

LANGUAGE IDENTITY MODERNITY

The
ARABIC STUDY CIRCLE
of Durban

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Gigi, Māzin and Haytham, finally I can show that this book has been completed.



*Ahmed S Ballim Mohamed A Mohamedy Suleman N Omar Ismail A Karim
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INTRODUCTION

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Arabic Study Circle, 1966



AS Ballim GH Agjee SN Omar SA Lockhat GH Vawda
AM Bobat DS Mall AQ Hashemi IA Manjira MA Mohameedy

*The most appropriate dedication is to all the
members of the Circle, past and present.*

1

INTRODUCTION

Injustice, poverty, slavery, ignorance – these may be cured by reform or revolution. But men do not live only by fighting evils. They live by positive goals, individual and collective, a vast variety of them, seldom predictable, at times incompatible. (Isaiah Berlin, *Four essays on liberty*)

This is an account of the history of an organisation called the Arabic Study Circle. The ‘official’ or explicit public date of its formation is 1954, but according to its founders it was already formed in 1950. Whatever the precise date, it was born in the city of Durban in what was then the Natal province on the eastern coast of the Union of South Africa (1910–1961). ‘The Circle’, as it came to be known, and as it will be referred to in this book, was an association of literate men who, with one or two exceptions, were from Gujarati-speaking backgrounds. Gujarati is a major linguistic grouping among the South African communities of South Asian or ‘Indian’ origin. The language and its dialects are widely used by both Muslims and Hindus.¹ The users of Gujarati also emanate from the same adjoining districts in the north-western coastal region of India, termed under the British the Bombay Presidency. With only one exception, the Circle’s founding members were from trading families, descendants of ‘passengers’ who had paid their own way, as distinct from the indentured labourers who were sent to the Natal colony to work in the sugar plantations. They were mostly second-generation immigrants to South Africa and, having made it their home, they put their energies, talents and some of their individual incomes into producing what they believed was an environment consonant with their cultural values and what they considered the demands of their religious faith. Promoting a contemporary approach to the study of the Arabic language and the study of the religion and cultural history

of Islam was their way of achieving these ambitions, but doing this was obviously not without contradictions, problems and challenges.

Arabic was not a spoken language in their community. Gujarati was widely used and Urdu was the *de facto* language for learning and teaching their Islamic faith. These were Indo-European languages, not a Semitic language like Arabic. Urdu, of course, is written in a modified Arabic script and has a good amount of vocabulary of Arabic (and Persian) origin, but it is a very different language. Furthermore, Islam was not articulated in ‘modern’ discursive terms, but rather was embedded in everyday life, as part of an ethnic identity, in their community. The majority of their community ‘lived Islam’ as an inherent part of their ethno-linguistic identity and did not see Islam as a distinctive object for which Arabic knowledge – apart from a modicum of ritual expressions – was necessary at all. It was good enough for their learned preachers and teachers to be able to read and sometimes understand Arabic in addition to Urdu, the language of Muslim religious discourse in many parts of South Asia and, therefore, in Natal as well. The anthropologist Rehana Ebr.-Valley makes an incisive observation when she refers to the ‘Arabisation of “Indian” Islam’ in South Africa. She mentions the replacement of Urdu by Arabic ‘as a second language for the interpretation of the Quran.’² Beyond these observations, she does not specify the process, and dates it in 2001 only vaguely to ‘the past twenty years’ during which there had been a ‘growing decline of the vernacular languages.’³ While this work on the Circle does not comment on the decline of languages such as Urdu and Gujarati, it does point to the way in which another language – Arabic – rose to prominence.

Arabic did not displace other languages as much as it became an added form of expression in certain aspects of everyday life, and most definitely in religious life. Greetings and wishes may have been ‘Arabised’, but it went no further than that in general usage. *Shukria* was replaced by *jazakallah*, *khuda hafez* by *wa alaykum al-salām*, *bhai* by *akhi* at times, and *namaaz* by *salah*. Very importantly, kinship terminology remained unchanged and so did culinary vocabulary. As an expression of a kind of ‘high culture’, however, Islam and religious knowledge in Arabic became hugely valued. In practice, only a limited vocabulary of Arabic expressions circulated. Despite their focus on

Arabic, the Circle also unconsciously promoted English, because they promoted studying Arabic through that medium and reading about Islam in that language. English became a legitimate medium through which to communicate a message about Islam and Arabic. The name of the organisation itself was in English. Traditionally, Urdu was the medium for the transmission of religious education. Using English as a medium limited the Circle's reach to the younger generation, for in the 1950s and 1960s many of the older folk would still have had little familiarity with English, especially of the more academic type that the Circle would have relied upon in its lectures and classes.⁴ The Arabic Study Circle is at the centre of the Arabicisation process Ebr.-Valley writes about. This study will elucidate the context, the process and the phenomenon itself through a focus on the Circle.

The Circle had clearly defined goals and a programme of action that it pursued relentlessly over five decades. Arabic language teaching, Islamic studies from a contemporary angle offered through the medium of English, and promotion of the heritage of Islamic civilisation by means of the latest studies were basic goals but also rather lofty pursuits in South Africa, where a population with an automatic interest in these issues was extremely small. In turn, the adequately literate (educated with high-school certification, and the few with university degrees) within this population were a minority. Thus, the Circle can easily be dismissed as elitist, concerned only with a negligible cohort within a minority community (Muslims), which itself was an inherent part of another minority ('Indians'). Indeed, there is an elitist element in the Circle's vision, but it turned what could easily have remained an esoteric luxury into a relatively commonplace pursuit among many ordinary Muslims – learning Arabic and speaking about the heritage of Islam on a regular basis and in a generally informed way. Whatever one's attitude to the Circle's work, this was a major achievement given the context and the period in which it emerged.

While the members were united by manifestly 'cultural' objectives and were never overtly political, they could not remain apolitical or insensitive to the unfolding of apartheid during the 1950s, the decade that saw 'grand apartheid' schemes unleashed throughout the length and breadth of the land. The racist National Party had come to power

in 1948 and from then on pursued a relentless course of implementing discriminatory legislation and huge social engineering projects.⁵ The Group Areas Act of 1950 was particularly harsh against urban property owners like the Indian traders of Durban. People of the Circle's colour and class were all intimately affected by apartheid policies such as forced removals and the curtailment of basic civic rights. Furthermore, as 'Indians', they were still seen by the state as temporary sojourners who would ultimately leave the shores of South Africa.

Nevertheless, the Circle's emphasis was on language and religion. In other words, it was concerned with questions of identity and with cultivating a particular sense of community. These areas of activity were fields of deep contention in South Africa, especially during the 1950s and subsequent decades; they were political issues, even if not transparently so. The apartheid state was engineering discriminatory policies and allowed little space for anything that was not white and European or conservatively Christian in origin and orientation. Except, of course, where 'others' – non-whites, non-Europeans, non-Christians – could be used for their 'exoticism' and to demonstrate the state's magnanimity in dealing with people of 'less civilised' status. Muslim ethnic cultures were easily available for displaying the country's diversity and its exotic riches.⁶ Their value was located in the colourful dress, exotic cuisine and rich festivals they could stage. An initiative such as the Circle's could easily have functioned in the frame of official policy in which 'group identity', segregation and separation were emphasised: they brought another bit of exoticism to the South African scene. Thus, the Circle had to work between the official discourse, which stressed otherness and irreconcilable differences, on the one hand, and its own aim to cultivate a minority language and religion, which was of major international significance, on the other. It had to do the latter without valorising the dominant apartheid discourse or sealing itself off from others. Furthermore, a Muslim revivalism (whether religious or ethnic) that set Muslim against Hindu could have been fostered by an organisation such as the Circle.

Added to this disabling political context were the internal fissures among Muslims – and language was a key marker of these tensions. The Muslim communities in the Natal and Transvaal provinces were

led by ‘*ulamā*’ educated in South Asian seminaries, such as Deoband Dār al-‘ulūm, established in 1867 in India, or the ones in Pakistan, with very firm views on language, the interpretation of religious texts, and the nature of authority in the Muslim community.⁷ These *mawlanas*, as they were known, favoured Urdu as the only language of Islamic instruction, except for the recitation of the Qur’ān and in worship, for which Arabic had to be used. Some of them were not locally born but were brought directly from overseas institutions, without knowledge of English and with only a faint awareness of the social peculiarities and political conditions in South Africa. Therefore, Urdu was used out of practical necessity because some of the leading *mawlanas* came from the Asian subcontinent. Many of them must also have viewed the South African Indian Muslim community as living through a transient phase, ultimately to return to their ‘motherland’.

The seminary graduates and their imported colleagues asserted, most often without space for disagreement, the learning and views of the seminaries in which they were trained. They also circulated the proclivities and prejudices of their own small worlds in their new southern African environment. Local context was hardly taken into account. In a sense, the only ‘local context’ they knew was that of the ‘ethnic’ community itself: living close together, eating familiar foods, marrying endogamously, speaking cultivated Urdu or a vernacular such as Gujarati, or one of its dialects such as Memon, and insulating themselves from other communities. While a handful may have picked up good Zulu, for instance, others would have learned a bit of pidgin Zulu, Fanakalo, because the only other people they interacted with were Zulu-speaking domestic servants, gardeners and customers at their stores.⁸ In this way, the larger impress of segregation and apartheid could often be seen only faintly or not at all. The Urdu-speaking *mawlanas* also believed they had the religious right to lead the Muslim *umma* (community). Therefore, consultation with less learned believers on communal affairs was deemed unnecessary, and interference from ‘the laity’ in leadership matters was viewed as inappropriate and disrespectful. The *mawlanas* were the leaders and teachers, the rest – such as the potential Circle membership and following – the led and taught. They were the learned from the ‘homeland’ or had studied there and thus had infinitely greater authority because ultimately they were the proper

guardians of 'The Book'. As Michael Gilson has written of the ideal type of the *'ālim* (scholar):

Inasmuch as the Quran is the major symbolic source and resource of a society that regards itself as Muslim, the *'ulemā* in effect reproduced it as a text of which they were the keepers ... The text is made esoteric and becomes the special preserve of scholars, who are self-defined as the only ones who can really understand it.⁹

Classical and later re-workings of Hanafi jurisprudence from a set body of texts, often in the Urdu language into which these classical texts were translated, and the religious conservatism of the South Asian countryside and small towns were faithfully, and sometimes fanatically, imposed as unassailable precepts of faith.¹⁰ The Circle was born into such a situation, which its members, on the whole, found unpalatable. 'Urdu versus Arabic', 'South Asia versus the Middle East', and 'tradition versus modernity', to a certain extent, encapsulate the atmosphere of the Circle's emergence and its work. The Circle's vigorous promotion of Arabic (hence its name) for the purpose of studying the Qur'ān placed it at odds with the dominant trends in South Africa: against the grain in its own 'community', and definitely outside and against the value system of official Christian National Education.¹¹

The numerically small South African Muslim community has begun to receive increasing attention from local and foreign scholars in diverse disciplines, but mainly from those in religious and Islamic studies.¹² Historians have concerned themselves mainly with the history of Islam in Cape Town under changing colonial regimes: first the Dutch and then the British. Initially, Muslims arrived as exiles and slaves in the middle of the seventeenth century and formed a substantial part of the slave population and, after emancipation, of the underclasses of that city.¹³ Islam in twentieth-century South Africa has only in recent years become a subject of academic research, and has predominantly been concerned with the quarter-century during which apartheid was decisively challenged and ended.¹⁴ The early years and middle decades of the century remain largely neglected.

Since we are concerned with Arabic in this volume, it may be useful here to refer to studies about Arabic at the Cape, where Muslims have

a long tradition of Arabic learning and the Arabic script was used for writing basic religious texts among the Muslim population of the Cape colony. The Arabic script was also the vehicle for the earliest texts in the Creole that would become known as Afrikaans.¹⁵ There was a greater affinity to Arabic in Cape Town than in Durban, because in the former the religious scholars were either locally trained or sent to Arabia or Egypt. While the Muslim population of the Cape (slave and free) had their origins in seventeenth-century South and South-east Asia, as well as Africa, by the early twentieth century there seems to have been less attention paid to their Asian linguistic connections than to the Middle Eastern Semitic language. For most of the twentieth century, it was unheard of for a Cape Town youth to go to South Asia for an Islamic education. In Durban (and Johannesburg), South Asian training was highly valued; consequently, until the Circle's efforts, nobody teaching there had received training in a native Arabic-speaking country. However, Cape Town would receive as students Indian boys from the northern provinces of the country who would arrive there to learn the art of memorising the Qur'ān with one or other of that city's legendary teachers of the Qur'ān.¹⁶ Although Arabic was highly valued in Cape Town, Muslims there had only a limited Arabic vocabulary, even if infinitely larger than that of their counterparts in Durban. Since the mid-1970s, Cape Town has also witnessed the Arabicisation of Islam, with residual Creole Malay words gradually falling out of the local everyday lexicon as 'prestige' Arabic ones replace them. This, of course, cannot be attributed to the work of the Circle, for the group did not operate in Cape Town, although undoubtedly there was an osmotic influence of the group's efforts countrywide. The reasons for the Arabicisation of Cape Islam lie elsewhere and deserve a separate study.¹⁷

The histories of religion among Natal's Indians are not served very well by existing academic research, but recent work has shed light on key aspects of both Hindu and Muslim cultural and religious practice in their wider settings, as well as on where they overlap and intersect.¹⁸ When writing about 'the Indians' of Natal, historians have been concerned chiefly with political struggles against discriminatory legislation, narratives of political struggle in which Mahatma Gandhi looms large, and formal political organisation. There are, however,

significant exceptions in the literature.¹⁹ There used to be a tendency to view ‘the Indians’ as fairly homogenous, but this perception has been completely undermined by more recent studies. In a few of these studies, an important question has been where Muslim merchants, the so-called ‘passenger Indians’, fit in the political spectrum. Recent work by historians such as Bill Freund, Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie and Goolam Vahed, among others, aims to redress this imbalance. They pay attention to the social history of the ‘Indian’ working classes, critically examine accepted categories and explore hitherto neglected aspects of the social history of Natal’s indentured labourers and passengers.²⁰ Muslim–Hindu interaction, for instance, is seen in a different light if read from ‘the bottom up’.²¹ Furthermore, the place of various religious movements and trends in the making of identities also receives some attention.

The secular focus of historical studies in South Africa has meant that complex questions regarding religions and religious identity, seen in critical historical perspective, have been grossly neglected. Anthropologists and scholars of religion have done a better job.²² The rich tradition of South African social history, in so far as it has grappled with questions of identity at all, has not really been extended to what can be described as ‘religious identities’ and the ‘identities of religion’ in the country.²³ Through focusing on one organisation that was concerned with issues of Islamic identity, the Arabic language and the fostering of Muslim ‘community’, this work is a modest contribution to the social history of religion, identity and language in South Africa. In the ‘bigger picture’ of South African history, and even in terms of the ‘smaller picture’ of Islam in South Africa, a short study of a group of Gujarati-speaking men with an obsession to promote Arabic may appear a rather peculiar exercise. Such a view, however, is precisely what can impoverish historical writing in post-apartheid South Africa. Through the minute, seemingly marginal, ‘unfashionable’ groups and small movements, we very often find an exceptional route into unknown worlds and neglected, yet important, social processes. In this way, we could stumble upon many surprises in the South African past and find little-known events that have captured the collective imagination of particular groups, changing lives. Whereas before the end of apartheid the question of ‘politics’ was dominant, now there

is less need to look only at political movements and tendencies. A few episodes in the Circle's history stand out and are elaborated here. While the working classes, to an extent, have been viewed as worthy subjects for such 'micro-histories', there is every reason for the completely under-studied middle classes of all ethnic and linguistic backgrounds to begin to gain the attention of historians. There are very few textured, intimate and detailed studies of this stratum among South African communities.

Here then are the beginnings of a micro-history of a middle-class community through a study of an 'Indian' Muslim association. Focusing on an organisation fulfils three objectives: we learn about a whole subculture of 'little' organisations, each with its own peculiarities, in a minority situation; we learn also of extended conflicts over doctrine, sometimes intricate and obscure, often expressed noisily in the public sphere in 'pamphlet wars' between opposing parties; and we learn about hybrid organisational methods, often mixing modernist forms and particularistic sympathies. Such phenomena, however, express something of the ethos and practices of civil society among South Africa's communities, not only its religious minorities.

Through looking at one association, we also find a way into a larger world of organised Islam in one city, but with transnational ramifications linking South Asia, the Middle East and the West to a single ethno-religious section of the city. In this way, the port city of Durban is quite unique in South Africa in that its mix of communities connects, even domesticates, historic ties and contemporary diasporic trends across the space of the Indian Ocean and globally. The Circle's members may have been mainly Gujarati-speakers, but they connected easily and quickly with a range of groups and intellectuals in Pakistan and India, England and North America, and Egypt and Saudi Arabia. They hosted academics and others from abroad, organised festivals and conferences and so constructed an imagination and palpable sense of a wider 'Islamic world' waking itself up, right in Durban.

