

## **Everyday Muslim Heritage Workshop Report**

### **British Muslim Heritage: A Discussion**

The following report is a summary of findings from a workshop organised by the Everyday Muslim Project. The workshop was conducted with a group of fourteen young British Muslims at the Cambridge Muslim College in Cambridge, UK on the 9<sup>th</sup> May 2016.

The objective of this workshop was to explore and examine British Muslim heritage in the contexts of identities and representations (whether in the media, heritage institutions or educational sectors).

The session was organised around three key questions that generated further discussion:

- 1) *What does the term “British Muslim heritage” mean to you?*
- 2) *Is heritage an important aspect of your identity?*
- 3) *Is it important to document British Muslim heritage?*

This workshop formed part of the Everyday Muslim Project’s on-going “What Matters?” research and consultation initiative that endeavours to identify and provide possible solutions and measures to the specific challenges, needs and opportunities related to British Muslim heritage with the aim of creating a cohesive manifesto as a reference for those interested in ensuring that British Muslim heritage is included in wider British heritage.

#### **Discussion 1: What does the term “British Muslim heritage” mean to you?**

- As part of the taught course at the Muslim Cambridge College the participants had explored certain aspects of British Muslim history in their lessons. Thus many participants framed their understanding of the term “British Muslim heritage” through the historical prism of

communities such as the lascars and prominent individuals such as Marmaduke Pickthall. Buildings such as mosques, artefacts, ephemera and the like were also understood as important aspect of British Muslim heritage.

- Until learning about British Muslim history many had seen the history and heritage of Muslim presence in Britain as a story of South Asian economic migration beginning in the 1950's and 1960's.
- Participants also distinguished between the general Islamic heritage found in museums and British Muslim heritage that is 'unique' to Britain. Exhibition spaces and collections that display Islamic art, artefacts and architecture were seen as 'outward' facing, often encompassing only aspects of Islamic heritage from abroad and thus were regarded as incomplete due to their limited, if any, examples of British Muslim experiences and contribution to both Islamic and British heritage.

## **Discussion 2: Is heritage an important aspect of your identity?**

- In answer to this question some participants were keen to emphasise that the heritage, history and culture of both Britain and their familial heritage, along with Islam, play an intersectional influence on their views and identities.
- Participants were acutely aware of the lack of representation of British Muslim heritage in traditional heritage institutions and within the school curriculum. They suggested that had Muslims/British Muslims been more widely represented in museums and within the taught curriculum it would have aided their sense of belonging to Britain and would have had an impact on their identity formation as children.

- However, there were differing views with regards to the extent to which the awareness of the long historical presence of Muslims in Britain affects a sense of identity. While some said they felt a greater connection to Britain and an affinity towards early communities and individuals, others saw their connection to Britain beginning only with their familial roots.
- A lively discussion arose regarding the importance of language and its ties to a sense of belonging and legacy to heritage. Language was considered an important aspect of identity and many saw it as part and parcel of their identity and heritage. English, Arabic and their respective familial heritage languages were seen as equally important; English was regarded as their mother tongue and first language and Arabic was considered important for understanding the Qur'an and having an important part to play in their religious identities. With regards to languages associated with their familial heritage, some viewed it through the practical lens of being able to converse with members of the family with limited English. However, others saw it as intrinsic to their sense of self and, as one participant put it, "*knowing where we come from*".

### **Discussion 3: Is it important to document British Muslim heritage?**

- Participants agreed that it was important to not only uncover and preserve British Muslim heritage from the past but also to document existing British Muslim heritage and experience for future generations and future historians.
- Some participants believed that heritage and history, be that Islamic, British Muslim, or solely British, defines or at least effects and influences the identity of contemporary Muslims making its documentation imperative.

- It was noted that all aspects of British Muslim heritage should be documented regardless of personal beliefs and opinions. Participants particularly noted the importance of documenting aspects of 'cultural Islam' (traditions and customs associated with certain regions/countries) that older generations had maintained but younger generations are no longer practicing.
- Some pointed to the institutional power structures that restrict certain historical and heritage narratives, with one participant stating: *"I don't think we have a choice in what part of history and heritage is presented. History is somewhat defined by whose words are kept."* While the participants agreed generally, some also believed that it is incumbent on British Muslims to undertake the initiative of documenting and preserving the heritage irrespective of the restrictions and limitations that exist.
- Furthermore many participants noted the opportunities available for even independent research on British Muslims to be shared via the internet and social media.