet six and three-quarter inches in height and bore a scar below his left knee. From his family archive we also know that he claimed to be of Arabian descent, for this was testified to in a genealogical certificate (*shajara*) demonstrating his belonging to a long line of Muslim scholars and judges (*qāzī*). Such Arabian ancestries were, however, commonplace among the Muslims of the Konkan, and the small ports of the Konkan littoral were able to maintain their centuries’ old trading and pilgrimage links with the Arabian peninsular well into the

14 Sulaymān, *Riyāz-e-sūfī*, 4–5. For a study of this text, see N. S. Green, “The dilemmas of the pious biographer: writing the life of a Muslim missionary” *Journal of Religious History* (forthcoming).

15 Colony of Natal, Immigration Restriction Department, Certificate of Domicile, No. 4834, issued at Port Natal, 21 December 1909 (facsimile reprinted in Soofie and Soofie, *Hazrath Soofie Saheb*, 55).

16 On anti-immigration legislation targeting Indian migrants in the opening decade of the twentieth century, see Ebr.-Vally, “Migration of an identity”, 222–4. The Immigration Restriction Act (Natal) had been further updated in 1900, 1903 and 1906.

17 On the Ratnagiri District and its people, see W. W. Hunter, J. S. Cotton, R. Burn and W. S. Meyer (eds), *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908–31), vol. 21, 244–58. By 1901, Muslims represented 7 per cent of the population of the District; their main language was Konkani.

colonial period. But in placing him as a member of the *ashraf* (“noble”) birth-line among India’s Muslims, this “Arab” ethnicity also served to place Ghulām Muhammad on equal terms with the new middle class of Indian Muslim merchants in Natal, who likewise considered themselves as Arab traders with roots in Arabia and branches all round the ocean, not only in India.¹⁸ By these means, in the new diaspora in South Africa, defining oneself as Arab rather than Indian could also serve as a strategy of adapting to displacement from India, which need only be considered a stopping-place (even if for several centuries) rather than a homeland.

Despite their small numbers, in fealty to their remembered ancestry the Konkani Muslims among whom Ghulām Muhammad was raised maintained a slender tradition of Arabic learning in the intellectual backwaters of the minor ports of western India. According to Ghulām Muhammad’s biography, it was in pursuit of such studies that he moved from Ibrahimpatan to Kalyan, a small town with a well-established Muslim community lying thirty-three miles to the north-east of Bombay. His father already acted as the imam of the Friday mosque in Kalyan and so it was there that Ghulām Muhammad completed his studies before eventually becoming imam of the same mosque himself.¹⁹ After the death of his father, in 1892 he left Kalyan to travel to Bombay in order to make the *hajj*.²⁰ As for so many of India’s Muslims, the *hajj* provided a first experience of sea travel that made further journeys possible. And like many other *hājji*s of the period, after completing the pilgrimage Ghulām Muhammad travelled on to Baghdad to visit the great Sufi shrine of ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī (d. 561/1166), where *Riyāz-e-sūfī* claims that he was initiated into the Qādiriyya order by the Ottoman Sufi Ghulām Mustafā Effendī, the hereditary keeper of ‘Abd al-Qādir’s shrine.²¹ After a period of residence in Baghdad, his biography then presents him travelling to Hyderabad, where he entered the circle of the influential counter reformist Sufi, Habīb ‘Alī Shāh (d. 1323/1906).²² Despite the testimony of *Riyāz-e-sūfī*, in view of the fact that Ghulām Muhammad and Habīb ‘Alī were both resident in Bombay by the early 1890s, it seems more likely that their association was made in Habīb ‘Alī’s meeting house beside Bombay’s Mazgawn dockyard, where many Konkani Muslims were settled. It is this version of events that is recorded in the oral tradition of Ghulām Muhammad’s family in Natal.²³

Ghulām Muhammad’s relocation to Bombay in the early 1890s reflected a much larger migration of Konkani Muslims to the city that had taken

18 On other Arab mercantile and Sufi inter-relations in the western Indian Ocean during this period, see A. Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea: Family Networks in East Africa c. 1860–1925* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003).

19 Soofie and Soofie, *Hazrath Soofie Saheb*, 45, citing a family genealogical document (*shajara-nāma*) dated 1185/1771 concerning Ghulām Muhammad’s ancestors. On Kalyan, see Hunter et al., *Imperial Gazetteer*, vol. 14, 322–3.

20 Sulaymān, *Riyāz-e-sūfī*, 5–7. However, the dates rely on Soofie and Soofie, *Hazrath Soofie Saheb*, 47.

21 Sulaymān, *Riyāz-e-sūfī*, 7–8.

22 The main source on the life of this figure is Hājji Muhammad Maqbūl, *Manāqib al-habībīn* (Delhi: Jahna Litho-Press, n.d. [c. 1910]).

23 Soofie and Soofie, *Hazrath Soofie Saheb*, 49.

place over the previous decades. Indeed, by the turn of the twentieth century his home district of Ratnagiri had come to be regarded as “the great recruiting ground of the Bombay Presidency”.²⁴ In 1872 there were 71,000 people resident in Bombay who were registered as born in Ratnagiri District, a figure that by 1901 had more than doubled to 145,000.²⁵ It was chiefly among the Konkani community in Bombay that Ghulām Muhammad’s own shaykh, Habīb ‘Alī Shāh, taught, even though he himself was from Hyderabad. Ghulām Muhammad’s religious endeavours were echoed in the changes taking place among his own Konkani community in Bombay during the years prior to and after his departure for Durban in the mid-1890s. On the one hand these changes were occurring through the deliberate efforts of Muslim pietists like Habīb ‘Alī, as well as being a side-effect of more general patterns of social change associated with the experience of urbanization. Thus in the last decades of the nineteenth century, the dress habits of Bombay’s Konkani Muslims changed considerably, seeing the abandonment of the *angarakha* and *jāma*, which had also been worn by Hindus and Muslims from the Konkan, in favour of the *shaya* long-coat that was formerly worn only by those Konkanis who had performed the *hajj*.²⁶ Konkani headdress also changed in Bombay to express a growing self-consciousness as a distinctly Muslim community, a religious identification that now implied a commonality capable of transcending older community formations based around language, region or occupation. Again, these developments were not limited to Bombay and were also reflected in the changing dress habits of mill hands and other Muslim workers in the industrializing cities of northern India.²⁷ But their significance in Bombay came through the city’s role as a net exporter of religious trends which, in the present case study, affected the creation of a new community in South Africa. Such changes in sartorial habits – as well as in physical culture more generally – formed an important part of the bigger picture of religious reform in India, linking the individual body to emerging religious formulations of the collective social body.²⁸ Far from being merely unconscious changes in fashion, such physical transformations were actively promoted in the cheap religious handbooks that flourished in vernacular languages with the coming of print, pamphlets which specified everything from the proper length of beards to the right kind of “Muslim” shoes. With its own fiercely

24 Hunter et al., *Imperial Gazetteer*, vol. 21, 250.

25 *Ibid.*

26 For this section I have relied on the *Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island* (Bombay: Times Press, 1909), vol. 1, 254–62.

27 See N. Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 263–8. As Muslim politics in certain places merged with the nationalist movement – as well as in a reflection of the deliberately downward social mobility of the new Muslim pietists like Habīb ‘Alī Shāh, who preached among the growing proletariat – in the 1920s the Kanpur ‘*ālim* Mawlānā Āzād Subhānī similarly “adopted the symbol of the *garha* or handwoven coarse cloth produced by mainly Muslim artisans” (*ibid.*, 264).