The Circle has been cast by Abdul Kader Tayob as the pioneer of the first wave of 'Islamic resurgence' in South Africa.²⁴ There is a very good case for this approach to the group in the light of its emphasis on Islam, not as a given in communal life, but as a body of ideals that

needs persistent reiteration, in terms appropriate to place and period without compromising its core meanings or implications. Many of the issues picked up later by far more activist youth movements in the country (discussed in the final chapter) were already present in theory in the Circle's literature and general tenor; it must be added that many of the themes neglected by the later movements were also clearly present in its literature and activities. If the youth movements were more activist, then the Circle was more intellectual in orientation. The activists demanded action from young people; the Circle did not deny action but insisted on an unceasing search for knowledge and 'culture'. Ultimately, however, the Circle would lose out to the activists during the 1980s as the urgency to act more politically became imperative in South Africa, and as a result of the Iranian revolution of 1979, which was seen as a successful 'Islamic revolution'.²⁵

The Circle possibly represents an early moment in what, with hindsight, has been called an Islamic 'revival' unfolding in the Muslim 'heartlands' and, to an extent, in their far-off 'peripheries' too.²⁶ The idea of 'revival' or 'resurgence', however, covers a wide range of trends and movements, from fundamentalism to modernism, from literalism to liberalism.²⁷ Within this spectrum, the Circle could be referred to as the first of a so-called 'modernist' trend among South African Muslims. The members may not have seen themselves in this way, although their conservative detractors might have attempted to demean them with such a label. The Circle was picking up ideas that had been circulating for some time in various quarters of the Muslim world and its diasporas. They also domesticated ideas that were never intended for the way that they adopted and deployed them. At a time when political and intellectual initiatives by Muslims are under intense scrutiny, it may be comforting to adjust to the current atmosphere by demonstrating that there is in fact a long tradition of modernism or liberalism in the modern Muslim world. In the South African case, the Circle would be an example of this in a minority context.

'Islamic modernism' has both intellectually enabling attributes and inherent contradictions and limitations. The Circle would articulate in its thought and practice the merits and challenges of 'modernism' in the Islamic context.²⁸ Some of its modernist propositions were:

an insistence that everyone should be able to read the Qur'ān with understanding and without exegesis by the *'ulamā'* or reliance on the historic commentaries; modern science and rational thought are essentially compatible with Islam; and political modernity and Islam are not contradictory.²⁹ Such axioms might satisfy young Western-educated intellectuals searching for a way in the world without abandoning their religious beliefs, but they simplify intricate conceptual questions and disregard complex histories. They ignore Islamic intellectual history, and positing the transparency of the Qur'ānic text implicitly diminishes the diverse traditions of textual interpretation (*tafsīr*) and associated scholastic disciplines. It is also a rather superficial understanding of the historical formation of modern science and the impact or social uses of 'rationality' in the West.³⁰ The positive reception, and indeed promotion, of types of modernity in many quarters in the Muslim world betrays a concern with the effects of colonisation and the lack of power of Muslim peoples in the face of the West's dominance, with the aid of science and 'rationality', in the organisation of its own modern states and colonial societies. As Dessouki has put it:

Modernism evolved in an attempt to establish the ability of Islam to face the new challenge [from the West]. In particular, the modernists hoped to refute the argument that Islam was responsible for Muslim defeats and underdevelopment.³¹

A reading of the 'cause of Muslim decline' that specifies the absence of science in contrast to the reasons for Western hegemony underestimates the complex effects and consequences of colonial power in the past and imperialism in the present.³² This type of 'me-too-ism' ('our culture is actually scientific, our religious precepts rational') and avoidance of the question of power was a characteristic of 'Islamic modernism' expressed in various ways by Islamic thinkers from the mid-nineteenth century onward. However, this is not the place to discuss the work of such figures as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani of Iran, Shaykh Muhammad Abduh of Egypt and Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan in British India.³³ Both Abduh in Egypt and Khan in British India stressed education as the means towards Islamic renewal. Their followers elaborated on their calls for a transformation of Islamic education through the renewal

of what they considered the Islamic legacy, which would combine the essence of Islamic teachings with the powers of modern thought. The Circle is a pale South African reflection of these intellectual currents that first emerged in the middle-to-late nineteenth century in the Middle East and South Asia and were a latent presence in Muslim communities by the time of the Second World War.

Instead of inserting the Circle purely into a framework of Islamic revivalism or modernism, it is productive also to view it from the perspective of 'identity politics'. The notion of identity politics has recent origins but its actual performance has a much longer presence in colonial and post-colonial situations. We could look at the Circle's location in identity politics from social and more philosophical angles. For individual identity not to be completely self-referential, it has to have 'horizons of significance', argues the philosopher Charles Taylor. He writes:

Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God or something else of this order *matters* crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial.³⁴

Here is a philosophical argument for the type of practical engagement with the world that existentially animated members of the Circle. The Circle provided them with an identity that was not an individualistic or trivial one. The Circle gave them meaning beyond the everyday activities of running a business or medical practice or some other means of making a living. It gave them 'horizons of significance' that intersected with religion, language and community. However, this was not free from another layer of identities. What was the character of their collective identity? They were 'in-between' a range of identities: Gujarati, 'Indian', Muslim, Arabophile, non-white South African and so on. Homi Bhabha has written that the 'social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.'³⁵ While the Circle members consciously held onto their specific objectives and expressed clear commitment to a very transparent course of action, they were actually located at the interstices of a number

of identities – some overlapping, others antagonistic. Negotiating between these identities is largely what the individual stories and the collective Circle's story are about. There are, therefore, many stories to relate, all of which cannot be covered in this book.

After 50 years, the Circle is still going, but only just. Its significance and contributions emerge in the body of this volume. Two of its shortcomings were that its membership did not grow and the leadership was never renewed. This is an example of its idiosyncratic modernist organisational form. It was organised as a modern association (with 'Annual General Meetings', even though held biannually, and a modern 'Constitution') and was structured like a secular group with a president, treasurer and so on, with careful minutes taken at meetings, and membership lists. It did not promote an ethnic 'Indian' or 'Arab' dress code, but rather adopted modern clothing of Western origin: tailored blue blazers with Circle badges in its first years! It has had one personality as leader for the better part of its 50-year history, but the 'Life President', in all but name, did not build up a personality cult and turn the group into a small-scale model of Max Weber's patrimonial regime. While consistency has been one of the outstanding features of the organisation, this has been at the cost of internal change, dynamism and renewal.

The youth movements of the late 1970s, the political organisations of the 1980s and the independent intellectuals of the 1990s all in their own way experienced a growing vacuum as the Circle contracted and became less of a presence in the Muslim community of Natal. Those from the 1970s era recall clearly the impact of the Circle, while scarcely any activist or intellectual of the 1990s and the new millennium would have heard of the group. Yet these movements and intellectuals themselves have come and, in most cases, gone or are shadows of their former selves, while the Circle's core is still there, faithful to its original purpose. Perhaps then, in the long-term view of things, there are lessons to be learned from the tenacity of the Circle's conservative approach to leadership and membership. While other actors in the Circle's history are not neglected, there is no better person to pay more attention to than the main force, the founder Dr Daoud Saleh Mall. After the general situation in 1950s Durban is sketched, it is to him that we turn.

First, however, I have to say something about the methods employed in completing this work.

This short study combines thematic coverage and a narrative approach. A straightforward chronology of events and lists of personalities would have served no purpose that a glossy brochure could not have achieved. A pioneering organisation such as the Circle deserves more than that. Celebratory pamphlets covering golden years are never critical and rarely say anything of value about changing or multiple contexts. Too many well-established and important civil society initiatives in South African history that were not explicitly political or semi-political in orientation get only such treatment instead of the deserved critical scholarly attention. Of course, doing individual case studies is not the most productive route to follow, yet a beginning must be made given the rich expressions of associational life in urban South Africa, from burial societies to credit associations to sports clubs.

I have tried to locate the group in its broader South African, Natal, Indian and Islamic contexts. There is no end to the number of 'contexts' one can place a group in, and I have provided the most obvious settings in which the group operated. What is implicit in this book is the way in which associations rise and fall, and how ethnicity, language and, of course, religion and sectarianism inform the life of a single association of men. Whatever the impacts of various contexts in shaping a group or the fortunes of the organisation in achieving its objectives, it is the experience of the men and women who are part of the association that ultimately matters most. Biography and personality, therefore, are not unimportant and I have paid attention to individual lives and actions in some detail. Thus, this study has two broadly interconnected components: one resembles a more analytical approach driven by a set of arguments, and the other is almost anecdotal in its attempts to offer a more detailed narrative about people and their organisational activities. Keeping these two sides in good balance and in conversation has been a key challenge in the production of this work.

I have relied very heavily on the methods of oral history.³⁶ I conducted a number of fairly detailed life history interviews with surviving members who had played a leading role in the organisation.

They were all generally forthcoming and had clear memories of their time as active members. This yielded a tremendous amount of data on individuals and their times. Only portions of the interview materials, however, were relevant to this project on the Circle, while the remainder provided a good sense of experiences before, during and after active Circle membership. After all, the Circle's activities were only one aspect of the lives of participants. They had wives and families, businesses or professions, other everyday preoccupations, belonged to sport clubs (tennis and golf were two games some members played), met as friends (playing extended games of bridge was a habit over weekends for one group of Circle friends) and so on. I have also tried to conduct interviews with opponents of the Circle, political activists who were sceptical of the Circle's apparently 'non-political' work, and once youthful activists who aimed to surpass its methods and work. Each recorded interview was carefully transcribed and then submitted to the respective interviewee for verification and sometimes clarification. Corrections were made and an index produced for each interview. This is now a useful source for other students of the same research area. In addition to these interviews, I used what remains of the Circle archives. The Circle's papers consist mainly of published materials, minutes of its Annual General Meetings and a limited amount of correspondence. Unfortunately, the library holding the Circle's papers burned down in the early 1980s, leaving a big gap in the written record.

I have no special training in the history of Natal, now KwaZulu-Natal, or the 'Indians' of South Africa, and I found this project a good way to educate myself about aspects of this fascinating part of South Africa's geography and history. I had no particular interest in the Circle itself and initially agreed to interview its members because I had a long acquaintance with the children and family of a leading member of the Circle. This was just before I took up a teaching position at the University of Cape Town in January 1997. After listening to many hours of wonderful stories and learning from a venerable generation of men still imbued with a passion for learning, I decided that their story needed to be told. They also wanted a history to be written. However, I had and still have what I consider more standard 'academic' research and writing projects about other locations on the continent

and, therefore, embarked on this exercise with some ambivalence. I worked on it between other writing and teaching commitments. My initial ambivalence was because their ideas and mine about how such a history should look were never quite in agreement. There was, of course, no unanimity on their part, but most were keen on a rather antiquated narrative of their achievements: a brochure filled with images and memories about rather blissful years now long gone. This I was not prepared to do. Instead, I burdened myself through attempting to compose a more extensively researched and critically crafted essay, which I shared with them. They were not in disagreement with my interpretations, in most cases, but there were some strong dissenting views about certain aspects of the earliest versions. I received several handwritten criticisms and some copies of my work-in-progress were returned with long comments and some invective against persons mentioned or analyses offered in the text. There was also a persistent flow, between Durban and wherever I was, of scribbled notes, paper clippings, photographs and suggestions that I include 'so and so' and 'such and such' an event. These Circle members were still very much alive to the pasts they had been active in making. No doubt, there was also a bit of the present colouring such views of the past. With every new draft I circulated, I was given new sheets of comment and criticism, and additional, sometimes contradictory, information. My written work evoked memories and set off divergent patterns of thought among the men (and one woman) I had interviewed.

This series of interactions contains an important, but by no means new, lesson for historians. It tells us something about the 'ownership' of the past. We may want to play the 'professional' with a seemingly disinterested approach to other people's stories, but they will attempt to engage productively with our interpretations and demonstrate their 'ownership' of their own past. The imperative for the scholar is to work with the actors in their stories of the past, while simultaneously staying in conversation with fellow scholars and the literature in history and the humanities. Therefore, historical scholarship, especially about more recent history, is a dialogue: the historical actors, the historian and other scholars are involved in the conversation. Nevertheless, I ultimately had to stop circulating drafts, because producing a close to

INTRODUCTION

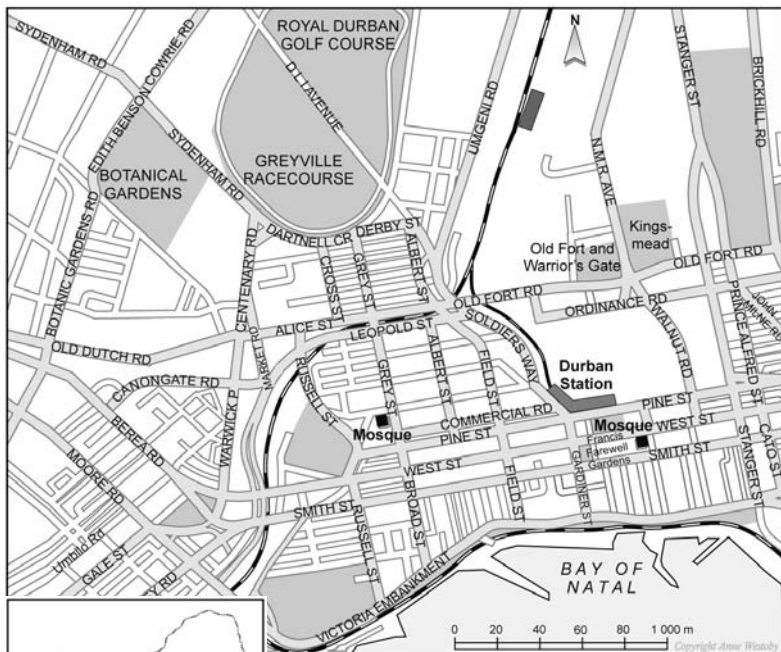
'final' product would have been impossible otherwise. I am sure that among the toughest critics of this short work will be Circle members. I did not let them read drafts in order to censor my work and they have to be credited for not showing any explicit signs of acting the part of censor. So this then is not an official history of the Circle, although it may enjoy the tacit approval of some of its remaining members.

2

THE SETTING: DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA, CIRCA 1950

According to its founders, the birth of the Arabic Study Circle took place in 1950, without public announcement, with its formal launch occurring four years later. What did the South Africa of that time look like for them? In 1951, the total population classified in the census as Indian was 367 000, of which 45 per cent lived in Durban. By that time, the Muslims among them numbered 79 000, most of whom resided in the Durban metropolitan area. Indian inhabitants of the city outnumbered white inhabitants by a narrow margin, and African and coloured inhabitants by a far greater percentage.³⁷

Muslims were a numerical minority within a minority. Most Indians were Hindus, a few were Christians, and an infinitely smaller number were Zoroastrians and Buddhists.³⁸ The Circle members would come to constitute an even smaller group of searching, questioning, ‘modernist’ Muslims among a majority of more ‘traditional’ and ‘conservative’ fellow believers. The ambition and impact of the organisation belied its small numbers. In practice, the Circle members were no different from other Muslims. Indian Muslims were all followers of the Hanafite *madhhab* – a distinctive trait among the Sunnite Muslims of South Asia. Despite a core unity of belief and ritual, the religious leadership was split between the Deobandi and Barelvi trends dating from the second half of the nineteenth century.³⁹ These groups are in agreement on the fundamentals of Islam but differ in key respects in their expression of the faith. For our purposes, it is sufficient to state rather crudely here that the Barelvi ‘*ulamā*’ accept, indeed promote, a more ‘performative’ style of Islam. They encourage following and revering their saintly personages who reputedly have special powers of intercession between God and human beings. The Deobandi are more strictly ‘literalist’ in their interpretation of the Qur’ān and the teachings of the Prophet



Street map of central Durban, circa 1950

Muhammad. The Circle would avoid the historic conflicts and ceaseless polemics between local partisans of either group.

By 1950, places of worship were not hard to find in Durban for either Hindus or Muslims. Hindu *mandiro* (temples) could be found all over the city. From 1881 onwards, Muslims had their own mosques (first in Grey Street, then in 1885 in West Street), and other institutions, such as *madrasahs* where children could be instructed in the fundamentals of the religion, soon followed.⁴⁰ Charismatic preachers and popular scholars from India visited periodically and contributed to a growing sense of 'Hindu-ness' and Islamic identity, respectively. Among Muslims, Shah Ghulam Muhammad Habibi, better known as 'Sufi Saheb', was a significant early visitor in 1895 and due to his efforts several mosques, *madrasahs* and clinics were built. Swami Shankeranand had a similar impact among Hindus during his

short sojourn in Natal between 1908 and 1913.⁴¹ Durban became a well-known stopover for preachers, reformers and missionaries from every faith. The Circle was itself the product of a visit to the city by Prof. Ishrat Hussain in June 1950. In the decades that followed, the organisation invited its own guests and so contributed towards the religious traffic to the country.

The fostering of Islamic religious identity, however, went alongside the cementing of other identities, such as regional and sectarian identities. Thus, membership of the mosques' boards was restricted to men from a specific *gham* (village) or linguistic group (Memon, Surtee or Konkani), as was the case with the Grey Street Mosque, which was funded by Memon-speakers. In certain instances, those adhering to either the Deobandi or Bareilvi trend established such institutions to impress their views on the community. This is exemplified in the histories of the Grey Street and West Street mosques. Memon-speaking merchants who were also supporters of the Bareilvi movement established the former, while Surtee-speaking traders who happened to be Deobandi followers founded the latter.

By 1950, Indians were no longer the class of agricultural workers they were when they first began to arrive in 1860 as indentured labourers to work on the sugar plantations and in the coal mines of the British colony of Natal. Between the World Wars they had moved out into the swiftly industrialising economy of the port city. Most had become unskilled workers in factories or in the services sector, while for others commerce was the major area of economic activity.⁴² As early as 1935, a *South African Indian Who's Who* was published listing mainly merchants, but also the handful of professionals such as lawyers and accountants, throughout the southern African region.⁴³ This publication was a sign of the upward mobility of a section of the Indian people of the country. It also spoke of achievement, ambition and pride. In 1950, Indians possessed 46 per cent of the trading licences in Durban.⁴⁴ Since their arrival, Muslims dominated the ranks of the traders. They had followed the indentured labourers as 'passengers', from 1872 onwards, paying their own way and setting up small stores throughout Natal (and later in the rest of the country, except for the Orange Free State).⁴⁵

Not all 'passengers' were Muslim, just as not all indentured workers were Hindu, but the image of the Muslim as merchant and the Hindu as indentured labourer was hard to break down. The latter was either disparagingly seen by white people as a 'coolie' (a corruption of *kuli*, porter) or as *girimitiya* (from the indenture 'agreement') by the 'passengers' and their descendants.⁴⁶ The merchants were often the patrons and creditors of the Hindu workers, but this was a relationship that did not seem to have religious overtones. The young men who gathered to establish the Circle were, with one exception, from either large or small trading families, and either the children or grandchildren of 'passengers'.⁴⁷

The real income and commercial activity of Indians expanded between 1910 and 1950. With this expansion came an increasing capacity and interest in owning fixed property. By the 1940s, not only did Indians have nearly as many trading licences as the white traders, they had a higher rate of house ownership than any other group in Durban.⁴⁸ Many of the political struggles of Indian organisations related to discriminatory legislation prohibiting them from buying or even renting real estate in certain areas. In Durban, white residents and the Durban City Council had a fear of 'Indian penetration' in areas dominated by them.⁴⁹ The Pegging Act of 1943, which halted property transactions between white and Indian parties for three years, and the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act of 1946, which also seriously limited property ownership, significantly inhibited Indian spatial mobility. The majority of Indians, however, were neither property owners nor capable of becoming so in the short term. The founding members of the Circle were among the privileged few whose families were propertied, and who operated businesses mainly from their own premises.

'Family' is a term that needs some clarification. Circle members were like the rest of their Indian and Muslim compatriots who generally lived with their *kutum* (extended family) in joint households or similar settings.⁵⁰ The established patterns of 'arranged' marriage, most often among Muslims from within the wider kin group or original *gham*, and inherited residence rules still dominated. Settlement after marriage occurred if not with them at least very near the home of the husband's

parents. In the families of the merchants, women almost universally stayed at home unless their help was needed in the business. Work in a 'family business' meant work in the shop of one's parents or an uncle or other relative. The founder of the Circle, Daoud Saleh Mall, was exceptional for not having to work in his father's firm and, furthermore, for having the opportunity of travelling first to Fort Hare College in the Eastern Cape and then to England to further his education. He became one of the few Indian doctors in Durban at the time.

The members all used Gujarati (or the Surtee dialect, in particular) at home, while they spoke English in the Circle. Most of the Muslims had come from the Gujarat region on the upper west coast of present-day India. Trading was a long-established 'specialisation' among Muslims and others from the Kachh, Kathiawar, Bharuch and Surat districts of Gujarat who had paid their own way to the Natal colony. The largest language groups among the Indians were Tamil and Telegu (among those from the south of the continent), followed by Hindi among Hindus and Gujarati and Urdu among Muslims. Gujarati was also spoken by Hindus who had come from the north of India. A pidgin, drawing on a number of dialects and South African linguistic influences, called 'Natal Bhojपुरi' by linguists, flourished among the indentured workers and their descendants.⁵¹

Muslims who, unlike the *Mia Bhai*,⁵² did not use Urdu as a home language also valued the language as a great bearer of culture and religious expression. In parts of South Asia under the Mughal Empire, Urdu developed out of Persian and Hindi into a significant literary language.⁵³ In Natal, Urdu was the medium through which a good deal of the religious activities of Muslims was conducted, especially after the arrival of Sufi Saheb in the colony in 1895. On Fridays during the congregational prayers (*jum'ah*), lectures by the '*ulamā*' in the mosques would be in Urdu, and a *mawlana* or an *apa* would instruct children via Urdu in the basics of reading the Arabic Qur'ān. Music in Urdu, such as *qawwali*, and poetry, especially the live *musha'ira* performances, were widely appreciated, although it was only in 1959 that an organisation, Buzme Adab, was formed with the aim of promoting this.⁵⁴ To some extent this organisation was the Circle's competitor – whereas the latter wanted more Arabic, the former stressed the value of Urdu.

In 1951, only 6 per cent of Indians employed English at home; in public affairs, however, English was to a very large degree the medium of communication. In religious matters, where Arabic was not absolutely required such as in the *salah* or recitation of the Qur'ān, Urdu dominated. By the 1950s, the '*ulamā*' were loath to depart from the tradition of teaching the basics of Islam in any language other than Urdu. While they may have advanced all kinds of arguments for this, the basic reason was that most of their number were from South Asia or, in the case of locals, had received all their education at seminaries there. The Circle clearly preferred Arabic and English above Urdu, as its very name proclaims. It would relentlessly fight for Arabic as a Muslim lingua franca in the years to come. And it chose to conduct this fight in English, not in some vernacular or Urdu. This was an idealistic cause, since hardly anybody spoke any Arabic dialect or read literary Arabic, except that every Muslim memorised a modicum of highly formulaic Arabic for daily religious observances without actually understanding much of it. Muslim traders had been labelled 'Arab' by the colonial authorities, and the traders used the appellation into the twentieth century, but this was pure colonial invention and had no relation to the Arabic language. The uniqueness of the Circle was in its championing an Arabic cause in a situation in which there was very little consciousness of the language; but as will become clear, the Arabic language and Islamic culture were interchangeable in the Circle's view of things. The great feat of the Circle was its consistent effort to see Arabic taught at all levels of the South African educational system. However, none of its leadership became either fluent Arabic speakers or capable readers of any serious Arabic literature, secular or religious.

Literacy was low among Indian men and women, and only a small percentage had any secondary schooling, even by 1950.⁵⁵ The spoken word remained the means of learning about the world and about religion. Thus, there was a lively Gujarati tradition of folk songs, and Hindi cinema was already a very popular recreational activity in the 1920s.⁵⁶ Still, there were newspapers directed at an Indian readership. A pioneer that was still in circulation in the 1950s was *Indian Opinion* (1903–1961), founded by MK Gandhi, with sections in Gujarati (and often in Hindi and Tamil as well) in addition to English. *Indian Views*

(1914–1972, but titled *Views and News* from 1962 until its closure) also had a political bent and appeared weekly in English with a few articles in Gujarati and Urdu. The paper promoted good relations between Hindus and Muslims, running articles on the festivals of both, for example. Circle members would have read it eagerly because it was somewhat biased towards Muslim affairs and gave Circle activities positive coverage. *The Leader*, issued by the Natal Indian Congress from 1940, and *The Graphic*, from 1950 onwards, were political broadsheets also directed at an Indian readership. A handful of other magazines, appearing intermittently, gave expression to various Indian concerns but there was no daily paper to compete with white-owned dailies like *The Mercury*. Hindu and Muslim organisations also brought out their own periodical literature aimed at the devout of the respective faiths. The Circle made a brief attempt at publishing a periodical, but after two years *al-Mu'minun* closed down. The dominance of an oral culture perhaps played no small role in its demise. The Circle never again experimented with the print medium; instead, it appropriately embraced the concept of 'Speech Contests' – where young people would deliver prepared speeches on set topics – which became a trademark Circle event. Well-prepared boys and girls and the new elite of university-educated men and women could now speak and debate about Islam and about the world. There was an implicit democratising element in this, for it meant that not only the *mawlanas* could talk and debate about Islamic matters.

As noted above, the class composition of the Indian population had changed by the 1950s. In other respects, too, the decade was one of rapid change in the social structure of the Indians of Durban. During this period, immigration was negligible and nearly all Indians had been born inside the country. A Creole South African 'Indian' identity had formed. This was partly shaped by their dense residence in a few neighbourhoods, and as a reaction to institutional and everyday racism. The historian Bill Freund has observed that 'in South Africa, the Hindu villagers became "Indians"'.⁵⁷ The same can be said of the traders from Gujarat who in South Africa – partly through struggle and close inward mobilisation – became 'Indians', but in their case older linguistic identities were redeployed and, especially after the

Second World War, a palpable 'Islamic' identity became an increasingly important emblem of identification.

A series of political and legal struggles contributed to the formation of a distinctive *Indian* identity, giving at least the elite a confidence about their social position in the country. A central issue of struggle was the right to own property and reside in any chosen area. The promulgation of the Group Areas Act of 1950 by a National Party riding the crest of a wave of Afrikaner nationalism, however, was a disastrous setback because it required 'non-whites' to move out of long-settled areas and to sell their property at below market value. The Group Areas Act was the culmination of a long series of moves inhibiting Indian mobility and residential settlement. Throughout the 1950s, there was uncertainty and finally removals started at the end of the decade. More than 75 000 Indians in the Durban area would be forcibly moved. The Circle members resided mainly in the central business district and managed to avoid the first wave of removals.

At the time, Indian politics was in the hands of 'radicals' who strove to align Indians with the African nationalism then sweeping both the country and the continent. More than nationalism, the Young Turks sought to loosen the grip of the merchant class over Indian politics. This was a major departure. As Maureen Swann has shown:

From the very first formal Indian political campaign in 1891, until the 1940s, Indian politics were dominated by the Natal and Transvaal commercial elite. Their major organisations ... were founded to protect vested commercial interests and were controlled by the wealthiest merchants.⁵⁸

The leading political organisation, the Natal Indian Congress, which was founded by MK Gandhi in 1894, was taken over by 'radicals' from more conservative entrepreneurs like the formidable AI Kajee who had favoured closer co-operation with the state. Between 1946 and 1948, a series of passive resistance campaigns signalled the more militant path of the Natal Indian Congress. In response, AI Kajee, AM Moola and other merchants established the Natal Indian Organisation. The South African Indian Congress – uniting the Natal, Transvaal and Cape Indian congresses in July 1951 – was part of the alliance of organisations to

undertake a defiance campaign against unjust laws the following year.⁵⁹ Indian participants in this campaign were arrested alongside others for breaking apartheid laws.

It is a cliché to say that Indians, located as they are between white and African South Africans, have been in a peculiar situation in the country, yet their interstitial position requires comment. As migrant indentured workers – but also later as petty capitalists – they quickly set down their roots and thought of the colony as home, although they were free to return to their homeland on the expiration of their indenture contracts. However, the politically dominant white population discriminated against them, and the majority Zulu-speaking Africans of Natal soon became suspicious of them because they had none of their economic certainties, at least not those of the successful merchants. Africans were employed as domestic servants or in other menial tasks by Indian-owned businesses. Indians and Africans kept their distance and a pidgin, Fanakalo, was developed through which the two groups communicated. Fanakalo was probably more widely spoken than ‘standard’ English among a substantial section of the Indian population.⁶⁰ As always, there were exceptions to the rule of distance between Africans and Indians. The founder of the Circle, for instance, remembers as a child daily eating and playing with Zulu-speaking children and talking with them in Zulu, while communicating with his parents in Gujarati. He claims to have been fluent in Zulu long before he learned his first English words. There were no indigenous African Muslims apart from the Zanzibari freed slaves who arrived in the 1870s, and who were separated from the rest of the population and maintained their own distinctive subculture – although on certain occasions, such as *Milād al-nabi* (celebrations of the Prophet’s birthday), the separate Muslim communities came together.⁶¹ So-called ‘Malay’ Muslims – part of the people classified as ‘coloured’, who moved up from the Cape during the inter-War years – would be among them. One from this group, Sedick Burke, became a Circle stalwart from its very start, but the Circle remained essentially a group of men of Gujarati (Surtee, in particular) origins.

A major turning point in Indian–African relations was the riots of 1949 in Cato Manor outside Durban. African squatters rebelled against Indian landowners who also operated the shops in the settlement. Over

130 died in the rioting, more than a thousand were hurt, and many buildings were razed to the ground in the looting and mayhem.⁶² This incident spoke of the resentment felt by Africans against their Indian slumlords. Nevertheless, formal political relations between African and Indian leaders, with few exceptions, were very good, as was reflected in the many Indian activists involved with the Communist Party of South Africa and the Congress Alliance. Muslims like IC Meer, a prominent lawyer, activist and an accused in the marathon Treason Trial of the late 1950s, were among the Indians who were committed to the cause of African nationalism.⁶³ However, relations on the ground were often less than cordial, when not openly antagonistic.

Political groups such as the Indian Congresses were only one kind of association that brought Indians together in the public sphere. Trade unions were another, and they had been radicalised in the late 1930s and 1940s. For instance, Indian workers together with African comrades in their unions went on strike in the middle of 1937 and again in 1942/43. However, this co-operation and militancy petered out for numerous reasons. The strikes stand out as beacons of Indian working-class radicalism.⁶⁴ Militancy may have been in short supply, but the less dramatic effort of ordinary Indians combining their resources and talents for some or other entertainment or social good was not. A number of autonomous social, commercial, educational, welfare and religious associations had been formed in Durban and elsewhere. One estimate in 1952 was that there were 44 associations for Indians in Durban alone.⁶⁵ For instance, among Hindus, the Hindu Young Men Society dated back to 1906, the Hindu Maha Sabha to 1912, the Ramakrishna movement was formed in 1942 and the Divine Life Society in 1949.⁶⁶ Among Muslims, the tendency to form associations was just as great: the Muslim Darul Yatama wal Masakeen, for instance, was established in 1934 and became a leading welfare organisation. A Young Men's Muslim Association was established in 1942, and the Natal Muslim Council was formed in 1943 to unite Muslim groups. Religious leaders established the Jamiatul Ulama Natal in 1950 as the arbiter of orthodoxy.⁶⁷ The birth of the Arabic Study Circle was a further contribution to the array of organisations operating in Durban. These are but a few of the Hindu and Muslim associations that were

established and continued to grow throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The first Muslim women's organisation was the *Mehfil-e-khawateen-e-Islam*, which was transformed, under Circle inspiration, into the broader Women's Cultural Group in 1954.⁶⁸

There were areas of diversion and of co-operation among the Hindus and Muslims. Open hostility and conflict were unknown; at least for the period under examination, the documentation points to no public tensions. Independence for India and the creation of Pakistan in 1948, with all the violence that accompanied the Partition, did not affect relationships in South Africa. Many of the visitors hosted by the Circle were Pakistani, but there is no evidence of the issue of Indo-Pakistani relations, the Partition (and its attendant problems and unsettled questions), rallying around the question of Kashmir, or the 'war of liberation' in Bangladesh ('East Pakistan') in 1971 being matters for public debate or rallying. This is another sign of the highly localised nature of the identity of the country's Indian population, certainly at the time.

Among the Hindu and Muslim working class, one moment of intense festive interaction was the annual Tenth of Muharram parade through the streets of their poor neighbourhood. This event is a commemoration of the martyrdom of the Prophet Muhammad's nephew Husayn during a battle between two contending Muslim forces at Karbala, outside Baghdad, in 680 AD. In subsequent centuries, this event became legendary and is held sacred by the Shi'ites, but it also came to be part of popular cultures in various Muslim communities other than Shi'ite. In Natal, groups of men carrying floats through the streets would sing and dance and compete against each other, invariably ending in brawls and police intervention. Neither religious group seems to have been aware of the solemnity of the occasion. Under the impact of Hindu reformers visiting from India in 1910, Divali began to be celebrated by Hindus. Under similar influence of Muslim puritans, by 1950 Muharram had largely been 'reformed' and 'cleaned up' after its origins in Natal as a bawdy public ritual participated in by Hindus and Muslims.⁶⁹

The Orient Club in Isipingo Hills on the Natal south coast was the social meeting place of the Muslim and Hindu elite. It was formed at the

suggestion of British India's first Agent-General, Srinivasa Sastri, who filled the position between 1927 and 1929. In genteel surroundings, the businessmen hosted distinguished guests from India, such as the Agent-General, entertained influential white politicians and negotiated contracts and made deals among themselves. It was here that AM Moolla and other Muslim members of the club formulated the idea of an Orient Islamic Institute in 1939.⁷⁰ Moolla would emerge as the leading businessman of the Muslim and Indian communities and supported many causes, no matter that they actually or potentially contradicted each other. A constitution was drawn up for the Institute in 1942 and, after a fundraising drive among Muslim merchants and professionals, the first 'Orient' school opened in 1959. It was this Institute that earlier, in 1950, invited to Durban Prof. Ishrat Hussain from India, who planted the seed of an Arabic study group which could continue learning the language after his departure.⁷¹

The Orient Islamic Educational Institute sought to take the Muslim school to a new, more sophisticated level, 'not merely as a place of secular education, but also as a centre of Islamic culture and Muslim thought', as AM Moolla put it.⁷² Education enabled mobility, and Indians, increasingly recognising the potential of this route, pursued it without reservation. After the Second World War there was a rapid growth in Indian secondary schooling, and the Orient Islamic educational project aimed to establish both primary and, importantly, secondary schools. For a long time the merchants had combined their resources to fund and sustain educational and welfare initiatives. Indian financial support for schools made up for the miserly attitude of the state. Indeed, it surpassed state funding in the number of schools built from scratch, partially funded and given ongoing financial support.

The Lockhat Charities Trust and the MA Motala Education and Charity Trust were pioneers in the field of philanthropic endowment trusts.⁷³ Other families followed, and by 1960 there was a Muslim Merchants Charitable Fund. Through the funding of schools and clinics, Indians – Muslims and Hindus – and Africans in Natal all benefited from such endowments. The Circle would benefit from them too when raising funds for its activities.