28 See N. S. Green, “Breathing in India, c. 1890”, *Modern Asian Studies* 42/2–3, 2008.

competitive missionary market in which Habīb ‘Alī himself vied for the following of Mazgawn’s Muslim mill-hands and dock-workers, it is therefore Bombay that emerges as the birthplace of Habīb ‘Alī and Ghulām Muhammad’s mission no less than that of the Āryā Samāj.

As well as working in the foundries and mills around Mazgawn, a significant proportion of the Konkani Muslims who migrated to Bombay worked as lascars aboard ships travelling in and out of the city, while others worked as porters and messengers in the city’s dockyards. Like Ghulām Muhammad’s own sea journeys, such occupations represented a pattern of continuity with precolonial Konkani Muslim life: the sea was as familiar to the Konkani working man as it was to the new missionaries who emerged from their community. It is little surprise then that in the years before Ghulām Muhammad’s death in 1329/1911 many other Konkani Muslims also migrated to Natal, as well as to Transvaal and Cape Colony.²⁹

In line with these fellow Konkani migrants, a couple of years after he became Habīb ‘Alī’s disciple Ghulām Muhammad embarked on the journey from Bombay to Natal which was to lay the basis for his fame among later generations of Indian Muslims in South Africa. In 1895 he left Bombay aboard the *SS Hoosen* to bring the message of Habīb ‘Alī’s sober and scholarly sub-order of the Chishtī Sufīs to the Indian population that had developed in Natal since the 1860s. But Ghulām Muhammad’s journey did not reflect the travels of Konkani jobseekers and the indentured sea-crossings of the Tamil labourers, but rather those of the “Passenger Indians” who had been setting themselves up in small and large businesses in Durban since the 1880s. For the different steamships on which he sailed on his several journeys between India and Natal (such as the *SS Umzinto XI* or the aforementioned *SS Hoosen*) were precisely those used by Indian merchant migrants of this “Passenger” class, several of the ships being owned by Indian merchants themselves. Announcements and recommendations for these steamships could be found in the advertising section of the *Indian Opinion* newspaper founded in Durban by Gandhi and supported by a mercantile readership, part of a well-established infrastructure of travel and trade into which Ghulām Muhammad was able to position himself in the 1890s.

It is of course impossible to recover Ghulām Muhammad’s private motivations in making this journey, but according to *Riyāz-e-sūfī* he was specifically instructed to go to South Africa by his shaykh Habīb ‘Alī Shāh in order to spread “the light of Islam and encourage people to keep the commands of God and the Prophet”.³⁰ While we should read such hagiographical allocations of motive with caution, given the activities of Habīb ‘Alī Shāh in Bombay at the end of a network of Sufi madrasas and khanaqahs that in the previous half-century had spread from Punjab to the

29 On the earlier maritime history of this community, see R. Chakravarti, “Merchants of Konkan”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 23/2, 1986 and *idem.*, “Coastal trade and voyages in Konkan: the early medieval scenario”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 35/2, 1998.

30 Sulaymān, *Riyāz-e-sūfī*, 8.

United Provinces, Hyderabad and then Bombay, this sense of deliberate purpose rings true in a period characterized by increasing missionary competition for Indian bodies and souls. Certainly, the Certificate of Domicile with which Ghulām Muhammad was eventually issued in Natal in 1909 recorded his profession as “priest”.³¹ But by then, almost fifteen years after he first arrived in Durban, Ghulām Muhammad was by no means the only professional Muslim “priest” working or seeking work there, and his success overshadowed the failures of a good many unknown Muslim preachers eager to establish themselves among Durban’s increasingly prosperous Muslim merchant class. An article in Durban’s *Indian Opinion* from 1911 describes how “a Moulvi or Mahomedan priest” was denied permission to land in Durban, despite having the money to pay the required deposit of £10 on arrival.³² In response to local Muslim criticism of this refusal, the immigration officer claimed that there were already five such “Mahomedan priests” staying in Durban under the visiting pass scheme alone. But entry to Durban was not in itself an assurance of success and although Ghulām Muhammad was allowed to land on his first journey of 1895, his attempts to gain a following were unsuccessful on this initial expedition and he was to return to India several times over the next fifteen years, gradually persuading other male members of his extended family to join him and support his venture in classic migrant strategy.³³ The adaptation of this ready-made network of kinship was to prove key to his success.

It is important to explore both the institutional and cultic means by which Ghulām Muhammad was able to establish himself in Durban during the years between his first arrival in 1895 and his death in 1911. Although over time he would prove himself to be the most influential religious figure among Natal’s Muslims, he was by no means the earliest Indian figure to found formal Islamic institutions in the colony. While no information survives on the religious practices of the Muslims among the first waves of indentured migrants in the 1860s and 70s, given the fact that formal Muslim worship can in principle be performed anywhere, it seems highly likely that prayers were offered in the sugarcane fields and the dormitories before the foundation of the first mosques in Natal. It was not until some twenty years after the arrival of the first indentured Indian Muslims in Natal that the earliest formal site of Muslim worship emerged with the establishment of the Friday mosque in Durban’s Grey Street in 1881. This was six years after the founding of the earliest recorded Hindu temple in Durban, located in the Magazine Barracks in Durban’s dockyards.³⁴ The founding of the Grey Street mosque was a direct result of the arrival in Durban of the Indian Muslim merchants we have seen forming a second wave of migrants. The

31 Reproduced in Soofie and Soofie, *Hazrath Soofie Saheb*, 55.

32 Anon., “Immigration difficulties: Mahomedan priest sent away”, *Indian Opinion*, 2 December 1911, 453.

33 For a fuller study of the processes of the migration and trans-nationalization of a South Asian Sufi tradition between Pakistan and Britain, see P. Werbner, *Pilgrims of Love: The Anthropology of a Global Sufi Cult* (London: Hurst, 2003).

34 On the foundation of this temple, see F. Meer, *Portrait of Indian South Africans* (Durban: Avon House, 1969), 175.

mosque came about when a small brick building on Grey Street was purchased in 1880 by the merchant and subsequent employer of Gandhi, Abū Bakr Amōd Jhavery, for the sum of £115 for use as a mosque.³⁵ Although the initial plot purchased on Durban's Grey Street was a small one – measuring only six by four metres – it lay at the heart of the commercial district in which the new Indian trading class was establishing itself, and just a few minutes' walk away from Abū Bakr Amōd's own shop. As a result of the donations of other merchants, in 1884 the original small mosque was demolished and rebuilt, before twice being extended again in 1903 and 1905.³⁶ But Brook Street was not only the merchants' space and in the years after the mosque's expansion its grounds attracted an informal market comprised of former indentured labourers who had since established themselves as market gardeners or hawkers. There was, however, little doubt that both mosque and market were ultimately in the control of the pious big men who made up the Muslim merchant class of the Grey Street neighbourhood.³⁷ The mosque's establishment occurred in the same decade in which formal mosque construction began in Cape Town with the relaxation of building restrictions for the Cape's non-Christian communities. In a sense, the activities of the Muslim and Hindu missionaries can be seen as a response to the liberalization of South Africa's religious marketplace that occurred in the 1880s and 90s.

Ghulām Muhammad represented the next stage in this institutionalization of the Muslim presence in Natal. In April 1896, a few months after his arrival in Durban, Ghulām Muhammad bought a plot of land at Umgeni, part of the Riverside area on the northern outskirts of the city, where near the ocean he built the first mosque, khanaqah and madrasa of the many that he and his followers would found across South Africa over the next three decades. The area that he chose to settle closely followed the trajectory of earlier Indian immigration, for over the previous two decades the Riverside region around the Umgeni river to the north of Durban had been extensively settled by former indentured labourers setting themselves up as market gardeners.³⁸ It was from here that many of the smallholders found in the market around the Grey Street mosque travelled to sell their produce. The dwellings these smallholders set up around Riverside were often rudimentary, made of tin sheets and rough wood, but they represented a step towards independent self-betterment after years of indenture. By the end of the nineteenth century, the smallholders' success

35 See E. M. Mahida, "History of Muslims in South Africa", typescript, p. 32 (Durban: Arabic Study Circle), 1993, Local History Museums, Durban, file 4741 (Grey Street).

36 Anon., "Detailed description of the Grey Street Mosque", typescript, Local History Museums, Durban, file 5419 (Mosques).

37 Incidentally, the street itself had earlier been named in honour of another big man, the Earl Grey (1799–1882), who amid a long political career was Secretary of State for the Colonies from 1846 to 1852 when Grey Street was laid out in 1850. See Local History Museums, Durban, file 4741 (Grey Street).

38 On Umgeni and other working-class Indian settlements, see B. Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban, 1910–1990* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1995).

began to attract other Indians to the region, and the social profile of the Riverside area began to change, seeing the establishment of Indian workshops and trading outlets in addition to the farmsteads.³⁹ Ghulām Muhammad's arrival was part of these larger demographic and social processes on the periphery of the colonial city. By the time of his arrival in 1895, much of the logistical and legal apparatus for the establishment of his venture was therefore already in place through the enterprising efforts of the pioneer indentured labourers and merchants.

The legal means by which he founded his complex at Umgeni are particularly revealing in this context. For although the account given in the biographical *Riyāz-e-Sūfī* of Ghulām Muhammad's arrival and foundation of a mosque at Riverside in the 1890s is replete with such hagiographical stratagems as the stamping out of Hindu worship and the ousting of a fearsome monster from the site, the picture that emerges from other documentation from the period is quite different.⁴⁰ It is of no little importance that the signature at the bottom shows the documentation had been prepared by none other than Mohandas Gandhi, who had arrived in Durban and set up his legal practice there just two years before Ghulām Muhammad himself.⁴¹ But what is most striking is that despite the strong sense of custom with which Ghulām Muhammad's movement surrounded itself, the legal means by which all of his institutions were founded were built on the bedrock of colonial property law. After the initial land purchase, Ghulām Muhammad employed the English lawyers J. P. Calder & Calder Conveyancers to establish the legal mechanisms by which the spirit and intentions of the old Islamic law of endowment (*waqf*), which had for centuries controlled the foundation and management of pious institutions in India and elsewhere, could be achieved through the English-based Common Law of Trusts.⁴² At Riverside no less than at his other foundations around Natal and the Cape, Ghulām Muhammad thus established deeds of trusteeship to ensure that the land and buildings granted to the trustees should only be used to serve the cause of Islam.⁴³ In

39 The biography of an Indian metalworker who established his own workshop in the region around 1914 can be found in the South African Indian magazine *Fiat Lux* 9/8, 1974.

40 Sulaymān, *Riyāz-e-sūfī*, 11–12.

41 Facsimile reproduced in Soofie and Soofie, *Hazrath Soofie Saheb*, 60. Gandhi's interest and expertise in "Mahommedan Law" during this period are seen in a letter he wrote on the subject to the *Natal Witness* a few months before signing Ghulām Muhammad's documents. The letter is reprinted in F. Meer (ed.), *The South African Gandhi: An Abstract of the Speeches and Writings of M.K. Gandhi, 1893–1914* (Durban: Madiba, 1996), 140–2.

42 On the situation of *waqf* in colonial India, see G.C. Kozłowski, *Muslim Endowments and Society in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Ghulām Muhammad's relations with other Britons in Durban is echoed in two small oil paintings of the interior and exterior of his mausoleum dating from *circa* 1911 and painted by R. Lucas (on display in the Soofie Saheb Archives in Riverside, Durban). Showing the interior decked with coloured garlands and Indian glass lamps, these are the earliest visual record of the mausoleum.

43 Copies of these legal documents are preserved in an anonymous compilation entitled "Soofie Sahib", file Islam/B 908/35, Documentation Centre, University of Durban-Westville, Durban.

an echo of the centrality of kinship to his organization that is discussed below, at the same time Ghulām Muhammad inserted legal clauses to ensure that ultimate control over these institutions should remain with his family descendants, who by the same token had to work in the service of Islam to warrant their trusteeship. The Deed of Sale that Gandhi oversaw for Ghulām Muhammad's initial land purchase at Riverside records the agreed price for the land as £185 sterling.

While judging by the available evidence Gandhi's direct association with Ghulām Muhammad was fairly short-lived, this should not blind us to the social and structural parallels between their respective projects in Natal. To begin with, both men had migrated to Bombay early in their careers from their home towns along the western coastline of India, while their early journeys to Durban also took them to Calcutta, since more boats travelled from there to Durban than from Bombay. In Gandhi's foundation of the Natal Indian Congress less than two years before he signed the documentation for Ghulām Muhammad's first land purchase in Natal, he relied on the support of the same class of wealthy Indian Muslim merchants that surrounded his Muslim contemporary. Indeed, the Congress was actually founded on the business premises of the Muslim merchant Dada Abdalla and Company.⁴⁴ By the same token Gandhi's Parsi merchant supporter Parsee Rustomjee was also responsible for funding the construction of the madrasa and gateway at Ghulām Muhammad's Riverside complex around 1911. While Gandhi arrived in Durban rather earlier than Ghulām Muhammad, in other ways the latter was a step ahead of his more celebrated contemporary. For when Gandhi decided to establish the agricultural utopia known as the Phoenix Settlement in 1904, he looked to the same region north of Durban in which he had helped Ghulām Muhammad purchase land some eight years earlier. In a small gesture of common purpose, Gandhi's *Indian Opinion* newspaper records the gift of sacks of monkey nuts, mangos and oranges to the Phoenix Settlement from one of Ghulām Muhammad's farms.⁴⁵ Other articles in the *Indian Opinion* reflected Gandhi's connections at this time with the new spirit of Islamic utopian modernism, such as a reprinted article on "The progress of Mahomedans" which among its list of ten proposals recommended the same blend of education, independent labour and physical health that also underwrote the ethics of the intellectuals' farmstead at Phoenix.⁴⁶ In these same years, other brave new worlds were also being invented in the northern hinterlands of Durban, such as the Zulu Christian Industrial School (later renamed as the Ohlange Institute) founded in 1901 by John Langalibalele Dube (1871–1946).

44 The importance of these Muslim merchants to the organization may be gauged from the names listed as vice-presidents and committee members on the founding constitution of the Congress (reprinted in Meer, *The South African Gandhi*, 174).

45 *Indian Opinion*, 27 August 1910, 285. The donor is listed as the Habibia Garden Co. at Warmbaths in Transvaal, a property which, I am informed by Ghulām Muhammad's descendants, was established by Ghulām Muhammad. Most of the latter's institutions were officially named Habībiyya in honour of Habīb 'Alī Shāh.

46 *Indian Opinion*, 4 June 1910, 187.