The Circle's rise occurred at a crucial point in the rapid upward turn in the educational levels of Indians. During the 1960s, there were vast increases in the numbers of Indians with secondary schooling and the beginnings of an expansion in post-secondary education, especially after 1973 when education became compulsory for Indian children up to the age of 15.⁷⁴ The Circle would have a ready audience in the burgeoning cadre of tertiary-educated men and women who wanted to engage with their new, brave and modern world of secular ideas and science, but with some of their religious precepts and traditions intact. Springfield College of Education opened in 1951, ML Sultan College began offering courses in 1956 and the University College of Durban opened in 1961. By 1979, at least eight out of every one thousand Indians were registered at a university.⁷⁵

Although Indians had been in South Africa for a century by 1961, only in that year did Prime Minister HF Verwoerd grant Indians 'permanent residence' status in the country. This was formal recognition of an indisputable fact. Indians had endured all kinds of indignities and hardships, had contributed to the economy and cultural diversity of the country and, by the mid-twentieth century, most were locally born and knew no other home. The proliferation of associations was a sure sign of the certainty of Indians about their place. The Circle reflects this confidence and change. India was not even thought of as the 'motherland'; the focus of some had shifted to another part of the East, where Arabic was the mother tongue.

3

THE FOUNDER AND FOUNDATIONS

Reading and rereading the story of Joseph, related in the Qur'ān's *Sūrah Yūsuf*, is what made the difference for Daoud Saleh Mall; it was 'a watershed in my life', he says. His whole mature adult life was transformed after hearing an exegesis of the rich and intricate parable of Joseph presented in the Qur'ān. There, the twelfth chapter begins:

Alif Lam Ra

Those are the signs of the Manifest Book.

We have sent it down as an Arabic Quran;

haply you will understand.

We will relate to thee the fairest of stories

in that We have revealed to thee this Koran,

though before it thou wast one of the heedless.⁷⁶

These opening declarative lines and the narrative that follows, with all its intriguing twists and turns, struck Mall and kept him pondering and digging into the depths of the Qur'ān. It is not too much to claim that here he began his second vocation as a devoted explorer of the Islamic tradition, a relentless educator and a worker for social improvement, starting in the greater Durban community and extending gradually but steadfastly to the larger community of Muslims in South Africa.

He recalled literally stumbling upon a meeting in early 1950, where this story was being explained verse by verse to a select and studious audience. The lecturer was Ishrat Hussain, a visiting professor from the Teachers' Training College of Aligarh University in India. The learned professor was then in his late forties and had been brought to South Africa by the Orient Islamic Educational Institute, the organisation in charge of Muslim religious education in Natal.

Mall, the usually busy medical doctor, was off for the afternoon and strolling around the area close to his surgery, which he shared with a

close colleague. The lecture was in the Pine Street Madrasah; his consultation rooms were around the corner in Commercial Street. He peeped into a hall where he saw a gathering of thoughtful young men and women, *madrrasah* teachers among them, but all apparently modern in posture and disposition and in Western dress like himself. The bespectacled and impressive figure of Prof. Hussain stood in front of the class:



Daoud Saleh Mall

He had his Qur'ān and everybody had their Qur'āns in front of them and he was going through *Sūrah Yūsuf*. Now *Sūrah Yūsuf* is a very gripping story of intrigue, of love, of *iman*, *taqwa* and all that. It is very difficult because once you look at it and follow it you can't give in until the end of it. You can't abandon it midway. So that gripped my attention and I said no, let me follow this story through and I attended the classes thereafter.⁷⁷

Mall's deep involvement with this *sūrah* started here. He said: 'I was so fascinated by this story that I was almost obsessed with it. I followed the story deeper and deeper' – closely comparing Biblical and Islamic versions, for instance – 'and I still do because the story of Joseph is not something that you can set aside ... It is always fascinating.' Nearly 50 years after the event he reflected: 'In hindsight, the aura of such a Qur'ānic story, the scholarly presentation and status of the teacher, and a keen class, made one captivated to complete the course.'⁷⁸

The immediate impact was that Daoud Mall went home and opened his own dusty copy of the holy Book, which he kept more for ornamentation than for recitation or reading. Having an Abdullah Yusuf Ali translation of the Qur'ān was not uncommon among literate Muslims and this is what Mall rushed to consult.⁷⁹ He had to open the Book himself to read and reflect again on what he had heard. The many layers of meaning, the cadences of the language, the possible gap between the Arabic original and the English version presented by Hussain had all to be examined by Mall himself. Using Yusuf Ali's translation into an almost Shakespearean English, and his extensive footnotes often filled with Arabic, Persian and English literary references, was Mall's means

into the world of the Qur'ān.⁸⁰ Coming from a Western educational tradition, he could not uncritically accept a preacher or teacher's word. Check, look and re-look, examine and re-examine, analyse the evidence, disentangle the narrative for yourself: this is what his secular intellectual formation made him do instinctively.

It was the story – not the teacher – that captured Mall's attention and sparked his lifelong interest in the Qur'ān. Nevertheless, he had an obvious respect and high regard for the teacher who led him to the story that changed his direction in life. Ishrat Hussain soon became a family friend, and he would visit the Mall home to give lessons to the doctor's wife, Sakina or 'Bibi' as everyone came to know her. This continued for the duration of his stay in the country. Ill health made the affable and effective teacher return to his family in India. All contact was lost between him and his students, but his impact remained palpable and his methods influential, way beyond the first group of *madrasah* instructors he was originally brought out to train. The Orient Islamic Institute undoubtedly gained from Hussain's sojourn, but there were young men who both benefited from him and carried his objectives and methods much further.

The method of teaching employed in Prof. Hussain's classes was unique in South Africa at the time. The text was the Qur'ān and through direct translation he taught his students each line of Arabic text, beginning with the meaning and structure of every word or phrase, then very briefly the grammatical function of selected terms and expressions, and finally (and most importantly) the meaning and significance of the full verse or collection of verses until an entire chapter was covered. His method of understanding and parsing Qur'ānic verses was seen by his students as revolutionary. AS Ballim, another enthusiast of Hussain's approach and a founding member of the Circle, relates:

He explained there being so many repeated words in the Quran, by learning *passively*, one will be able to *master a good bit* of vocabulary and to some extent with *keen effort* you will be able to have a fairly good grasp of Quranic Arabic. It is like a child learning the home language from the parents while he learns as he grows up and communicates ... At the same time we learned the content of the Quran.⁸¹

The *‘ulamā*’ were rather disturbed that novices could learn the Qur’ān and Arabic in this novel way. Mall recalled them denouncing the innovation: ‘How can these people learn Arabic when we spent seven years and we can’t even speak the language now ... We can’t speak it and these people want to learn Arabic in six months.’⁸² Perhaps it was also the attention to Arabic that perturbed some of the *mawlanas*, who were educated mostly in South Asia and were more familiar with, and partial to, religious literature in Urdu rather than Arabic.

The issue for students, though, was knowledge of the text, not the language. The centre of the lectures by Prof. Hussain was the Qur’ān, not Arabic, which was the vehicle to understanding the text. Instead of old-fashioned lecturing or simply relying on the available translations, Hussain taught his students to translate the verses of the Qur’ān themselves, because the noble Book was addressed to them as individuals. The focus of Hussain’s work at Aligarh University in India was pedagogy and he had obtained graduate training in the subject in England. His South African students were possibly the recipients of the latest techniques in language acquisition adapted to Qur’ānic learning. It seems that a basic reading ability of the Arabic script was the only requirement for successful participation in the classes. This was immensely empowering to all, since it led them to read the Arabic script not merely for a vague spiritual feeling but, ultimately, in order to reflect on the messages of the various chapters of the text. Thus, they began to build up a selection of key classical Arabic words and phrases, and they also came to memorise a number of the common expressions and verses of the sacred Book, especially those encouraging human beings and believers to think and reason. No longer was this knowledge the preserve of a select few who had been formally trained at a South Asian seminary as memorisers or teachers of the Book. Hitherto, the Book had been closed to ordinary folk who approached it only for recitation on solemn occasions and for a nebulous feeling of spirituality, especially during the month of Ramadān. As Mall explained:

It [the Qur’ān] was shelved and put in a velvet covering and put on high shelves, brought down on ceremonious occasions like Ramadān, funerals and so on and then read parrot fashion ... We said that the Qur’ān says, *‘la ala lakum ta’qilūn* [Do you not ponder]?⁸³

After Hussain's visit, this was no longer the case, at least not with a few of his devoted students and their party of neophytes. After six months of Hussain's programme, there were 24 students who could, in the words of the Circle's first report, 'translate at random, Qur'ānic passages into English or Urdu.'⁸⁴ This was perhaps hyperbole, but with time it became a reality for a handful of students. MA Mohamedy was such an eager student, and he ran the classes on Hussain's departure. Mohamedy was regarded as the model who apparently could easily translate any passage of the Qur'ān instantly. He became a lifelong stalwart of the Circle and Mall's right-hand man in the organisation. In this way, then, the noble Book was moved from the margins of the students' experience to the heart of their lives. Mall reflected that: 'The Qur'ān actually was the centre you could say; it was the dynamo which occupied the centre of the stage which then radiated the message in diverse ways to attract us.'⁸⁵

These early sessions led to bigger things. After the teacher departed the city, a few of his students continued his work – learning and deliberating over the meaning and message of the Qur'ān. Initially, Mohamedy assumed the teaching role. This continued for about one year, after which they contracted a retired Lebanese medical practitioner then resident in the country, Dr Yusuf Zablith, to teach Arabic. Zablith was paid a salary of £550 in the first year. He arranged with the Lebanese government to extend bursaries to the Circle for South African students to study Arabic in Beirut, but these were not taken up by the students.

The first annual report of the newly established Circle records: 'Until this period the activities of the Circle were conducted on an informal basis ... But when our activities began to expand and our expenditure grew, it became imperative that a properly constituted organisation be formed.' On 1 February 1954, the new association was formally brought into being, 'to promote the study of the Arabic language, culture, literature, sciences, and arts.'⁸⁶ The name 'Arabic Study Circle', which the group came to assume, was a misnomer, just as 'Qur'ānic Study Circle' would have been an incorrect description of the activities launched by the group. Their intellectual concerns very soon expanded to become much more comprehensive and ambitious.

It appears that it was impossible to have an educated and socially aware collection of middle-class men in an association limited to the

reading of the Qur'ān, even if it was for exploring its meanings and not for recitation only. The founders were urban-dwellers and urbane. A group photograph of the founders shows them with Hussain all in western suits (see page vi). Of the group, only Mahomed Vawda did not wear a tie and sported both a full beard and a fez. Such a picture would be unthinkable today: young men who study the Qur'ān were then and now not expected to look so 'Western'. The group is composed of Ahmed S Ballim, Mohamed A Mohamedy, Suleman N Omar, Ismail A Karim, Suleman NM Kamdar, Dr Daoud Mall, Mahomed I Vawda and GHM Omarjee. From this image alone, it would be hard to say what their purpose was, what united them or, except for the single fez, what their religion was. They were everything that the religious establishment barely tolerated. The '*ulamā*' must have asked rhetorically: 'How could such a collection of men even venture into the mysteries of the Qur'ān?' If their appearance was criticised as too Western, and their learning methods suspiciously innovative, then their later progress was to be subject to even more criticism. The group was developing a commitment to Islam, but it was premised on ideas of reason and science, constructed upon values of the Enlightenment and modernity. To them, Islam was compatible with modernity. Throughout its five decades, this underlying sentiment informed the Circle's activities; it also landed the organisation in trouble, and the strategies employed to articulate it would change over time. Fundamentally, however, this belief survived. Islam, then, was not merely a dogmatic creed, but was conceived as a culture and civilisation in which religious dogma (compatible with science) was a small part of a structure consisting of great literary, philosophical and scientific depth, from which Muslims and the West had once benefited in common.

Extending the purposes of the initial meetings was inevitable. The unpretentious name, Arabic Study Circle, did not proclaim the much larger ambition and range of objectives that the Circle was later to pursue. The members' interests were wide, betraying a hunger for knowledge and an energy for productive social endeavour. The Circle came to be a forum for studying, in the words of Mall, the 'totality of Islam, the totality of civilisation, the totality of the message of the Qur'ān'. Furthermore, 'the Circle did not become an Arabic Study

Circle, it became a circle for the comprehensive understanding of the whole Islamic ethos and civilisation.⁸⁷

Who was Daoud Saleh Mall before that sunny day in 1950 when he entered the Orient Hall in Pine Street? What variety of forces motivated and shaped this man in the 38 years before that day, before his passionate engagement and intense relationship with *Sūrah Yūsuf* and the rest of the culture and religion of which it is part?

He was born in September 1912 and raised on the farm Vergelegen about 25 miles outside the town of Waschbank in the district of Dundee in the north of what was then the province of Natal. His immigrant parents, Hawa and Saleh, had come from Gara in the Surat district on the west coast of India. They arrived in South Africa in the late 1800s as independent traders and were subjected to all the discriminatory laws that women and men of their origin suffered. However, they persevered like the other members of their community. They and their family of six boys and four girls, of which Daoud was the fifth son, ran a lucrative supply store on the farm.

The religious and cultural climate was dominated by the traditional orthodoxy of India brought to the small settlement, in which the Muslims were a negligible minority. The nearest mosque was in Waschbank and, even then, it was more like a temporary prayer room than a conventional or permanent mosque.

His family was not particularly religious, nor were they enthusiasts of one or other sectarian Islamic group based in India. As Mall put it: 'I never grew up in front of a mullah. I never knew what a *molvi* was.'⁸⁸ He did not remember there being much passion for rituals or for abstract theological ideas. He only encountered a *molvi* when he began to travel to the town of Dannhauser to attend a 'proper *madrasah*'. There he instantly became very interested in Islamic beliefs and rituals as expounded by one Mawlana Desai. This religious teacher even encouraged the young Mall to start a course of rigorous discipline to memorise the entirety of the Qur'ān, all of its approximately 6 000 verses. 'I was going to become a complete *hafez* and I went up to four *siparas*, and they used to stop me in the street and make me read.'⁸⁹ Thus, his early religious experience was rather mixed – partly swayed by his first meeting with what must have been a persuasive

mullah at Dannhauser and partly unconcerned because there was no vibrant context for enhancing his subsequent zeal for the faith. The complacency of the countryside ultimately made him a young man like the rest when it came to matters of faith and culture. They were conservative but neither orthodox nor overly concerned about ritual and religious practice. It was a background he shared with many of the Muslims of Natal and, indeed, with other founding members of the Circle.

From today's perspective, an outstanding feature of his early years was the very close relationship he had with the Zulu-speaking children of the area. He claimed that he could speak Zulu competently even before he spoke Gujarati or knew a word of English. He proudly and fondly remembered that he 'grew up with them [Zulu-speaking children] and learned to speak their language, ate their food, and regarded myself as one of them because they were my friends. My brothers and sisters did likewise.'⁹⁰ In later years, his abilities in the Zulu language would lead him to critical engagement with a senior *mawlana* from Newcastle who was translating the Qur'ān into Zulu. Based on what he considered his intimate familiarity with the language and culture of the Zulu-speaking people, Mall had many complaints about the quality of the effort.

Around 1930, he left his childhood surroundings in the Dundee district for the province's economic centre, Durban, more than 300 kilometres south. There he took up residence with the Meer family, who are related to him, and attended various high schools including Sastri College, which he entered as one as its first pupils in 1932. He excelled in all his subjects, but a spell of nearly fatal typhoid fever interrupted his schooling. After about two years, because of his illness, he returned to his old school but could not adjust. He was a highly competitive student and, consequently, was dissatisfied that his fellow pupils had moved ahead of him during his absence.

His parents had no objection, for either emotional or financial reasons, to his desire to trek to the Eastern Cape to complete his high school education. He enrolled at what was popularly known as Fort Hare, but which had been officially titled the South African Native College on its establishment in 1916. At that time, Fort Hare was not

a university but a secondary school with college facilities for a basic degree for the black middle class and elite from all over southern Africa. His sojourn at the premier institution for black scholars made a deep impression on him. He said that it 'was the turning-point in my life'.⁹¹ From the bucolic setting of northern Natal, through the equally narrow environment of segregated Durban, he arrived in a completely 'different world' at the famous institution. Although Fort Hare was also a rather small rural town, the difference is that it was a college town, with students and staff from all over the country and beyond:

There I met Cape coloureds, I met Xhosas, I met Sothos, I met traditional chiefs, I met Malays from all over the country, especially the Cape, Muslims from the Eastern Cape and so on. It was quite a different environment from what I was used to in Durban.⁹²

After matriculating in 1937, he left the country for genuinely cosmopolitan settings and experiences. Universities in South Africa were not freely open to men of his colour. He applied to institutions in Britain, partly to avoid all the bureaucratic red tape and racism that he would have had to confront in applying to a local university. His family could afford to educate him overseas, so he went to England to study medicine. He was accepted at a number of British institutions and chose the University of Sheffield, not for academic reasons but on the advice of friends he met in England.

Before starting at medical school, Mall spent six months in London. There he met Muslims based in the suburb of Woking with whom he was able to maintain his cultural affiliations and his growing interest in religion. At the Islamic centre in Woking, he was particularly impressed by 'the modern Western-oriented *dawah*, which wanted to capture the West'.⁹³ This modern orientation with special attention to literature of high quality in impeccable English was the style of the Qadiani movement founded in British India by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in the late nineteenth century.⁹⁴ Many years earlier, around 1928, Mall had heard a speech by one of its leading spokesmen, Khwaja Kamaluddin, during a speaking tour of South Africa. He was impressed by his presentation of Islam and he remained so when he actually saw the *khwaja's* followers at work from their centre in Woking. There he was 'exposed to a different

brand of Islam. A very dynamic brand of Islam [that] reacted in the *dawah* field'.⁹⁵ He recalls that he 'didn't find anything conflicting in the movement'. Qadianism and its breakaway branch, the Ahmadīyyah, were not yet the highly controversial sects in Muslim minority communities that they were later considered to be, and all the Muslims in London seem to have participated in the activities of the Woking Islamic centre. Later in life he and the Circle were beset by accusations that they were active exponents of Qadiani thought in South Africa. Mall always denied this, though he could never deny how impressed he was with the calibre of the Ahmadīyyah missionary project in England.

At Sheffield University, his circle of friends was large and multinational, for now he was on a campus with many students from all over the world, including 'lots of Muslim students especially from Egypt, the Middle East and from India as well and Nigeria and so on'.⁹⁶ From his friends he learned a lot about the cultures and politics of their countries, which were all still under some form of colonial rule. Given their similar colonial backgrounds, he had much in common with these students. His political passions were first inflamed, however, not by a general anti-colonialism but by the specific and growing crisis over the British-mandated Palestine. There the Zionists had become increasingly militant while the local population grew equally resistant to the settlers. The British were not acting on the side of the indigenous Palestinian inhabitants. Activated by the flow of news about Palestine and his friendship with students from the Middle East, he contributed an article to the student newspaper supporting the Palestinians in their plight. This drew the hostile attention of the Jewish students on campus. Immediately, he was confronted by what he remembers as a united and visible Zionist student lobby: 'Everyone came, not one Jew was left out. So I thought that now the Jewish people here are working as a unit.'⁹⁷ As part of a pro-Palestine Muslim minority, this event further stimulated his social and political awareness and possibly led to his first spell of activism.

He did not, however, form or join an organisation for Muslim students or students from the colonies. Instead, more out of curiosity than for any ideological reason, he joined the campus branch of the Communist Party of Great Britain and even represented the branch at party congresses. Participation in the party's activities never affected his

Islamic convictions: 'I had at least my background in Islam as a result of the scholars I met in Woking ... and then my reading, especially when I was at Fort Hare, my reading on Islam was very intense.'⁹⁸ His approach to communism was, therefore, not dogmatic but was shaped by his eagerness to always explore, examine and learn about the world: 'I was exposed to all these things and I didn't shy away from them. I faced them. And faced them with a view to learn. I was open-minded.'⁹⁹

A few years earlier, as part of the Fort Hare tradition, Mall had even been a regular churchgoer and hymn-singer. A liberal attitude was cultivated there, and he encountered young men from a variety of religious, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, including one particularly aggressive white Christian missionary. Undoubtedly, in the latter case his openness was tested severely. Bishop Ferguson-Davie once invited Mall home for lunch, after which the host proceeded to challenge him to a debate on religion with a view to winning him over to join the Anglican Church. Mall remembers the ridiculousness of Ferguson-Davie actually inviting him to join the church, to which he responded with a plea for more time to consider the invitation, just so as not to be rude to a staff member. Ferguson-Davie was a 'tall imposing missionary who had served in India for some years' and thought he knew 'the Indian mind'. Thus, imagining that Mall would be easy prey, the missionary 'tried to corner me and I felt terrible'.¹⁰⁰ With its rich range of students, its library and teachers of diverse temperament and persuasion, Fort Hare had prepared him well for his adult life. In England, he could befriend and collaborate with Muslims of various sectarian or no commitments, support the cause of Palestine and join the Communist Party.

By the time he left for England, he was ready for encounters with all sorts of people and with all kinds of ideas. Indeed, as his English sojourn demonstrates, he faced many intellectually challenging situations but emerged with his religious moorings intact, and an expanded mind and a wider range of experience to his credit.

Mall completed his studies, was tired of England and, despite employment possibilities there, he rushed home: 'When the war was over in 1945, I took the first boat ... the first cargo boat that came to South Africa.'¹⁰¹ This was his only trip back to South Africa since

leaving the country. His mother had died while he was overseas and, because of the war, he could not travel to attend her funeral. Returning to South Africa, therefore, was a matter of urgency once the war was over. The family business had prospered during the war years and financing his studies and his return journey was no problem.

Back in his own country, he opened a general practice in Dundee, a short distance north of where his family continued to live and run their business near Waschbank. It was understandably hard to return to such small-town conditions and begin a regular life after years of living abroad. Mall needed challenges and a bigger, more dynamic social setting, so he moved to Durban to open a practice right in the heart of the city.

His single status also changed in 1945 when he married Sakina ‘Bibi’ Bismillah, who came from Potchefstroom in the then Transvaal province. Sakina and Daoud Mall shared more than 30 years of married life. They had three children – two sons, Junayd and Zakariah, and one daughter, Leila. For virtually the whole of this period he was the leading figure in the Circle, and she the caring mother and tireless partner as well as courteous host. Zuleikha Mayat recalls her sister as being a selfless supporter from a young age, but not a weakling, and during the heyday of the Circle she remembers:

[Dr Mall] had just to say somebody was coming and she would see to his entertainment. I know that very many times she quarrelled with Ismail [Manjra] and Mr Mohamedy, for she expected others to help as well. She really became a little bully in that sense. But, really, the tremendous help that Dr Mall got from her, few men would get that from their wives.¹⁰²

Mrs Mall died in a car crash in 1979. The executive committee of the Circle noted that: ‘The late Mrs Sakina Daoud Mall lavished her hospitality upon visiting Circle’s guests who were often housed by her. In fact, her home became the headquarters of the Arabic Study Circle.’ Moreover, ‘in recognition of this quiet and consistent labour of love’, the members voted to establish a bursary fund in her honour.¹⁰³ In 1980, Mall remarried; his new wife’s name was Zahra and they had a daughter, Qudsiya, in 1983.

In South Africa, Mall’s interest in mental health was reignited. He had developed a keen interest in psychiatry at medical school, attending

many additional lectures and seminars on the subject in London and spending some time working in a mental hospital in Croydon. For him, psychiatry was ‘the medicine of the future’, the medicine for the ‘spirit, for the soul’, and all his ‘love for medicine seemed to have gone to psychiatry’. His early preoccupation with the psyche, as constructed by modern science and medicine, would later be supplemented by his fascination with the Qur’ān story of Joseph. In the latter instance, one is dealing with manifestly religious allegory, but one which is simultaneously very human. The themes of jealousy, competition, revenge and affection are there as much as they are in Western conceptions of the mind and personhood. This is a good example of the coalescing of Mall’s interest in the Western and Islamic traditions.

By leaving northern Natal for Durban, Mall could continue his interest in psychiatry. When he arrived in the city in 1946, hardly any attention was paid to mental health, ‘the field was wide open, there was no psychiatrist in Durban ... in the whole city’. The only practitioner came from near Pietermaritzburg, and he gave shock treatment once or twice a week! ‘I said no, here I am, the field is wide and virgin ... Let me establish myself.’¹⁰⁴ However, there was no specialist training programme anywhere in the country and Mall had to develop his expertise without the benefit of formal certification in the field.

His attention was immediately attracted to the need that prevailed among the black population of the city – Hindus, Zulus and Muslims were all ‘groping in the dark as far as mental diseases were concerned’. The Muslims reduced their problems to possession by *jinn*. For Zulus, three factors played a role – consuming poisoned food, falling upon a bad spirit, and bad spells cast by jealous people. Among Hindus there was a concern with evil spirits, which could be expelled by visiting the temple; consequently, Mall observed ‘temples all over the country doing a roaring business treating these mental patients.’¹⁰⁵

Mall pondered: ‘How could Islam be reconciled to this? ... It couldn’t ... The whole thing was to me a bag of superstition whether it was practised by the Zulu, Muslim or Hindus.’¹⁰⁶ Moreover, a number of *mawlanas* were making money by ‘dishing out *taweez*’.¹⁰⁷ Mall was appalled by the situation he encountered and he spoke and wrote against it, because ‘Islam didn’t allow this sort of thing. The Prophet

never wrote one *taweez*, neither did his companions ever write a *taweez*. This tradition developed centuries later.’

When he did make contact with the medical establishment, he was almost equally appalled at the kind of old-fashioned analyses that were paraded as scientific procedure in the field of mental health. Schizophrenia, for example, was believed to be caused by toxins in the bowel, a long-debunked theory but still propounded at a place like Addington Hospital, the leading public medical facility for white patients in Durban at the time. He challenged this idea publicly, and was then invited by the superintendent of McCord Hospital, Dr Alan Taylor, to attend to psychiatric patients there. He fulfilled this function until 1954. His interest and reputation in the area led to his involvement at King Edward VIII Hospital, and he taught the subject at ML Sultan Technikon. Mall maintained a fascination with the field, continued to work in institutions concerned with the problem (even while in private practice) and treated patients with various psychological and mental problems right into the 1990s. In November 1998, he was honoured for 50 years of service by the Psychiatric Society of South Africa.

The burdens of his profession and starting a family initially left little time for anything else, until he attended, by sheer coincidence, that lecture by Ishrat Hussain in 1950. Before the Circle:

My life, my religious life was a typical life of a doctor, Western-oriented but Muslim doctor. I never attended mosque, occasionally on a Friday, going ... reluctantly, going to Eid prayers reluctantly. I was, so to speak, one of those Western-oriented [persons] who had returned from Europe and therefore suspect, Islamically, by the orthodox.¹⁰⁸

From 1950 onward he was no longer a ‘typical doctor’, although he remained ‘suspect, Islamically, by the orthodox’, because of his role in the formation and leadership of the Arabic Study Circle. Despite what his detractors have said, in 1950 he began on a long road of intellectual discovery and a path of social and religious duty for the communities of Natal. This was combined with his professional services as a medical practitioner, concerned especially with psychiatric problems, for the whole population of the province. Mall passed away in 2003, having lived an honest and exemplary life.

4

LEARN, SPEAK, READ – AND STUDY ARABIC

When the Circle was formed in 1950, its founders committed themselves to studying for individual edification, and strove to circulate Islamic learning in the public sphere. They have remained devoted to these objectives ever since. Such aims were not new in the minority Muslim community of South Africa. Muslims knew the command of the Prophet to seek knowledge (*talab al-ilm*) and they pursued this goal in their individual fashions, most often at the feet of a *mawlana* or an *apa*.¹⁰⁹

‘Knowledge’, however, mostly entailed the accumulation of minute details relating to prayer, fasting and other stipulated rituals. There was also a general circulation of aphorisms relating to good conduct in one’s everyday dealings with neighbours and others. Critical exchange over the whole range of human affairs was not considered a religious duty. The established institutions of learning reproduced rules of respect for the traditional sources of knowledge – the ‘*ulamā*’ – and their corpus of texts.

The Circle’s members dissented from this model. They sought after modern and innovative methods and content instead of the traditional system of the *madrasah*. The purpose of Ishrat Hussain’s visit to Durban was to investigate the current state of basic Islamic education. Born in the wake of his departure, the Circle committed all its energies to spreading awareness of the need for education, raising funds to employ and invite lecturers and, very importantly, to upgrade primary Islamic education in South Africa.

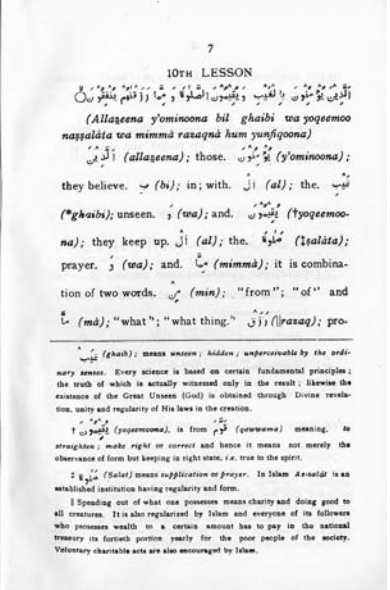
At the core of all these efforts was the study of Arabic. This emphasis on education and ‘the intellect’ was very much in keeping with the style of an earlier generation of ‘reformers’ in various parts of the Muslim world.

LEARN

Learning the language of the Qur'ān so that each individual could understand and interpret it was the first purpose of the association. It steadily broadened its sphere of concern to include the provision of Arabic and Qur'ānic classes to a broader community of Muslim adults, and then moved on to the education of Muslim children. The Circle's role in the establishment of departments of Arabic and Islamic studies, offering full undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses, at the University of Durban-Westville, was the culmination of an enduring commitment to the systemisation of Islamic education. Furthermore, the Circle granted bursaries to students taking Arabic. The bursaries have been indispensable to the continuation of Arabic and Islamic studies at Durban-Westville (which has amalgamated with other institutions to form the University of KwaZulu-Natal). In a sense, without the provision of financial support to students to take these courses, the future of the courses and the staff teaching them would have been in jeopardy.

Before it began granting bursaries for local study, the Circle obtained scholarships from the Lebanese government for Arabic studies in Beirut. At the time, there was still diplomatic contact between South Africa and Lebanon. Although no students undertook studies in Beirut, the Circle did raise bursaries to send three students – Abdullah Deedat, Ismail Timol and Suleman Omar – to study in Cairo. Before the rise of Gamal 'Abd al-Nasr as Egyptian ruler, South Africa and Egypt had diplomatic relations, and making arrangements for students to study in Cairo would not have been difficult. The students travelled to Egypt in 1954 but, unfortunately, they had to return after two years because of the Suez Crisis when Egyptian President Gamal 'Abd al-Nasr nationalised the Suez Canal, and Britain, France and Israel bombarded Egypt.¹¹⁰ Although the students did not enter Al-Azhar University for degree purposes, they did return with a capacity to effectively use Arabic as a living language.

The Circle steadily became an association for the comprehensive education of the entire Muslim community. Of course, it was not the first in this endeavour, for there were many other associations devoted



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to Islamic education for both children and adults. The Orient Islamic Institute (established in 1942) in Durban and the Central Islamic Trust (established in 1952) in the Transvaal were the leading and most recognised bodies supervising *madrrasah* education for Indian Muslims. The former was established under the patronage of AM Moolla and other wealthy businessmen, and Transvaal Indian merchants established the latter. Both were run by lean, but functioning, administrations and had sound financial backing. They were 'establishment' bodies, universally accepted by the Muslim community and the 'ulama'. However, they seemed to lack pedagogical creativity and any sense of the modern Westernising context of South African Muslims.

What was different about the Circle's interest in education? The Circle's members had noted that, despite concerted efforts, disarray persisted in the provision of basic Muslim education; effective organisation existed only in a few parts of the better-off urban areas. More crucially, outdated methods were used and largely irrelevant

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content was being taught at virtually all the institutions in Natal. It seemed to members of the Circle that Ishrat Hussain had come and gone; the professor had issued a critical 11-page report and made concrete recommendations, but the status quo remained unchanged. The report slated the poor quality of *madrasah* education, remarking on the ill-prepared, poorly paid teachers, the absence of proper textbooks and the sorry physical state of classrooms. The Hussain report was an incisive pronouncement on the dismal state of primary education. It is unclear whether his hosts actually paid serious attention to his findings. What is certain, though, is that the Orient Trust opened its own school in January 1959, offering religious instruction alongside the regular secular subjects.¹¹¹

Hussain had observed of the *madrasah* system that it was ‘undefined and ill-conceived and the whole system drifts in the current of traditions that have never engaged thought from any quarter of the community’.¹¹² The extensive recommendations were meant to reform the entire system from teacher training through the structure of lessons to the conditions of the classrooms. Although the Orient Institute had brought Hussain to Durban, the Circle membership believed they had the duty to implement his recommendations.

The improvement of *madrasah* education and the promotion of Arabic became the Circle’s two areas of involvement very early on in its history. In the field of *madrasah* education, the Circle collaborated with existing organisations concerned with education in Natal and elsewhere in the country. The Circle, however, attempted to bring its unique insights and concerns to the education field. There was no need to undertake educational initiatives when existing bodies were already involved. The Circle sought a broader vision and transformation of the educational ethos rather than offering yet more of the same *madrasah* classes. To give practical shape to its concerns, the Circle did run one winter school in 1955 to upgrade the skills of *madrasah* teachers. Otherwise, the Circle concentrated on raising the bigger questions about the spirit and content of Islamic education. In January 1967, the Circle’s Education Conference brought together 180 delegates from 35 organisations. Mawlana Abdul Quddus Hashemi, a Pakistani educator and author, was the keynote speaker and AM Moolla opened the event.

The result was the formation of the Natal Muslim Education Board. Much effort was put into arranging this conference, but the board that was established to act on the resolutions sunk without much notice.

This did not deter the Circle. A mark of its deep and continuing concern with this area is that it arranged another conference to celebrate its 25th anniversary in 1975. This time it was a national conference on Muslim education, with many international guests invited. The Vice Chancellor of Karachi University in Pakistan, Prof. Ishtiaq Quraishi, was invited as the keynote speaker but, unfortunately, he was prevented from coming by the political situation in Pakistan.¹¹³ In his place, Dr Syed Aziz Pasha, who was very involved in Islamic educational issues in Britain, gave the keynote address.¹¹⁴ Again, many educators and administrators attended. Participants came from across the country with reports on the state of Muslim education in their respective regions. The role and place of Arabic in Muslim education was the subject of numerous papers and played a large role in proceedings.¹¹⁵

The Circle had the will but not the capacity to fully engage with the *madrasah* system. Splendid ideas and a grand cultural vision were not enough to ensure a role for the Circle in the reform and transformation of the system. The energies and interests of the Circle membership were more productively turned towards fostering the Arabic language and holding events such as speech contests.