None of these utopian communities can be separated from the activities of the Christian missions in town and country or from the aspirations of the former indentured labourers buying smallholdings in the same area. Aside from the small farmers, all of these new social formations sought to establish novel forms of group solidarity, whether through the religious universalism of Christianity and Islam or the fusion of Ruskin and Tolstoy with the deracinated ideals of Hindu renunciation. Whether envisioned in cosmopolitan or more narrowly sectarian terms, each of these new communities sought to transcend existing social categories on the ground, be they of colonial or pre-colonial provenance: caste, *birādarī*, nationality and skin colour could all be washed away through these reinvented notions of Islam or Satyagraha.⁴⁷ Behind all of these experiments was a more local and neglected inspiration, that of the former indentured labourers who had originally settled the rural north of Durban. For in their different ways, each of the utopian movements which established themselves to the north of Durban in the 1890s and 1900s represented a spiritualization of an existing peasant movement, for whom the dignity of independent labour and economic self-sufficiency was utopia enough.

It would also be a mistake to regard Ghulām Muhammad's enterprise as being solely religious in a narrowly doctrinal sense, for like the European missionaries whose activities he reflected, his work was concerned with the supply of basic amenities for the poor as much as with the provision of metaphysic. As well as a medical dispensary and school lessons in the madrasa for poor Muslim children, he also founded an orphanage for the many children of indentured labourers whose lives were cut short through overwork. Charitable donations were collected for the supply of medicines (many of them made up in the dispensary at the Riverside complex) and for the proper religious burial of poor Muslims in the cemetery that was also founded.⁴⁸ Another means of helping the labouring class was the refuge nicknamed the *mawlī khāna* ("house of the good-for-nothing") that Ghulām Muhammad established. It was intended as a shelter for the homeless, and the dissolute in particular, in this period effectively meaning *gānjā* (cannabis) smokers, though toddy drinkers were probably also admitted. The scale of *gānjā* use among the indentured classes is reflected in a mournful Durban folksong in Bhojpuri dialect from the era of indenture of a type known as "riverside songs" due to their association with performers in the Riverside area where Ghulām Muhammad and his formerly-indentured neighbours dwelt.

47 In this respect, the activities of these colonial idealists in Durban and their complex interaction with European ideas reflects the wider *fin-de-siècle* utopianism explored in the colonial centre in L. Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

48 Sulaymān, *Riyāz-e-sūfī*, 11. Given the position of the complex beside the ocean, a number of lascars and other Muslim sailors were also buried there over the years. One of the more interesting of these was Shaik Belal Hasan (d. 1918), the ship steward of HMS Trent. The British Embassy still attends to the maintenance of his grave.

Gānjā pī ke sāiyā āwē
Jhagharā macchāwēlā
Jab ham kucchū bōlē
Ta hamkē ākhiyā camkāwēlā
Phatal hō Rām sasurariyā se jīārā

*

My husband comes home high with *gānjā*
 And raises havoc.
 Should I say something?
 Then he makes eyes at me.
 My heart has become disenchanting.⁴⁹

In the organization of such charitable activities among the urban and suburban poor in the early twentieth century, Ghulām Muhammad's movement and others like it present an important link between such later socio-religious organizations as the Jam'at-e-Islāmī or Hamas, and precolonial patterns of charity based on individual acts of aristocratic and mercantile piety.⁵⁰

Between 1904 and 1905 Ghulām Muhammad founded several more mosques and madrasas in other districts of Durban. His second outpost at Westville (around ten miles west of central Durban) very much reflected the character of his first settlement. For like Riverside, when Ghulām Muhammad arrived at Westville it was a predominantly agricultural settlement on Durban's periphery that was becoming increasingly connected to the urban economy. Westville's early settlers were Germans involved in the cotton trade, but by the time Ghulām Muhammad established himself there, like Umgeni the Westville area was also home to a community of Indian market gardeners who had served out their indenture.⁵¹ The mosque established at Springfield two years later in 1906 was similarly located among a community of former indentured labourers.⁵² By 1910 affiliated institutions had been founded in Cape Town, Tongaat, Springfield, Ladysmith, Pietermaritzburg and Kenville, all under the leadership of Ghulām Muhammad's sons or deputies drawn from his kinsmen.⁵³ Again, Ghulām Muhammad was no first-generation pioneer

49 Quoted with minor amendments from R. Mesthrie, "New lights from old languages: Indian languages and the experience of indentureship in South Africa", in S. Bhana (ed.), *Essays on Indentured Indians in Natal* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 1988), 205–6. The traditional use of cannabis by the Indian peasantry was also of course exported to other regions by the indentured labourers of the nineteenth century, including the West Indies, where the Hindi term *gānjā* was adopted into Jamaican patois and eventually incorporated as a sacrament of the Ras Tafari cult.

50 On the foundation of Muslim charitable organizations to help the urban poor in North India at this time, and their connections to Sufi shrines in such cities as Allahabad, see Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor*, 272–7.

51 On the early settlement of Westville, see B. O'Keefe, *Pioneers' Progress: Early Natal* (Durban: n.p., n.d.).

52 Soofie and Soofie, *Hazrath Soofie Saheb*, 130.

53 Sulaymān, *Riyāz-e-sūfi*, 10–11, 13–14. The dates are given in Soofie and Soofie, *Hazrath Soofie Saheb*, 206.

in these other towns. As in Durban, he rather followed the movement of the Indian trading classes into Natal's interior and thence to Transvaal and the Cape. Many of the new Indian migrants moving to the new towns of the Natal interior as well as Transvaal were merchants rather than labourers who were following the expansion of the mining industry and the railway in South Africa to set up shop.⁵⁴ As it had for centuries, here again Islam followed trade around the Indian Ocean. But unlike such ports as Zanzibar a century earlier, here in Durban it was not an Islam of grand Shirazi merchants and slave-owners, but a moral economy of shopkeepers and petty traders. Although Indians began to arrive in the city of Pietermaritzburg in the Midlands of Natal as early as 1863, Indian Muslims did not start to settle there until around 1880 with the coming of the trading classes.⁵⁵ Yet it was not for another two decades in 1909 that Ghulām Muhammad established his mosque in Pietermaritzburg, by which time the Indian population had reached almost 7,000.⁵⁶ The other mosques and madrasas that he founded in the uplands of Natal – at Springfield, Ladysmith and Kenville – similarly reflected the secondary migration of the Indian traders into the new colonial settlements that were developing through the expansion of mining and commerce in the interior. In Transvaal, for example, as early as 1870 a marquee tent had been erected to serve as a mosque among the other miners' shanties in Johannesburg, with a proper mosque built on the site in 1888, an institution which again preceded Ghulām Muhammad's expansion to Transvaal by several decades.⁵⁷ The mosque Ghulām Muhammad founded in Cape Town in 1903 reflected this pattern of earlier ventures, being set up in the wake of the migration to the Cape of Muslim merchants from his home Indian region of the Konkan and being established on the marginal land of the Cape Flats; his brother-in-law Mawlā 'Abd al-Latīf (d. 1334/1916) was appointed as its head.⁵⁸ Given the overwhelming presence of Afrikaans-speaking "Malay" Muslims in Cape Town, the new Konkani community there also helped 'Abd al-Latīf fund a madrasa to educate their children in Konkani and especially Urdu.⁵⁹

Ghulām Muhammad was by no means the sole figure involved in the establishment of Muslim schools in South Africa. In other Indian

54 See B. Maharaj, "From a privileged to an unwanted minority: the Asian diaspora in Africa", in Gervais-Lambony et al., *Reconfiguring Identities*, 119.

55 In 1863 there were 78 Indians registered in Pietermaritzburg, a figure that had risen to 2,311 by 1891. See S. Bhana and J. Brain, *Setting Down Roots: Indian Migrants in South Africa, 1860–1911* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1990), 59.

56 See Bhana and Brain, *Setting Down Roots* and Soofie and Soofie, *Hazrath Soofie Saheb*, 139.

57 See Anon., "Origin and development of Islam and Islamic education in South Africa", typescript, p. 11, Durban Cultural and Documentation Centre, file Religion: Islam (95/173).

58 See Y. da Costa, "The contribution of Maulana Abd al-Latif (R.A.) (1860–1916) of the 'College' to the religious life of the Muslims at the Cape", in Y. da Costa (ed.), *Sufi Sahib: 100 Years of Service* (Durban: FA Print, 1416/1995), 18.

59 On the settling of Konkani merchants at the Cape, see Padayachee and Morrell, "Indian merchants and Dukawallahs", 75.

settlements members of the merchant class were founding schools and mosques on their own initiative, just as they had previously founded the Grey Street mosque in Durban in 1881. In 1912 the Muslim merchants of the inland Natal trading station of Nottingham Road took it upon themselves to establish a madrasa behind “Shop No. 1” to educate their children, bringing a certain Munshī Jamāl al-Qādirī from India to act as teacher.⁶⁰ Then in 1927 the merchants hosted their own Muslim missionary, Mawlāī Kamāl al-dīn (1870–1932), a former District Inspector of Schools from the Punjabi city of Amritsar.⁶¹ However, in Kamāl al-dīn’s case, it was not Bombay’s Islamic revival that was responsible for his dispatch, but one much closer to the imperial centre in London. This was the Woking Islamic Missionary Society, part of the Muslim educational complex established on the outskirts of London by the eccentric Hungarian educationalist and Orientalist Dr Gottlieb Leitner (1840–99) after his retirement as principal of Government College in Lahore.⁶² On Leitner’s death, the mission was taken over by the British head of the Ahmadiyya, Kamāl al-dīn. As the commonalities between Ghulām Muhammad’s work and that of the Christian missionaries in Natal, here the history of Indo-Muslim revivalism intertwined with the international missionary itineraries made possible by the British Empire. In a fitting reminder of the global interconnections of such Muslim no less Christian movements, the main residential compound of Kamāl al-dīn’s mission headquarters in Woking was funded by the prime minister of Hyderabad State, and named Sir Salar Jang House in his honour.

In the years after the foundation of Ghulām Muhammad’s earliest centre at Riverside, he and his kinsmen had thus established a network of other mosques, madrasas and cemeteries in response to the movement of Indian Muslims into other regions of Natal Colony and thence to Cape Colony and elsewhere. The central role of kinship in Ghulām Muhammad’s project is further apparent in the mechanism of founding these institutions, for the majority of them were placed under the control of either Ghulām Muhammad’s sons or occasionally other males of his extended family.

60 For an account of the early Indian mercantile settlement at Nottingham Road, a classic colonial trading town in the Natal interior, see Anon., *Nottingham Road: 100 Years, 1895–1995: Commemorative Brochure* (Nottingham Road: n.p., 1995); on the madrasa and mission, see p. 10. Other Indian groups were also establishing their own distinctive schools at this time, such as the (predominantly Hindu?) Tamil-medium school established in Durban in 1910 whose opening was reported in the *Indian Opinion* (14 May 1910, p. 163).

61 In line with the Ahmadīs’ early and enthusiastic embrace of print culture, Kamāl al-dīn was the author of a number of missionary texts. See e.g. Al-Hajj Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din, *Islam and Other Religions* (Woking: Woking Muslim Mission and Literary Trust (192–?)). On his mission to South Africa, see Lord Headley, “Islamic mission to South Africa: Khwaja Kamal ud-Din and Lord Headley at Cape Town”, *The Islamic Review* 14, 1926.

62 On Leitner’s career in India, see J. H. Stocqueler, *A Review of the Life and Labours of Dr. G. W. Leitner* (Brighton: Tower Press, 1875). A useful account of his later activities in Woking is found in J. Keay, *Eccentric Travellers* (London: J. Murray, 1982).

The sheer biological fecundity of Ghulām Muhammad (and his two wives in particular) was in this way a key factor in his success, for in all he had no fewer than seven sons and three daughters, nine born of his first wife Bībī Zaynab Qāzī and a single male child born of his second wife, Hanīfa Bībī. Most of these sons were appointed to manage his expanding network of mosques and madrasas and his daughters were married to members of Natal's new class of religious professionals. In 1905, his eldest daughter Hājira Bī married Hāfiz Muhammad Husayn, a Gujarati migrant merchant from Surat whom Ghulām Muhammad subsequently appointed as the manager of a new mosque and madrasa established the same year in Tongaat, itself another centre of indentured labour.⁶³ His youngest daughter Khwāja Bī married the former imam of the Grey Street mosque, from which Ghulām Muhammad had been turned away on his first arrival in Natal a decade earlier. Again, this pattern was by no means unique and to all intents and purposes the means by which Ghulām Muhammad expanded his mission across South Africa was identical with that tried and tested by the Indian merchants who had preceded him to Durban and the other towns where he subsequently established outposts. The extended family business structure of the Indian merchant class in which sons, brothers or sons-in-law were appointed to manage new branches was the precise mirror of the biological network established by Ghulām Muhammad across the expanding towns of South Africa.⁶⁴ It had been through this system that Gandhi's Muslim patrons the Jhaveri brothers had first set up shop in Durban, just as it was through their fraternal rift that the young barrister was summoned from his (and their) hometown for his legal intercession. If Gandhi was a lawyer whose services were needed, he was also the son of a family friend in whom money might be sensibly invested. Given the all too real possibility of such family disputes as that between the Jhaveri brothers, it is perhaps unsurprising that Ghulām Muhammad was so circumspect in his use of the same legal mechanisms of colonial Common Law to ensure the capital invested in his various institutions run by his sons was used in the manner he intended. These parallels between religious and commercial activities were not only of structure but also of kind, for Ghulām Muhammad's charitable activities were also reflected (and as we have seen in many cases actually sponsored) by the philanthropy of Durban's Indian merchants.

The making of a diasporic sacred geography

Given the centrifugal quality that the Hijaz can easily assume in discussions of Islam, it is important to emphasize alternative sacred Muslim geographies around not only the Indian Ocean region but also around

63 For details of Ghulām Muhammad's children and their marriages I have relied on E. M. Mahida, *History of Muslims in South Africa: A Chronology* (Durban: Arabic Study Circle, 1993), 42–4.

64 On the organizational structure of the Asian family business and its connections with global trade in the precolonial and colonial era, see J. Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

the wider span of the British Empire, which provided the intellectual and commercial networks along which the new Muslim religious organizations could disseminate their ideas. For the migrations of empire were not only creating new geographies of commerce and communication, but new religious geographies as well: Ghulām Muhammad did not merely create mosques and madrasas for the Muslims of Natal but also a sacred geography. This was not, however, a geography that connected Natal directly to Mecca but one that was orientated towards the Indian shrines of Ghulām Muhammad's predecessors in his branch of the Chishtī Sufi order. For at the same time as he was developing his first mosque and madrasa at Riverside, Ghulām Muhammad also initiated a pilgrimage cult in central Durban around the grave of an indentured labourer, Shaykh Ahmad (d. 1312/1894).