SPEAK

An activity giving the Circle wide publicity was its annual public-speaking contest, the first of which was organised in early 1954. According to the Circle's annual report of that year, one EH Ismail had raised the idea of a speech contest. The subject of the inaugural contest, which drew 19 participants, was the life of the Prophet Muhammad. Seventeen speakers took part in the 1955 event.¹¹⁶ The winners received floating trophies and book prizes donated by local businessmen.

Judges were drawn from the city's professionals, and even local '*ulamā*' were invited to adjudicate. Among the professionals at the opening competition in 1954 was, appropriately, the head of the Department of Speech and Drama at the University of Natal, Prof.

Elizabeth Sneddon. Although the topics were largely religious in nature, the panel of judges was very often multi-religious and non-sectarian. This reflects the Circle's attempt to act as a conduit for modernity by looking to the appropriate and modern experts in a particular field as a source of advice and knowledge. Thus, a speech contest should have a professor of speech and drama. In 1975, Dr Kalim Siddiqui, a Pakistani scholar then resident in England, was an adjudicator.¹¹⁷ In that contest, the first prize in the adult section was a return air ticket to Saudi Arabia for the annual *hajj*. In 1977, the head of drama at the University of Durban-Westville, Prof. Devi Bhugwan was among the panel of adjudicators. Mall characterises the effect of these competitions as follows:

Weighty topics drawn from early Islamic history, rehearsed under teachers and presented eloquently before judges seated amidst a large audience ... lent a dramatic setting that held the audience spellbound.¹¹⁸

The winner of the first competition, on the life of Prophet Muhammad, was a young man by the name of Abdul Kader Asmal. He would later become a leading figure in the anti-apartheid movement in Britain, a professor of law in Ireland and, ultimately, Minister of Education in the new, democratic South Africa. Second place went to Abdullah Deedat, who was sent to Egypt by the Circle, and would become a well-known and emotive public speaker on Islamic topics in the country. For 'most humorous speech' (the first and last time that this category was included), SM Shaik was presented with one of the book prizes. The newspaper *Indian Views* said of the first public speaking event: 'The contest was successful from every point of view. At both its sessions, in the afternoon and evening, the hall was crowded and enthusiasm prevailed throughout the long hours, among the audience and the speakers.'¹¹⁹

After his return from Egypt in 1956, Abdullah Deedat taught at an all-Muslim school, Ahmediah, and rigorously prepared pupils for participation in the speech contests. He had the help of two colleagues who had also studied in Cairo, Ismail Timol and Suleman Omar. They would first hold internal contests at school and then take the best through to the Circle's event.

Contests for women were hosted in collaboration with the Mehfil-e-khawateen-e-Islam, an Indian women's group, and later the Women's Cultural Group, formed in 1954 by Sakina Mall, her sister Zuleikha Mayat and other Durban women. The group in fact emerged out of the Circle. The separate competitions for men and women were later combined.

Dr Mall recalled:

These events drew a tremendous amount of response and acted as a catalyst because the message of Islam had to be given to the public at grass-roots level [and this] was through the speech contest. The hall was full of people coming from all over Natal to listen to speeches by confident speakers.¹²⁰

The speech contests were probably the most successful activity the Circle conducted on a regular basis. They were certainly much more successful than the Circle's forays into *madrasah* education. While organising the speech contests was hard work, it was nothing compared to what was expected in trying to run a *madrasah*, not to mention transforming an entire system of relatively entrenched basic education. The idea of the speech contest was taken into other provinces and they continued well into the 1980s, especially the 'flagship' Durban event. In 1983, the Circle hosted its 33rd annual speech contest, exemplifying its consistency. The contests later became less popular but continued nevertheless.

The larger number of participants each year led the organisers to split the competition into three levels so that students from primary school through to university level could take part. Between 1954 and the mid-1980s, the range of topics addressed in each event also expanded. Increasingly, the topics moved away from a set selection about heroes of early Islamic history and so on; by the 1980s, subjects relevant to the contemporary Muslim world and also to South African society were addressed, such as the conflict in Afghanistan and Lebanon, the Iranian revolution and the problem of racial discrimination at home.

With expansion, advertising became more extensive. Schools were invited to send a maximum of three competitors, and they were not limited to sending Muslim children. Indeed, non-Muslim participants had featured in a number of contests since the outset. Interestingly,

the contest was always simply billed 'Speech Contest', without further definition, thus lending itself to a range of topics and participants.

Although the speeches were short (three minutes for the primary school competition), every participant had to be well prepared. Over the years, the event encouraged dozens of young men and women to conduct some research, write a speech, do a preliminary practice run and then the real thing in front of a large crowd. At least a few of the participants must have benefited from such experience in their later careers. This annual competition made a valuable contribution towards Islamic awareness and the development of the vital skills of literacy and elocution among sections of Natal's black communities.

READ

In order for speeches to be delivered, there had to be a certain amount of material available for prospective speakers to research their topics. Given the severe lack of public reading or book-lending facilities for black people in Durban, similar to the situation elsewhere in the country, there was a need to create a library facility, especially one that stocked books and other materials relevant to the Circle's sphere of concern.¹²¹ The Circle's promotion of reading possibly contributed to fostering a broader reading culture and fitted in neatly with its promotion of the speech contest. It was only in 1968, however, that the Circle established its own Islamic lending library in the Porbandar Building in Grey Street. The library later moved to Queen Street, where everything went up in flames in 1979. Subsequently, a new library was founded in the Dar-us-Salaam Centre in Queen Street. In 1999, the library was donated to the al-Ansaar Islamic Society, a group that was established in 1993 'to promote Islamic education at all levels'. However, the name of the Circle would continue to be used, and two Circle members sit on the library committee. Al-Ansaar's vision is to bring the library up to contemporary standards.¹²²

The library started with a collection of 700 books. By 1971, it housed a thousand titles and had 300 members.¹²³ It assisted the members in their preparation for the Qur'anic reading classes, and served many constituencies: the general public, Circle members, students working

specifically on their speeches and those doing more general reading.

The holdings of the library reflect its diverse users. ‘Islamic culture’ in its broadest sense is the concern of the library, and all subjects within this ambit are covered. Authors, intellectual approaches and subjects are not censored. Old-fashion Orientalists and young apologists and everyone in-between are represented in the collection. The library reflects this openness, but it also bespeaks the lack of a coherent collection policy. Nevertheless, it is a community library and not an academic one. For the latter purpose, the Circle generously supported the development of the Islamic and Arabic collection at the University of Durban-Westville library. Many of the major classical and modern Arabic texts necessary to teach and research Islamic studies are housed there.

While the speech contests were annual events, and the library a large room stuffed with books, magazines and newspapers, with a single librarian, the pursuit of Arabic was a full-time passion.

AL-LUGHAT AL-ARABIYYAH

The Circle’s promotion of Arabic extended from the formation of Arabic classes for adults, Qur’ānic discussion groups, and Arabic language classes for children, to the establishment in the 1970s of two university chairs – one in Islamic studies, the other in Arabic.

As we have seen, the Circle was born out of the desire to understand the Qur’ān. After Ishrat Hussain left, his loyal followers continued on their own. Thus, the concept of a Qur’ānic discussion group was established. The group had between 20 and 25 participants and continued for many years on a weekly basis at the Kismet Clinic in Queen Street. When numbers began to fall, the idea of attracting participants through inviting special guest speakers was conceived. On evenings when guests such as the venerable Mawlana Ansari of the West Street Mosque or Prof. Salman Nadvi led the discussion, numbers easily rose to 60. Mawlana Ansari was a founder of the Jamiatul Ulama in Durban in 1950, the major voice of the Muslim clergy of Natal, and his presence at the Circle’s events gave it legitimacy in the eyes of the general public.¹²⁴

Once fired by the need to understand the Qur’ān in its original language, Dr Mall could not support the preference given to Urdu

by the *mawlanas*. To him, this was just to confound the populace and was irrational in the South African context. His emphasis was on an intellectual appreciation of Islam and he therefore denounced the '*ulamā*' for not encouraging Arabic, the language of the primary sources of Islam. Furthermore, he argued in 1959 that Arabic was the basis of Urdu and, to better understand the latter, the former needed to be studied just as 'we study Latin to have a better understanding of English and other European languages.' Dr Mall added:

Arabic and Persian are more important than Urdu because the Quran and the Ahadith and many great works are in Arabic whilst intellectual giants have left monumental works in the Persian language. We had rather have Persian than Urdu but Arabic is a must.¹²⁵

ARABIC LANGUAGE CLASSES

In 1967, Arabic was offered for the first time as a subject at all three levels of the Bachelor of Arts degree at the University College for Indians on Salisbury Island, in Durban Bay, and at the University of South Africa (Unisa). In 1945, the Council of Unisa, until then a national examining university, had decided to offer courses by correspondence. Nearly 20 years later, in 1963, the university started a Semitics department, in which Arabic became an examinable subject. Mehmood Dawood, a diligent student from Durban, was the first to major in Arabic at Unisa.

In 1969, Dawood was appointed as a lecturer in the Department of Arabic and Oriental Studies at the University College of Durban, and also gave weekly informal language classes to 30 adult learners. High school students attended a separate class. However, at the end of 1970 an adult class that had begun with 42 ended with only 9. In 1971 these classes were still running, but numbers were decreasing. By 1977, MA Mohamedy, affectionately called *bhai mota* (elder brother), the Circle's stalwart treasurer, was the Arabic instructor. He had been a student of Hussain and continued to follow the professor's method of studying Arabic for many years. He was virtually self-taught but, with long experience in grappling and battling with Qur'anic Arabic, he started to teach a class himself.

Running parallel with its community-based classes, the institutionalisation of Arabic became the major purpose of the Circle. The struggle to have Arabic as a recognised language of instruction at schools and universities preoccupied Dr Mall and his colleagues.

Whereas the Circle's community-based classes declined in their effectiveness in the 1970s, the struggle to institutionalise the teaching of Arabic at schools began to bear fruit. After much correspondence and numerous meetings with the education division of the Department of Indian Affairs, eventually Arabic was accepted. Additional consultations were held about textbooks that would be used in the Arabic classes. The Circle arranged for *A new method of learning Arabic*, a four-part introductory textbook written by MA Al-Masri, to be the prescribed text. Later, a compilation of more advanced readings for upper-level high school students was funded by the Circle.

By 1977, five schools in Natal and one in the Transvaal offered Arabic as a regular, examinable subject. In 1984, Arabic was offered at Indian primary schools, and in 1989 it could be taken on the Higher Grade at matriculation level. In June 1987, matriculants were ready for the first ever matric examination in Arabic. There were approximately 300 students who had enrolled for Arabic as a matriculation subject.¹²⁶ The Circle's 27th biennial report noted: 'With his enthusiasm and tireless efforts he [Dr Mall] has succeeded in making Natal the leading province as far as Arabic is concerned.' This was not boastful. From then on in Natal, a student could take Arabic at, say, Durban Indian Girls High School and then go on to major in the subject for a bachelor's degree at the University of Durban-Westville. She might have a sibling in a primary school taking Arabic and parents attending weekly classes offered by the Circle. Furthermore, a bursary was available from the Circle if she needed it.

BURSARIES

The Cairo trio of Deedat, Timol and Omar received the first Circle funding. Ebrahim Mahida began his BA at the University of Punjab in Pakistan on a Circle scholarship in 1966. Certainly, by then it was more complicated to get a South African into a university in Cairo, but it is unclear why Pakistan was chosen as a place to study, given the Circle's

emphasis on Arabic. In 1975, three bursaries for Arabic studies at the University of Durban-Westville inaugurated the Circle's scholarship programme to support the department there, and by 1977, 21 students had received bursaries. In the mid-1980s, the Circle was giving bursaries to between 15 and 20 students annually. One estimate is that the Circle spent more than R35 000 on bursaries between 1975 and 1988.¹²⁷ This figure, however, is an underestimate. According to the Circle's own documentation, preserved by its indefatigable treasurer MA Mohamedy, between 1979 and 1999 the circle gave out bursaries to the value of R447 863. This amounted to about half of the donations totalling R834 337 collected by the Circle over roughly the same period (1976–1999).¹²⁸

Mall was a tireless fighter for Arabic. He corresponded with individuals and organisations around the world to help the Circle in realising the dream of Arabic as a course of instruction in South African schools and universities. He was most consistent and, for the sake of Arabic, his correspondence continued well into the 1980s. He began in 1956 by writing to the Agha Khan, the imam of the Shi'ite Ismaili sect, who was then Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah. He was invited to have tea with the Agha Khan and his French wife in Cannes, France, where he requested financial support for a university chair in Arabic. The meeting was affable but yielded nothing; a few months later, a reply came from the Ismaili East African headquarters in Nairobi saying the request had been unsuccessful.

In December 1958, Dr Mall wrote to Jochanan Kapliwatzky in Israel, asking for advice on teaching Arabic to children and permission to reproduce extracts from his *Arabic language and grammar*.¹²⁹ Kapliwatzky's books circulated widely in South Africa among Muslim students of the language; his name was synonymous with Arabic studies, and his multi-volume textbook, distributed by Juta's publishers, was popular until the 1970s. There is no record of a reply by the author to Mall's letter. Mall wrote to the Jewish Arabist without concern for the latter's faith, politics or location. The important thing was to circulate materials for teaching Arabic. Many years later, he would still be writing to experts for advice and materials. In July 1975, he received a reply to his letter from Dr Harold Spencer, an Arabist at the University of Durban-Westville, about the

latter's Arabic course on tape. Unfortunately, Spencer wrote that the course he had devised was for first-language users in the Arabian Gulf states.

In May 1975, Mall wrote to Shaikh Hassan Abdulla al-Shaikh (Minister of Education in Saudi Arabia) asking that South African students of Arabic be allowed to spend time in Saudi Arabia to consolidate their local studies. The 1970s saw a steady stream of young South African Muslims spending anything from two years (for a certificate course) to six years (for full first degree) at a selected number of institutions in Saudi Arabia. In his letter to the Minister of Education, Mall also requested that a *qari* (reciter of the Qur'ān) be sent for a period of six weeks to tour the country. In November 1975, he sent a letter to Shaykh Saleh al-Qazzaz (Secretary General of Rabitah al Alam al-Islami). As with the Saudi education minister, he requested a *qari*, exchange programmes and Arabic teachers to teach locally. Earlier, in June 1975, he wrote to Syed Aziz Pasha (General Secretary of the Union of Muslim Organisations of the UK and Eire) for advice on the planning of Islamic education for children in South Africa. As noted above, Pasha came to South Africa as a guest speaker at the Circle's education conference. Mall was given the rare opportunity, for a black person and a Muslim, to speak on national radio about Arabic. In the radio interview, on the occasion of the conference, he used the opportunity to speak about Arabic in schools and universities, the speech contests and the general operation of the Circle.

In this energetic promotion of Arabic and the implementation of programmes at various educational levels, inside formal institutions of learning and in community programmes, we get a sense of the process of Arabicisation of Muslim ethnic and religious life in parts of South Africa. This point was raised in Chapter 1; in this chapter, important aspects of the process are explicated. In the reproduction of this Arabicisation process, the institutionalisation of Arabic studies as a respected and recognised discipline at university level was vital.

CHAIRS IN ARABIC AND ISLAMIC STUDIES

Although it had become possible by 1967 to major in Arabic at the University College for Indians, the predecessor of the University of

Durban-Westville, and through the University of South Africa in Pretoria, not many students took courses in Arabic at either institution. The former was still rather tainted as an ethnic college, and the latter's courses by correspondence were not an inviting prospect. Things changed for both in the 1970s and 1980s.

Ismail al-Faruqi, professor of Islamic studies in the Religion Department at Temple University in Philadelphia, USA, advised the Circle in setting up the Islamic Studies Department at the University of Durban-Westville.¹³⁰ The Circle and the Orient Islamic Institute explored all the dimensions of a department of Islamic studies. With Faruqi's assistance, the committee members of the Orient Islamic Institute and Dr Mall drafted, in 1971, a detailed and scholarly paper on Islamic studies as a university discipline. Faruqi was an articulate exponent of the centrality of Arabic in Muslim intellectual life and in the process of educational and intellectual transformation that he called the 'Islamization of knowledge'.¹³¹ However, these specific ideas of Faruqi's were not articulated in the proposal. The proposal was necessary to clarify, for the South African group itself, what was meant by the discipline and to convince white South African university administrators of the efficacy of such a discipline. Dr Mall recalls the vice chancellor of the University of Natal, the institution for white students, never before having heard of Arabic.¹³²

The development of these departments must be placed in the larger context of higher education for black students in South Africa. Between 1858 and 1966, ten residential universities – all for white students – were established in the country, of which five were for Afrikaans speakers, four for English and one dual-medium. The South African Native College (later the University College and then University of Fort Hare), which Mall had attended, was established in 1916. Many prominent African leaders, including Nelson Mandela and Robert Sobukwe, emerged out of this institution. The universities of Cape Town and the Witwatersrand admitted a small percentage of black students on a full-time basis. The University of Natal offered part-time courses leading to a Bachelor of Arts degree. The Afrikaans universities did not accept black students, nor did Rhodes University in Grahamstown.