Tradition claims that on his arrival in Durban, Ghulām Muhammad realized through a dream that the deceased labourer was one of the hidden "friends of God" (*awliyā allāh*) and so built a simple platform to mark the position of his neglected grave. Whether Ghulām Muhammad knew of this labourer only from such a dream or whether he also knew of him from conversations with other Durban Indians who remembered Shaykh Ahmad as a wandering beggar in the market beside the Grey Street mosque must remain uncertain. What are more clear are Ghulām Muhammad's activities in establishing a mausoleum and pilgrimage cult at the pauper's grave. On his death in the year before Ghulām Muhammad's arrival in Durban Shaykh Ahmad had been buried in the Muslim section of Durban's Brook Street cemetery without being accorded any special status by the city's Muslims.⁶⁵ Whether through the instigation of a dream or rumour, soon after Ghulām Muhammad's arrival in Durban he constructed a wood and iron shelter above the grave.⁶⁶ Who Shaykh Ahmad actually was is obscure in the sources from Ghulām Muhammad's own circle. He appears as a mysterious and somewhat marginal figure in the earliest Urdu source, *Riyāz-e-Sūfī*, where he is only mentioned in the hagiographical role of predicting Ghulām Muhammad's arrival in Durban.⁶⁷ However, according to the oral tradition transmitted by Ghulām Muhammad's followers, Shaykh Ahmad had sailed from Madras as part of the earliest shipment of labourers and arrived in Durban on the *Truro* in November 1860 to work in the sugar cane fields at Tongaat.⁶⁸ In line with a wider tradition of Muslim "ancestor saints" that is shared all round the Indian Ocean, this story emphasized Shaykh Ahmad's role as a community founder, a holy man present among the earliest Muslim settlers in Natal.⁶⁹ In oral tradition

65 See A. A. Soofie and O. M. Essop (eds), *His Exalted Eminence Hazrath Sheikh Sayyid Ahmed Badsha Peer* (Durban: Impress Press, 2003), 11.

66 Within eight years of Ghulām Muhammad's own death this early structure was replaced in 1919 by a domed mausoleum in the style of the Sufi shrines of India. See Soofie and Essop, *His Exalted Eminence*, 12–3.

67 Sulaymān, *Riyāz-e-sūfī*, 8.

68 For a written version of this tradition, see Soofie and Soofie, *Hazrath Soofie Saheb*, 42.

69 On other Indo-Muslim ancestor saints, see N. S. Green, "Migrant Sufis and sacred space in South Asian Islam", *Contemporary South Asia* 12/4, 2003.

Shaykh Ahmad is also said to have been released early from his indenture due to “insanity”, a state that Ghulām Muhammad interpreted through the Sufi idiom of spiritual rapture (*jazb*).⁷⁰

It is unclear what to make of these accounts of Shaykh Ahmad’s life. The Ship List for the *Truro* does not contain the name of any indentured passenger by the name of Shaykh Ahmad, a fact that seems fundamentally to undermine the traditional story.⁷¹ Having said that, there is listed the name of a sixteen-year-old female passenger “Ameena Bee” (Amīna Bī), who registered a “Sheik Ahmed” as her father.⁷² Given that several generations of the same family often moved into indenture together and listed related labourers in Natal as their next of kin, this suggests that there is some measure of fact in the traditional account. This would seem to be supported by documentation of an indentured Indian Muslim from Masulipatam listed as “Sheik Ahmed” who disembarked in Durban a month later in December 1860 from the *Lord George Bentinc*. Although this was not the *Truro*, it was one of the first generation of indentured ships and arrived only slightly later than the *Truro* as the emblematic “first Indian ship”.⁷³ At this time, “Sheik Ahmed” was twenty-four years of age, which means that by the time of the death in Durban of the former labourer of the same name in 1895 he would have been around fifty-nine years old, a ripe age for a man who had worked most of his life in the fields. While its historicity can never be established with certainty, the story of a former indentured labourer spending his last years wandering begging around the market and mosque on Grey Street reflects what is known of the social history of the poorest Indians during the late nineteenth century, a state of affairs to which the colonial government responded by passing a Vagrant Law to limit the movements of this underclass of drifters. Although seven other labourers by the name of “Sheik Ahmed” appear among the thousands of other indentured Indians in the Ship Lists over the fifty-one year period in which the indenture programme was in operation, the labourer aboard the *Lord George Bentinc* fits most closely with the dates described in the traditional story of Shaykh Ahmad’s life, the labourer who became a tramp and who was only recognized as a holy man after his death.

Apart from recording the height of “Sheik Ahmed” as 1.73 metres (relatively tall by the standards of his shipmates), the name of his father (simply, “Abdool”), and his registered home of the port of Masulipatam

70 This story of insanity and release from colonial employment echoes the careers of Shaykh Ahmad’s contemporaries, Banē Miyān (d. 1339/1921) and Tāj al-dīn of Nagpur (d. 1344/1925), who both served in the colonial army before finding a new social definition as holy fools (*majzūbs*) on account of their “madness”. On these figures, see N. S. Green, “The *Faqīr* and the subalterns: mapping the Holy Man in colonial South Asia”, *Journal of Asian History* 41/1, 2007.

71 Ship List *Truro*, in Ship Lists Files, Documentation Centre, University of Durban-Westville, Durban.

72 Ship List *Truro*, in Ship Lists Files, Documentation Centre, University of Durban-Westville, Durban, Coolie No. 283. No information is provided on either her home district in India or her employer in Natal.

73 Coolie No. 962, Ship List *Lord George Bentinc* [*sic*], in Ship Lists Files, Documentation Centre, University of Durban-Westville, Durban.

(on the eastern coast of India), nothing is recorded in the Ships Lists data by way of distinguishing marks (such as the facial pox marks recorded for so many of the indentured) or the employer to whom he was contracted. There is a certain poignancy in the biographical obscurity of the Indian beggar buried beneath the dome funded by Ghulām Muhammad's following among the Indian merchant migrants of the early twentieth century, as though his resting place were the monumental grave of the unknown labourer. Whether or not the Indian buried in the grave in the cemetery was this "Sheik Ahmed" of the *Lord George Bentinck*, Ghulām Muhammad's efforts ensured that the pauper's grave off Brook Street was quickly transformed into a centre of pilgrimage for the Muslims of Durban. Since the grave was located only a few minutes' walk from the congregational mosque on Grey Street, the cult that Ghulām Muhammad established there formed an effective means of replicating the veneration of the saints (*awliyā*) that was so central to the Islam of his Indian homeland. Around the grave, Ghulām Muhammad began to organize the rituals of the death anniversary (*ʿurs*). The rituals which he sponsored were already familiar to his early followers in Natal who were from Bombay and the Konkan, as well as to the Tamils who also made up such a large proportion of Natal's indentured workforce.⁷⁴ The saintly death anniversary or *ʿurs* predicated a sacred space created by the burial of a blessed man, whose very physical presence – in death as in life – was endowed with the blessing power of *barakat*. In this way, personal mobility formed an effective and endlessly repeatable means for the transfer and re-creation of such sacred spaces through the migration of such holy men to different regions, where they eventually died and were buried.⁷⁵ In more recent times, this process has been repeated in the South Asian Muslim diasporas in Europe and America, just as it had followed the spread of Muslim communities in India since the eleventh century.⁷⁶ In effect, since Sufis had for centuries followed wider Muslim migrations, the creation of shrine-based sacred geographies mirrored the foundation of new Muslim communities across the globe, with the ethnicity and class of the client community often shared by the saint himself.⁷⁷

Despite the longer history of the *ʿurs* in India, in Ghulām Muhammad's case the link was rather more recent. For prior to their introduction to Natal, *ʿurs* festivals had already been instituted in colonial Bombay through the foundation of a number of shrines there in the nineteenth century.⁷⁸

74 On popular Muslim festivals and their interaction with other religions in colonial Tamil Nadu, see S. Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society, 1700–1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and J. B. P. More, *Religion and Society in South India: Hindus, Muslims and Christians* (Nirmalagiri, Kerala: IRISH, 2006).