In 1953, a government commission was appointed to investigate the question of separate training facilities for ‘non-Europeans’ at universities. The findings of this commission led to the Extension of University Education Act of 1959, which allowed for the establishment of ethnic colleges. White universities were to become more restrictive towards black students once they were assigned their own second-rate institutions.

Black students could study at white ‘open’ universities only if the ethnic university did not offer the proposed course of study. In 1969, the university colleges (of Fort Hare, Zululand, the North, the Western Cape and Durban-Westville) received full university status, with provisions for the establishment of Advisory Councils and Advisory Senates consisting of members of the various ethnic communities.

In November 1960, the University College of Durban was established as an institution for higher education for Indian South Africans.¹³³ Students from other ‘ethnic groups’ were not allowed to attend it, unless the course of study they wanted to follow was not offered at their ethnic colleges. Only in 1977 was legislation passed stipulating that the University of Durban-Westville could admit students irrespective of colour or origin.

One month after the formation of the college for Indians, a very large conference was held at which several papers on ‘tribal universities’ were read. The concept of a ‘tribal university’ was condemned at the conference. The motion was moved by Advocate MD Naidoo and seconded by AM Moolla, who would later serve on the advisory council of the University of Durban-Westville, donate substantial sums of money to the institution and, in return, receive its first honorary doctorate.¹³⁴ AM Moolla, as we have seen, was an influential Muslim businessman, serving on the executive of the Orient Islamic Institute, and a generous sponsor of many of the Circle’s activities.

The first phase of the introduction of ‘Eastern disciplines’ at the college was the establishment of the Department of Oriental Studies in 1965. This department was intended as the nucleus for the future development of separate departments of Arabic and Sanskrit, which were established in 1971. Additional Indian languages were later added.¹³⁵ The Department of Hindu Studies was established only in

1981. There were no suitably qualified local scholars to staff such a department until then. The Indian government firmly supported the diplomatic isolation of South Africa and this made it difficult for citizens of India to teach in the country. By 1981, Sanskrit was being taught and there were degree courses in Gujarati, Hindi, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu, as well as Arabic and Persian.

The Circle took upon itself the task of making possible a programme in Islamic studies. The academic burden of building Arabic and Islamic studies fell on Salman Nadvi. He was first invited to South Africa in April 1973. The Department of Oriental Studies was then headed by GR Smith, a British missionary who had worked in Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh, India. Nadvi had just completed his doctorate in Islamic studies at the prestigious University of Chicago under the eminent Marshall Hodgson. He had not heard of South Africa before the Circle's advisor on Islamic studies, Ismail al-Faruqi, requested that he visit the country. When he arrived in Durban, he was taken to a Muslim youth camp at As-Salaam Educational Institute in Braemer on the southern Natal coast, where he was asked to deliver an impromptu lecture on Muhammad Iqbal, the great twentieth-century Urdu literary figure and Islamic thinker.¹³⁶ He recalls his fascination with having to speak on 'Iqbal in Africa'. He was not yet aware of the extent to which the legendary 'Allama's work was known and admired on the southern tip of Africa.¹³⁷

Nadvi came with impeccable credentials. He had a doctorate from a prestigious American institution as well as a period of training, from 1941–46, at the highly respected traditional institution of Darul Ulum Nadwatul Ulama in Lucknow. Furthermore, he was the son of the prominent Indian scholar Sayed Sulayman Nadvi, who once directed the research institute Darul Musannafin in Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh, India.¹³⁸ The young Nadvi's success was that in South Africa he was well received by both the conservative '*ulama*' and the Circle modernists. He had traditional and modern training, and he spoke Urdu and Arabic, in addition to English. He straddled two worlds. The vice chancellor of the University of Durban Westville wanted a scholar who was acceptable to all sections of the Muslim community. Nadvi fitted the bill perfectly.

After some prodding by Faruqi, Nadvi finally accepted the university's offer in November 1973, and arrived in a conflict-ridden but economically stable country still firmly in the hands of the white minority. That year, the Durban dock workers began a wave of strikes, which marked the revival of labour militancy in South Africa. The university was prepared to get permission for Nadvi to live in a 'white group area', but he preferred to live close to other Muslims and where there was a mosque in the vicinity. Because of unequal salaries, he was paid at a lower rate than his white professorial colleagues, but the Circle, AM Moolla and other businessmen, who also felt this situation to be unfair, committed themselves to covering the shortfall in Nadvi's salary. Nadvi started at the University of Durban-Westville in January 1974. Ebrahim Mahida, an old Circle supporter, was appointed his secretary and departmental administrator. Nadvi's first postgraduate student, Sulaiman Dangor,¹³⁹ and Farouk Vanker, the son of a Circle stalwart, GH Vanker, joined the department soon afterwards.

Meanwhile, Arabic continued in the Department of Oriental Studies under GR Smith. A new Department of Arabic, Urdu and Persian was established in 1974 and, through the efforts of Prof. Salman Nadvi, Prof. Habib al-Haq Nadvi was brought over from the University of Karachi to head it. He was an old friend of Salman Nadvi from their Darul Ulum days and had a doctorate in Arabic from Harvard University.

With these developments, the Circle's ambitions were fulfilled. The imported Pakistani, but US trained, academics were in charge of the substance and structure of their courses. The Circle had created the opportunity, but it could not influence the academic content of the new departments. As modern men themselves, the members understood and respected how the modern academy worked: leave scholars the freedom and space to pursue their research and teaching. However, not everyone in the Muslim community shared the Circle's knowledge and regard for the rules of the academy. Scrutiny of Islamic studies' reading lists, for instance, would lead to pamphleteering against Prof. Salman Nadvi. The Circle was again implicated, and the old bugbear of Qadianism was once again circulated (a theme considered in more detail in Chapter 7), but this was a minor concern. The Circle had to work to ensure the continuation of its activities and the success

of Arabic at all the levels, now that it had become established. The Circle thus definitely made a major impact. By 1980, the Circle's 'Arabic-in-institutions' programme was a reality. By promoting new courses, degrees and programmes, the Circle continued to support the initiatives it had begun. However, the type or calibre of Arabists and Islamic studies specialists that would emerge from the formal and informal programmes was now beyond the Circle's control.

5

AGE OF VISITORS

While Arabic was a major and explicit concern of the Circle, in the process of undertaking this work it also unwittingly cultivated the English language among its constituency. As will become clearer, in a number of the Circle's activities, including the campaigns to promote Arabic, the language of communication was neither Gujarati nor Urdu, but English. Command of English was a sign of modernity, and the Circle represented itself as an association of modern men. Through the medium of English, a modern association concerned with knowledge had to regard the entirety of human knowledge as worthy of pursuit. An important activity of the Circle, therefore, was the public lectures given by invited local and foreign speakers. In all but two instances, the language of these lectures was English.

There was a thirst for knowledge and an enthusiasm for learning from experts within the country and, especially, from overseas scholars. Invitations were extended to English-speaking scholars the Circle believed would support their understanding of Islamic civilisation and, particularly, their individualised method of studying the Qur'ān. Non-Muslim scholars with the relevant expertise were also hosted to talk about their areas of research or their religious affiliation. The Circle leadership believed that since they were in the field of learning, they should equip themselves well on as wide a range of topics as possible and receive education from all sources. As the report of the Circle's first year's activities put it:

We believe that Islam is a universal as well as the final religion. Therefore, it becomes the duty of all of us to understand and study all aspects of human life and society. Hence the necessity of knowing and understanding of [sic] the religions and cultures of other people.¹⁴⁰

The 1960s witnessed a distinguished parade of scholars coming to Natal under the auspices of the Circle. Yusuf Ibish, a professor of philosophy

at the American University of Beirut, was hosted in the middle of 1966. A sign of his popularity and the Circle's capacity to listen, learn and talk is that in a week-long visit he delivered 12 lectures. His trip was indeed very successful, and its significance is underlined by the fact that it was the 'first time that anyone had called to South Africa an Islamic scholar from sources other than the traditional ones of India and Pakistan.'¹⁴¹ This is a significant observation and supports the earlier arguments in this book, which have stressed the allegiance of the Muslim leadership of Natal to their historic South Asian connections.

Qari Abdul Basit Abd al-Samad, the legendary Egyptian reciter of the Qur'ān, was a guest of the Central Islamic Trust of the then Transvaal province, but the Circle arranged his Natal programme in October 1966.¹⁴² The Circle's biannual report in August 1967 noted: 'Durban had never witnessed so huge a turn-out at any function as at one of the four recitals of the world famous *muqri*.' The process by which they managed to secure this famous Egyptian Islamic personality's visit to South Africa is unclear.

Abdul Quddus Hashemi, a Pakistani education expert, made two visits to South Africa. He had come at the invitation of the Central Islamic Trust in 1963, and returned in 1966 as the Circle's guest. Although he had translated works from English into Urdu, his spoken English was less certain; nevertheless, he had an extensive knowledge of modern affairs and religious issues. According to Abdullah Deedat, his strength was in providing advice quietly to influential individuals within the Muslim community.¹⁴³ The Central Islamic Trust also brought Masud Yar Khan to South Africa, and the Circle was again the Natal host, in the winter of 1967. His lectures in English again reminded the group that 'English speaking lecturers on Islam are a great attraction.'¹⁴⁴

For the 14th Centennial Qur'ānic Anniversary, the choice was not an English-speaking scholar but the Pakistani Urdu poet Mahir al-Qadiri, who was invited to give a series of poetry recitals called *musha'ira*. Indeed, the South Asian connections were hard to break. What is quite apparent, however, is that the vast majority of guests were from Pakistan and not India. Whether this was conscious or not is not clear at all. There remained in India a large number of influential

writers, poets and public speakers, who could have been invited. So it does not appear that because of the migration of many Muslims to the new Pakistani state in 1947 that there were no available Indian scholars to invite to South Africa.

In 1967, Sir Muhammad Zafrullah Khan, the Pakistani judge at the International Court of Justice in the Hague, although on official business in South Africa, met the Circle and gave one public lecture on 'Islam and human rights'. Knowing that he was a leading member of the controversial Qadiani movement in Pakistan, the members of the Circle met privately with him to discuss the arguments and beliefs of Qadianism. The meeting 'proved to us beyond any doubt of the hallowness of Qadiani beliefs'.¹⁴⁵ Janab Palan Haqqani, an enigmatic Indian lecturer, gave a series of sometimes controversial speeches in Urdu in late 1969. Although by then it was clear that English was the medium through which to attract the public, in this case a widely spoken Indian vernacular served the purpose.

Between 1971 and 1975, the Circle played host to a diverse range of visitors. As much as Prof Ismail al-Faruqi audiences were impressed by him during his visit in 1971, he was struck by the Circle and the Muslim community. He wrote to Dr Mall: 'On return home from my three months leave of absence, I can say that my visits were all uneventful when compared to the visit to South Africa. The latter is the nicest to remember and it has been the most felicitous.'¹⁴⁶

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in 1975 the Pakistani government prevented Prof. Ishtiaq Quraishi from leaving Pakistan to visit South Africa (because of his membership of the opposition party),¹⁴⁷ and his place was taken by Dr Syed Aziz Pasha. From Quraishi's Karachi University, however, came the German-trained sociologist Dr Basharat Ali,¹⁴⁸ whose short sojourn in Durban was unfortunately rather uninspiring because he was ill, in addition to being far too abstract.

Dr Inamullah Khan, Secretary General of the Karachi-based World Islamic Congress (Mu'tamar al-al-'ālamī-Islamī), visited and acquainted himself with the situation of the South African Muslim minority. He developed a close friendship with Dr and Mrs Mall, corresponding with them long after his departure. Prof. Saeed Ahmad

Akbarabadi, a theologian at Aligarh Muslim University, also visited and gave many lectures over a short period. The well-known author of the *Road to Mecca* and translator of the Qur'ān, Muhammad Asad, was the Circle's guest in 1978. More will be said about him later.

The last of the Circle's invitations, co-sponsored by other organisations, went out in 1984 to the Paris-based Islamic historian and manuscript editor, Dr Muhammad Hamidullah. By this time, many other organisations had been inviting speakers on a regular basis to undertake national tours of the country. The Circle had shared costs and co-hosted events for visiting speakers for quite some time, but by the mid-1980s such collaboration was definitely over. For instance, in 1977 the British scholar James Dickie visited on the invitation of the newly formed and ambitiously titled Islamic Council of South Africa, of which Dr Mall was a founder member. The Circle played an active role in the visit, but this would not happen again.

The Islamic Council of South Africa and the Muslim Youth Movement were two groups that would bring many visiting scholars to South Africa. The latter organisation was particularly concerned to invite scholars who were also activists in what it referred to as the 'Islamic movement'. Thus came guests such as Ahmed Sakr and Hisham Badran in the early 1970s, and a whole host of similarly inclined intellectuals would follow well into the mid-1980s. The scholars the Circle had hosted since the 1950s may not always have fitted comfortably with these Youth Movement guests, who more often came for energetic summer camps and not for gentlemanly deliberations in the Circle mode. Yet the Circle's purpose of promoting knowledge was being fulfilled by newer groups, especially the Youth Movement with its growing body of members.

The Circle's activities had included public lectures since the 1950s. Its traditions were laid down in those early years and included inviting local lecturers of other religious persuasions. Still, the Circle was by no means the only or first group to host overseas speakers; this had been happening throughout the twentieth century. In the period after the Second World War, the second national tour of the Indian mystic and scholar Mawlana 'Abd al-Alim Siddiqui in 1952 is perhaps a turning point. Dr Mall met him and, according to Abdullah Deedat, one of his

first lectures dealt with the importance of learning the Arabic language in order to understand the Qur'ān.¹⁴⁹ The eminent *mawlana's* successor and son-in-law, Fazlur Rahman Ansari, would visit the country in 1970 and have a single private session with the Circle. Both of these eminent visitors were hosted by Makki Publications, the Circle's chief nemesis almost from its inception.¹⁵⁰

In the following section, we look in greater detail at the impact and experience of three visitors, one for each decade between 1950 and 1980.

THE MAGICIAN: *IL EST PERDU?*

No history of the Circle would be complete without attempting to convey with as much detail as possible the period when a charismatic foreign visitor to the country captured many hearts and minds, but also created lasting and deep problems for the group. His real identity is known neither to members of the Circle nor to others who made contact with him.



Joseph Perdu

An intellectual by the name of Joseph Perdu was among the first speakers to be invited to Durban by the Circle. Perdu was living in Cape Town and Ahmed Meer, a distant relative of Dr Mall, informed him about the man. Apparently, Perdu had visited Durban already, but found somewhat better prospects in Cape Town, where he operated a small store in the working-class neighbourhood of District Six but devoted much of his time to lecturing on religion.¹⁵¹ Selected members of the congregation at the Azzavia Mosque, on the outskirts of District Six, heard him give impressive interpretations of *Sūrah al-Shams*, one of the shorter *sūrahs* of the Qur'ān, and which is filled with metaphors about the natural world. It consists of 15 brief, allegorical verses with a definite rhythmic structure. It seems that the imams and their followers at the Cape Town mosque were impressed by Perdu and did not question him.¹⁵²

Ahmed Meer successfully persuaded Mall to invite Perdu to Durban. 'I paid no attention to him but when he repeatedly came to me and drew my attention, our attention, I said, "Look, get him down,

we'll have a look at him.'"¹⁵³ The Circle was then hardly two years old and was operating on a shoestring budget.

When Mall met Perdu, he saw a young, white-skinned man in Western dress, who looked very French but spoke English quite well, although he claimed to have only a very limited English vocabulary. Perdu was about 40 years old and, according to Mall, 'slightly built, clean-shaven and suave'. Mall says he 'did not behave like a Muslim [but] he spoke with authority on Islam, on the Qur'ān and *hadith* and everything'.¹⁵⁴ Monsieur Perdu, as he was apparently formally addressed, was recalled by Mall as follows: 'He was a professional, he was multifaceted. I would say, as a speaker, a genius, a gifted speaker who spoke with authority, quoting the Qur'ān, quoting *hadith*, quoting Farsi, French, everything.'¹⁵⁵

Perdu was invited by the Circle in 1954, for a modest honorarium, to deliver a series of lectures on the Qur'ān. His programme on Sunday mornings drew large crowds every week, and numbers swelled once word was out about his command of a wide range of Islamic topics and his effective style of oratory. Sources report figures ranging from one hundred to two and even three hundred young people filling the main hall in the Pine Street *madrasah* every week to follow Perdu's sessions. He then started conducting separate *tafsīr* classes during the week for women, and two additional sessions for men.¹⁵⁶ Without doubt, he was a great stimulus to the Muslim youth of Durban, who at the time were alienated from Islamic traditions by mullahs steeped in another age and place.