75 Green, "Migrant Sufis".

76 Werbner, *Pilgrims of Love*.

77 On these processes in the Indian Deccan, see N. S. Green, *Indian Sufism since the Seventeenth Century: Saints, Books and Empires in the Muslim Deccan* (London: Routledge, 2006), chapter 1.

78 On these Bombay shrines, see *Gazetteer of Bombay City and Island* (Bombay: Times Press, 1909), vol. 1, 188–9, vol. 3, 300–14.

Ghulām Muhammad’s activities thus formed a pattern of continuity with earlier processes which were adapted to the new African itineraries opened up by the British Empire; what had happened through labour migration to Bombay was repeated in Durban. But the spread of the *ʿurs* also reflected the promotion of a devotional saint-centred Islam that by the end of the nineteenth century was emerging as a Muslim counter-reformation, promulgated most famously by Ghulām Muhammad’s contemporary, Ahmad Razā Khān of Bareilly. In either case, though, this was not so much the defence of custom as its revision, substituting customary practices for a diluted and often sanitized version of them. For while like his master Ḥabīb ʿAlī Shāh before him Ghulām Muhammad was a keen promoter of the *ʿurs*, this was a carnival to which the prostitutes and dancing-girls of old were no longer invited. But by the same token of compromise that was echoed in India by the followers of Ahmad Razā Khān, certain elements of licit entertainment were allowed in the Durban *ʿurs* festivals. Thus, photographs from the 1912 *ʿurs* initiated at Ghulām Muhammad’s own shrine after his death record the presence of black African (“Zanzibari”) Muslims performing the self-mutilating sword-and-skewer displays known as *ratiēp* (*rātīb*).⁷⁹ In the banishment of “frivolous” female dancers alongside the retention of the legitimately “religious” male entertainers, the public status of women was as important to this reform of public morals as the control of the carnivalesque.

Ghulām Muhammad’s discovery of the grave of an unheeded saint was a motif common to many other Muslim cults and the tomb of Shaykh Ahmad was by no means the only saintly grave to be “discovered” through the intervention of a dream among South Africa’s Muslims. Ninety years after Ghulām Muhammad’s discovery of the grave in Durban, another Indian Muslim at Zeerust in Transvaal had a dream commanding him to build a shrine over the grave of a certain Sayyid Muhammad al-ʿAydarus in the town’s Muslim graveyard. Like Shaykh Ahmad, Muhammad al-ʿAydarus was an Indian migrant to South Africa whose sainthood had not been recognized during his lifetime. Born in Surat in 1313/1895, he studied at Aligarh, before moving to Cape Town in the 1930s, where he worked as a schoolteacher before spending three years in Mecca after an extended *hajj* in 1948. With the eventual construction of a mausoleum over Muhammad al-ʿAydarus’s grave in 1986 after the intervention of the dream, we see a repetition of the twin process of the foundation of a new community and the commemoration of a saintly migrant.⁸⁰

79 The photograph of the 1912 *ratiēp* performers is preserved (uncatalogued) in the Soofie Saheb Archive at Riverside, Durban. For a colourful colonial account of the South African *ratiēp* performances, see A. W. Cole, *The Cape and the Kafirs, or Notes of Five Years’ Residence in South Africa* (London: Richard Bentley, 1852), 44–6.

80 I am grateful to Pnina Werbner for supplying information on the cult of Muhammad al-ʿAydarus. On the role of the graves of the pious in the Hadrami diaspora, see E. Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

During his lifetime Ghulām Muhammad also constructed another mausoleum in Durban, apparently intended for his master Habīb ‘Alī Shāh but destined in the event for himself. By the time of his death in 1911 Ghulām Muhammad’s following was extensive and his obituary (which appeared in the *Natal Mercury* on 1 July 1911) described large numbers of Indian merchants among the hundreds of other devotees who were present at his funeral.⁸¹ After his death, Ghulām Muhammad’s own *‘urs* was celebrated in the mausoleum he had built beside his first mosque and madrasa at Riverside. It was in response to the instigation of the *‘urs* there that the biography *Riyāz-e-Sūfī* was printed in Bombay in 1331/1913, containing a long appendix of Urdu litanies that allowed it to act as a prayer book for the congregation that gathered around Ghulām Muhammad’s tomb. After the biographical section, the second half of *Riyāz-e-Sūfī* consisted of a collection of Urdu *na‘at* and *munāqib*, prayer songs addressed to the Prophet and the four righteous caliphs and to ‘Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī, Habīb ‘Alī Shāh and Ghulām Muhammad as their heirs.⁸² Here in simple songs was a liturgical echo of the theological principles of prophetic and saintly intercession that were a central feature of the writings of Ghulām Muhammad’s teacher, Habīb ‘Alī Shāh.⁸³ In this way, biographical narrative and cheap lithographic print technology were incorporated into the ritual process. In addition to these prayer songs, *Riyāz-e-sūfī* also supplied songs to accompany the ceremonies of the procession (*jālūs*), the rubbing of sandalwood into the tomb (*sandalmaī*) and the laying of the “flower blanket” (*phūlūn kī chādar*), ritual stages in the symbolic recreation of the marriage bed of the saint and his divine bride (*‘arūs*) that lay at the symbolic heart of the *‘urs*.⁸⁴ By supplying a focus for the devotional piety of the *‘urs*, Ghulām Muhammad’s death was in this sense one of the most effective moves of his missionary career.

However reformed, customary practices like the *‘urs* formed a widely intelligible ritual idiom among Natal’s Indians and as a consequence of Ghulām Muhammad’s efforts a number of Hindus seem to have converted to this recognizably Indian Islam.⁸⁵ In this way, the semantic inclusivism of an earlier tradition of customary religiosity in which ritual practices were often shared by Muslims and Hindus was appropriated for the purposes of proselytization in a new era of missionary competition. Along with the *‘urs*, Ghulām Muhammad also promoted other aspects of Muslim piety that were familiar to his Konkani and Tamil constituency. These ranged from formal prayers (*salat*) and meditation (*zikr*) sessions to the popular celebration of Muharram, replete with processions from the Riverside complex bearing representations of the standard (*‘alam*) and coffin (*ta‘ziya*) of the martyred Husayn. Such Muharram processions also formed an important element of popular piety in colonial Bombay, where Ghulām

81 The text is reproduced in Soofie and Soofie, *Hazrath Soofie Saheb*, 76.

82 Sulaymān, *Riyāz-e-sūfī*, 17–30.

83 The latter’s teachings are preserved in *Habīb al-tālibīn*, Salar Jung Library, Persian ms. Tas. 50 and *Habīb al-barāzikh*, Salar Jung Library, Persian ms. Tas. 49.

84 Sulaymān, *Riyāz-e-sūfī*, 30–1.

85 Soofie and Soofie, *Hazrath Soofie Saheb*, 73.

Muhammad would have seen the vast throngs of both Hindus and Muslims following the processions, which possessed an air of festivity that has since all but disappeared with the spread of communalist tensions and Iranian forms of Muharram. Such was the popularity of the processions Ghulām Muhammad organized that they became a touristic spectacle for European visitors to Durban, receiving the disparaging nickname of “Coolie Christmas”. The style of Muharram procession that Ghulām Muhammad promoted closely reflected those of Bombay, with the glittering symbolic coffin carried for hours until its final deposition in the Umgeni River near Ghulām Muhammad’s original complex.⁸⁶ For all the lessons Ghulām Muhammad had learned from his master Habīb ‘Alī about the importance on such occasions of proper decorum (*adab*), in a district of Durban that was still heavily populated by Indian agricultural workers it should come as little surprise that the processions often ended in a raucous shambles. But the Durban constabulary were always present to police what Ghulām Muhammad’s moralizing could not.

Caught between the indentured Indian labourers and the colonial constabulary, the place of the imported Muharram carnivals in colonial Durban society echoed the introduction of the same rituals to the Caribbean by indentured Indian labourers shipped to Trinidad, British Guiana and Surinam.⁸⁷ There too the Muharram processions – known as “Hosay” through a creolization of the name of Husayn – brought together Indian labourers of a variety of religious backgrounds, as well as Afro-Caribbeans who, like the “Zanzibari” African Muslims seen in the early photographs of Muharram in Natal, were often employed to accompany the processions as drummers.⁸⁸ In the plantation colonies of the Caribbean, official attitudes towards Muharram were even stricter than in Natal, and between the 1860s and 1880s legislation was passed for the strict control or in some cases the outright banning of Hosay.⁸⁹ In Bombay too, in 1913 the Muharram processions were effectively prohibited by the Police Commissioner S. M. Edwardes, a regulation enforced by armed soldiers who, as in Trinidad, finished up shooting law-breaking celebrants.⁹⁰ It was not only the colonial authorities who were seeking to restrain or repress the popularity of the Muharram carnival, for in the Caribbean no less than in Bombay and Durban, Muslim voices were also added to this critique of custom. By the early decades of the twentieth century, in Bombay it was largely Ghulām Muhammad’s own Konkani community which was most vocal in its opposition to what they regarded as unislamic “innovation” (*bid’a*) in the city’s Muharram processions as performed by Bombay’s Moghul Muslims, particularly with regard to the symbolism of the

86 On Muharram in colonial Bombay, see J. Masselos, “Change and custom in the format of the Bombay Mohurrum during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries”, *South Asia* 5/2, 1982.

87 See F. J. Korom, *Hosay Trinidad: Muharram Performances in an Indo-Caribbean Diaspora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

88 Korom, *Hosay Trinidad*, 108.

89 Korom, *Hosay Trinidad*, 109–18.

90 Masselos, “Change and custom”, 59.

decorated coffin (*tābūt*).⁹¹ In cases of such criticism in the Caribbean, sectarian Sunnī *‘ulamā* went so far as to deny that the processions had anything to do with Islam, an argument which closely reflected Protestant colonial perceptions that such vulgar spectacles had nothing to do with “true religion” at all.⁹²

While Ghulām Muhammad’s efforts to promote a sober, respectable and most importantly “Islamic” celebration of Muharram did not go as far as some attacks on the carnival, they were a response to this newly globalized polemical environment. In his sponsorship of the Muharram processions, Ghulām Muhammad thus seems to have sought a compromise by tolerating such frivolities as the “tiger boys” who had long prowled alongside the Muharram crowds in India in return for the right to surround the gaiety with a more formal programme of Quran recitations and prayer meetings.⁹³ There was also an important element of community consolidation in Ghulām Muhammad’s promotion of a revised Muharram. For the processions countered the popularity among Natal’s Muslims of *kavadī* processions, a Hindu ritual that played counterpoint to the *‘urs* in reminding Tamil labourers of life in the homeland.⁹⁴ On the other side of the communal fence, the Hindu Māhā Sabhā movement in Natal tried to prevent Hindus from joining in with Muharram.⁹⁵ Whether Muslim or Hindu, such organizations focused on popular processions because of their efficacy in the symbolic claiming of urban territory for a particular community.⁹⁶

Conclusions

It is important to recognize that there was nothing intrinsically “Islamic” about the transfer of Ghulām Muhammad’s activities to Natal. Many of the underlying processes may be observed among migrant and transnational cults in non-Islamic contexts. A comparable case is seen in the introduction of the cult of the “refugee god” Wong Tai Sin to colonial Hong Kong through the influx of migrant labourers to the island.⁹⁷ As with

91 Masselos, “Change and custom”, 50–51.

92 Korom, *Hosay Trinidad*, 93–4.

93 For an account of the carnivalesque Muharram customs of nineteenth-century India, see Jaffur Shurreef, *Qanoon-e-Islam, or the Customs of the Mussulmans of India*, trans. G. A. Herklots (Delhi: Asian Educational Services. 1991 (1863)), 98–148.

94 Soofie and Soofie, *Hazrath Soofie Saheb*, 66–7. On the performance of *kavadī* and other trance rituals among Natal’s Hindus, see H. Kuper, *Indian People in Natal* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1960), 217–35.

95 See F. Landy, “Land of ancestors and territory of the diaspora: the example of the ‘Indian’ South Africans”, in Gervais-Lambony et al., *Reconfiguring Identities*, 215.

96 On Muharram processions and the claiming of public space in Pakistan, see V. J. Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam: Shi‘i Devotional Rituals in South Asia* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993). On later changes in South African Islam, see G. Vahed, “Changing Islamic traditions and emerging identities in South Africa”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 20/1, 2000.

97 See G. Lang and L. Ragvald, *The Rise of a Refugee God: Hong Kong’s Wong Tai Sin* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Ghulām Muhammad’s blend of spirituality and social welfare, the cult of Wong Tai Sin likewise saw the sponsorship of community-based charity and the god’s eventual promulgation along labour networks to Macau, Kowlong and eventually New York. However, what distinguished Ghulām Muhammad from the supporters of Wong Tai Sin was the counter-reformist and missionary ethos that underwrote his career, and as such connected him to the nineteenth-century transformation of religion into a competitive global market for bodies and souls. Like other missionaries in an age of what Christopher Bayly has termed “imperial religions”, Ghulām Muhammad was using religion to invent a distinct community in South Africa, just as other organizations – Hindu and Christian – were using the same framework of religion.⁹⁸ As the organizing principle around which Ghulām Muhammad’s community would be made, Islam had to provide for every aspect of community life, from festivities and schooling to the more intangible realm of identity and history shaped by stories of the saintly immigrants Ghulām Muhammad and Shaykh Ahmad. In so doing, if they were to be regarded as distinctively “Islamic” in their polemically competitive age, each of these aspects of existence needed to be shorn of attributes associated with other competing movements or religions.

In the hands of Ghulām Muhammad, as in the hands of Christian, Hindu or Buddhist proselytizers of the period, “religion” was being made to do new work as traditional societies faced massive change through urbanization, migration and the cheek-by-jowl competition of the cosmopolitan cities of empire. Ghulām Muhammad’s career therefore illustrates the contradictions of trans-regional “religious” identities, torn between territorial ties and abject deracination. For even if Ghulām Muhammad was disseminating Islam, and disseminating it in a counter-reform guise, it was none the less a distinctly Indian Islam that was ritually recognizable to the labourers of Natal and morally appropriate for a colonial merchant class. South Africa would have to wait until the last quarter of the twentieth century until the descendants of its Indian migrants rejected Urdu for the schizophrenic diglossia of Arabic/English and so embraced an Islam that was truly, in the terms of Olivier Roy, globalized.⁹⁹

98 See C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), chapter 9.

99 See O. Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (London: Hurst, 2004).