Ismail Manjra recalls how his attendance at Perdu's first lecture in the Kajee Hall led him to an 'understanding of Islam in a rational way ... That was the beginning of my learning experience.'¹⁵⁷ After this, he was a regular at Perdu's talks, and began to read the Qur'ān on his own and became a member of the Circle. For the young Manjra, 'Joseph Perdu really opened the door of Islam.' Sedick Burke was originally from Cape Town and also attended Perdu's talks, which 'really boosted' him; he remembers that 'this was what I really wanted, and Perdu to that extent was even better than what I got, what I received in Cape Town, even with the high quality of [Islamic] education over there.'¹⁵⁸ Burke seems to have been unaware that his Cape Town teacher, Shaykh

Ismail Ganief, had been highly critical of Perdu when he was still in that city. The Circle's secretary, SC Seth, in his first report, notes that the organisation's guest 'awakened part of our people'. Furthermore:

His qualifications are many and to my mind, unequalled in South Africa. I am happy to state that he has made his home in Durban and his Quranic *tafsir* classes are drawing appreciative audiences regularly. I hope the community will utilize to the fullest his abilities and talents.¹⁵⁹

The leading members of the Circle grew rather close to Perdu on a personal level. 'He ingratiated himself so well with us that we regarded him as one of ourselves. We moved together wherever we went. He moved with us, but he kept his wife at a distance from us because she was an English woman.'¹⁶⁰ The Circle members trusted their foreign guest, even though they were uncertain of his nationality. His honorarium amounted to £25 for the first six months of 1955, and the Circle offered a loan of £152 10s. It is unclear what the loan was intended for, whether it was to help him during this period to make ends meet or for other purposes.¹⁶¹ The loan might have been to cover the publication costs of *al-Mu'minun*, a very well-produced monthly magazine covering Islamic topics, issued in the name of the Circle.

Perdu and his wife seem to have had few needs, leading extremely frugal lives. Mall likened them to gypsies, with the absence of material possessions in their rented apartment, Perdu's modest dress and their disposition to travel and move around. He had lived in Lebanon, Cyprus, Sudan and Madagascar, and apparently also in Fiji and Australia, before arriving in South Africa.¹⁶² However, it was neither this itinerant lifestyle nor his nationality that brought adverse attention to, and created controversy for, the Circle.

Perdu was suspected of being a Baha'i missionary, sent to South Africa to win unsuspecting Muslims over to the Baha'i faith. These suspicions had begun in Cape Town but they did not accompany him on his arrival in Durban. In the Mother City, Shaykhs Ganief Booley and Abubakr Najaar spoke out against some of his pronouncements; a lecture in the Drill Hall at which Perdu's radical ecumenism surfaced drew the ire of the

'*ulamā*. The accusations did follow him in time, and Mall and the Circle came to hear the rumours, but Perdu was a highly successful educator, winning hundreds of youth to the cause of a 'modern' understanding of Islam. He was also very skilful as editor of the *al-Mu'minun* magazine that appeared during the mid-1950s. Perdu seems to have had absolute control over the magazine, with the Circle's name and resources simply supporting his venture, but there is no sectarian or even subtle Baha'i propaganda in any of its articles. Many contributions in the magazine were of an esoteric or *sūfi* character, and all articles extolled the virtues of Islam and portrayed its history in glowing terms. A number of the issues came with supplements in Urdu, Zulu and Afrikaans. Later opponents of Perdu, such as Adam Peerbhai and IM Bawa, also contributed articles to the early issues of the magazine.

When Mall became really irritated by the accusations against the Circle's Sunday-morning speaker, he decided to investigate for himself. He would not accept gossip and rumour; he wanted hard facts. Mall was in a predicament, for Perdu was a hugely popular figure, attracting young Muslims to discover their faith. What should he do if Perdu was indeed an impostor?

Mall undertook the *hajj* in 1956 (*al-Mu'minun* published a report by him from the holy cities in the September/October 1956 issue). On his way, he decided to go to the Baha'i movement's offices in Bombay, India. There he learned that the Circle's popular guest speaker, and editor of its only mouthpiece, was indeed a Baha'i and 'a very leading member and world scholar in their view'.¹⁶³ He learned that Perdu had been planted to work in Natal, while other missionaries worked in the Transvaal and in Swaziland. On his return, Mall informed all the members of the Circle. Instead of an open confrontation with Perdu, they gracefully cut ties with him. There was neither violence nor public disputation, simply a distancing between the erstwhile supporters and the charismatic but suspect teacher. They were gentlemen and preferred the quiet approach rather than a press conference, press release or clamorous expulsion, but they were under attack for employing Perdu in the first place. Perdu got the message; he packed his bags and left South Africa, apparently for Brazil. The last reports about him were that he had died in a car crash around 1978.

From then on, the Circle would be tainted forever with suspicion, and the Perdu issue was valuable ammunition for its conservative opponents. The *Muslim Digest*, a slim monthly magazine established in 1950 in Durban, under the editorship of Mohamed Makki, together with Advocate IM Bawa in Natal and Adam Peerbhai in Cape Town, began a tireless campaign against Dr Mall, his colleagues in the Circle and every group or person associated with them. The campaign found further cause when, many years later, the Circle brought to South Africa Muhammad Asad, the German convert whose translation of the Qur'ān includes a number of views not acceptable to Makki Publications' interpretation of Islam. The Baha'i accusation gave way to the Qadiani one. Contemporary detractors and critics of the Circle are dealt with elsewhere in this book.

THE ENTERTAINER: JANAB PALAN HAQQANI

From October to November 1969, the Circle hosted an orator from India called Janab Muhammad Palan Haqqani Sahib or simply Palan Haqqani. He had been brought to the country by the Central Islamic Trust of Johannesburg. In Natal, he delivered 24 lectures and, according to the Circle's report, was the 'most popular lecturer ever to visit South Africa. Not since the visit of Qari Abdul Basit had Durban seen such huge turn out to hear a lecturer. ... [The audiences] came from far and wide ... nearly everyday. His lectures were forthright and he discussed many subjects that were considered controversial'.¹⁶⁴

Dr Mall remembered:

Both Haqqani and Perdu drew huge crowds and people flocked from as far as Maritzburg, Stanger, Verulam and Port Shepstone. The former speaking in Urdu covered the work of *Jamaat-e tablighi* in much detail. The audiences were such that they had to be accommodated under a huge marquee in the Orient School grounds.¹⁶⁵

THE LION: MUHAMMAD ASAD

The visit of Muhammad Asad generated its share of controversy and criticism of the Circle. He stayed in Durban for about two weeks in 1978

and delivered only a few, but by all accounts very impressive, public talks. Asad was a man of multiple talents. He was a journalist for a leading German-language newspaper in the 1920s. As a correspondent, he travelled widely in the Middle East and met such figures as ‘Umar Mukhtar, the anti-colonial hero who fought the Italians in Libya in the early part of the twentieth century, and he became intimate with leading Saudi personalities during his sojourn in the Arabian desert. On the birth of Pakistan in 1947, he spent time in its capital working on the transformation of the country’s administration and constitution. The ideals of Islamic statehood motivated him in his work in the new nation, and he took on Pakistani citizenship and eventually represented the country at the United Nations Organisation in New York. Later, he would leave the country and settle in Gibraltar.¹⁶⁶

Asad was also an accomplished author and Arabist, having translated al-Bukhari’s collection of *hadith*, and later translating the Qur’ān into English.¹⁶⁷ Only a small portion of the former was published, since most of it was destroyed in the bitter Partition conflict on the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Several other works on Islamic religious topics appeared along the way, as well as the first instalment of his autobiography. Being avid readers, the Circle’s executive members were well acquainted with Asad’s corpus. Moreover, Asad’s style and emphasis on rationality appealed most strongly to his tiny band of South African readers. Ismail Manjra recalls:

At the end of *Judgement of the Lion* [in November 1958], the ASC presented each participant with the book called *The road to Mecca* by Muhammad Asad. That was the beginning of my really serious study of Islam. And then I really fell in love with Muhammad Asad, his style of writing, his thought. I read a lot of books he had written at the time, like *The road to Mecca*, *Islam at the crossroads* and he used to publish a journal called *al-Arafat*. He had started a journal and I started reading those and intellectually I began to understand Islam after reading Asad and, of course, I started to study more and more of the Qur’ān. I studied Muhammad Ali’s translation. In 1960, Muhammad Asad’s one volume translation – ten *paras* of the Qur’ān – was published in English. I bought it from overseas and I started studying that. He was the one person who made a great impact on my thinking and my studies.¹⁶⁸

Circle members, like Manjra, who attended the World of Islam festival in London in 1976, met Asad who was a speaker at that event. 'It was then that we invited Muhammad Asad to come to South Africa to launch his *Message of the Qur'ān* and we ordered one thousand copies of the Qur'ān,' recalls Manjra.¹⁶⁹ Two years later Asad arrived in Durban.

His first lecture was in the Orient Hall, with Mawlana Ansari of the Jamiatul Ulama in the chair. Having the venerable *mawlana* as chairperson for the evening was a good tactical move because, thereafter, the Circle's critics would get to work. The issue this time was Asad's views on Jesus, propounded in his translation – that Jesus died and was not 'raised bodily to God'. According to Manjra, the Circle 'defended him with all our might'. Mawlana Ansari also came to the Circle's defence, and they circulated a well-prepared paper in which sympathetic arguments from highly regarded modern and classical sources were presented. The purportedly progressive Islamic Council of South Africa, under the leadership of Shaykh Najaar of Cape Town and Advocate Bawa, who had been part of the anti-Perdu campaign, spared nothing in this attack on Asad. The role of the Muslim Youth Movement is less clear, but they certainly did not come out on the side of the Circle. Ismail Manjra's children, staunch Muslim Youth Movement supporters, were very anti-Asad and, on this basis, Manjra believed that the movement had taken an official position against the Asad translation. Through all these events, Manjra's house was stacked with copies of Asad's translation of the Qur'ān, which had to be sold. Asad's visit had made a deep impact on the Circle. Ultimately, the Circle was vindicated; their opponents dropped the cause, as the issue of Jesus' fate remained an open issue (the Circle's leadership would say a non-issue).

CONVERSATION

We wanted to understand the viewpoints of other religions and things like the concept of God, the hereafter and those theological issues, and we drew lots of people and brought about a good understanding. We invited a Hindu Swami, a Buddhist, a Zoroastrian, Christians – a Protestant and a Catholic – a Jewish Rabbi. And this really livened things up.¹⁷⁰

Prof. Adrianus van Selms of the University of Pretoria, who had researched the literature of nineteenth-century Muslims in Cape Town in Afrikaans (rendered in Arabic characters), spoke about his findings to the Circle in 1954. A synopsis of his lecture subsequently appeared in *al-Mu'minun*. Prof. Jefferies from the University of the Witwatersrand spoke to the group in 1955. Rabbi Swift, who lectured on Judaism, Dr Bierman on architecture, and the well-known South African liberal author Alan Paton were among those who delivered talks on set subjects to the Circle in the 1950s. In September 1955, Noel McAdam gave a lecture on the 'influence of Arabs upon Western music'. According to the pamphlet advertising the event, it dealt with the 'musical heritage of Islam and its impact on Western composers'. Dr Yusuf Zablith delivered a lecture in the same month on the 'Arab contribution to medicine', in which he would cover the 'six periods in the history of Arab medicine'. In September 1966, Prof. Pravasy gave a 'philosophical exposition of the Vedas' in a lecture on 'the facts about idol worship'.¹⁷¹

In the winter of 1970, the Circle had its one and only public debate, or 'brains trust' as it was billed, on the subject of *bid'ah* (innovation). Many '*ulamā*' tended to condemn many things about which they knew very little as bad innovations introduced into the lives of Muslims. One way of reading this reaction is that it was a way of dealing with modernity. This tendency to cast all 'innovation' as negative was thus a topic of conversation among Muslims. The debate was a rare occasion, with several leading Natal '*ulamā*' participating in a Circle event. About 200 people attended. Such a debate on a widely discussed subject was never held again.

Qualified speakers from all religions came to deliver special lectures to the Circle. Enthusiastic discussions would follow such events. Ahmed Deedat, who later became an internationally known Islamic propagandist and missionary, attended the Circle's gatherings and was a keen participant, especially in the comparative religion sessions, but these deliberations suited neither Deedat's purpose nor his temperament. In 1959, he founded the Islamic Propagation Centre with the assistance of two prominent Circle members, GH Vanker and Goolam Agjee. Whereas the Islamic Propagation Centre launched a

missionary campaign akin to the efforts of certain Christian missionary movements, the Circle continued its intermittent efforts at dialogue. Dr Mall, as a representative of the Circle, gave lectures on Islamic topics at other interfaith gatherings in the Durban area.

In its 50-year history, the Circle has been responsible for dozens of academic visitors reaching the shores of Durban. Circle members benefited from these scholars, their intellectual horizons expanded, and they were motivated to continue their work. Nevertheless, the broader community of Muslims was the intended target and beneficiary of these visits. The Circle would perhaps like to believe that Muslims were changed by these lecturers. The extent to which this was the case is hard to assess. Undoubtedly, the range of intellectual and practical possibilities for the community was widened by these overseas guests, who had the requisite academic credentials and authority – most had extensive knowledge of Arabic and training in the traditional disciplines of Islamic scholarship. Furthermore, as guests, they had the space to express views that were not possible for locals to expound. Perdu pushed this space to its limit; he stayed the longest but eventually also left. Asad was attacked after a very short stint in the country but, unlike Perdu, his message was defensible; Asad was not a suspect in a foreign ‘onslaught against Islam’. The Circle defended him and found at least one member of the clerisy to support their cause, Mawlana Ansari. Haqqani could swipe in all directions and entertain crowds with polemics, but his rhetoric was well placed within the conservative repertoire, so it needed no defence.

The vision of religion presented by the local clerisy, until then the sole source of religious knowledge and legitimacy, was no longer the only view of Islam when the Circle entered the field and asserted a different message; but the dominant understanding of Islam was never displaced, it was only challenged. At least two parallel interpretations came to coexist. The visiting scholars came and went. The Circle stayed. It had to continue the work of educating the community in its viewpoint, and in its much broader and more generous grasp of faith and practice. This vision of Islam was infused with a brand of Enlightenment understanding of the world. The Circle saw the world and religion as possible only in the light of reason and rationality. The

mind was universal and the sources of Islam were within the grasp of every thinking mind – as Asad’s dedication in his translation of the Qur’ān has it, the Book was ‘for those who think’. The Qur’ān was the property of the thinkers. This view bound them together and sustained them. Still, despite their proclivity to Reason, they were not completely subject to it, because their unquestioned commitment to Islamic moral values and a wider religious and ethnic culture shaped their appropriation of Enlightenment reason.

For as long as the lectures lasted, the lay and religious audience of non-members would most often agree with the lecturers. The talks were held in halls, not mosques, because the latter was the preserve of the *mawlanas*. Furthermore, women would not have been able to attend talks in the mosque, and the Circle leadership believed in the equality of women and their capacity to participate on an equal footing in discussions about matters of religion and the world. Thus, inside the hall and afterwards the Circle had authority, but it may have been lost to them in the long term.

There were no clear victors in the long conflict between Reason and Tradition, between partisans of the Circle and bearded folk clinging to the *molvis*. Muslims of Natal would share in the Circle’s Enlightenment and go to the *molvis*, just as they would go to the puritan *molvis* and to the shrines of revered *sūfis*. Hegemony was never easily or fully achieved by any of the groups, but the Circle had carved out a niche that was protected and promoted for five decades. It made it acceptable and permissible to ask questions of religious authorities, to debate and study, and to make ‘Islam’ everyone’s everyday concern.

6

GREAT PERFORMANCES

Clearly, the Circle had an expansive sphere of activities to propagate its cause. Public lectures, Arabic classes at night and formal Arabic classes in schools and at universities were among its range of programmes. However, the organisers were aware that such cerebral engagements would appeal to only certain, albeit growing, sectors of Natal's Muslim community. As with the lectures, in terms of which the Circle's leadership felt passionately that all human affairs and knowledge were there for them to learn about and from, so too could many different forms of social activity be utilised to realise the group's objectives. Thus, the Circle used modern dramatic forms, and the mass outdoor festival, to get across its message and engage new sections of the population in its sphere of activities. These were also an assertion of the group's modernity.

JUDGEMENT OF THE LION

The Circle has the distinction of being the first, and perhaps only, South African group to stage a theatrical production about an aspect of early Islamic history. In the relatively short history of modern drama in the Arabic-speaking world, plays with religious content were not unknown. While such dramatic representations of episodes in Islamic history entered the world of television when the medium spread through the Middle East, this was unheard of among the Muslims of South Africa. Thus, producing a play about an early period in Islamic history was a bold initiative at a time when such a venture was almost unimaginable in the community. The very idea was innovative, for at least two reasons: firstly, because the experience of the Prophet and his companions was considered appropriate material for a stage production; secondly, conceiving of entertainment as a form of adult education was a fresh idea, which, in the context of Durban's Muslim community, could have come only from the minds of Circle members.

The Prophet Muhammad himself was not represented, but depicting the companions of the Prophet did cause some offence to members of the 'ulamā' fraternity. Furthermore, having a cast of men and women together on stage, and an equally mixed audience, could have upset the conservatives. The thought of combining all historical fact with the necessary fictions of dramatic recreation was yet another area inviting condemnation. Nevertheless, the criticisms seem to have been mild; at least, the production was not blocked or boycotted, or members of the cast beaten up.



Theatre programme

The religious leaders of the Muslim community thus appear to have been more tolerant then. In the late 1970s, a film about the rise of Islam, which did not even depict the Prophet Muhammad, was prohibited from exhibition at Durban cinemas. *The Message*, a Hollywood production directed by the Syrian-American Mustafa Akkad and starring Anthony Quinn, was a sympathetic depiction of the Prophet Muhammad and the first community of Muslims, but conservative clergy opposed its distribution.¹⁷² Circle members attended a private showing and supported its exhibition, again as a form of public education, but without success. Between 1958 and 1978 much had happened to harden attitudes against any sign of 'modernism', drama and cinema included.

In his foreword to the programme for the play *Judgement of the Lion*, Dr Mall wrote that the Circle was 'breaking new ground' and that: 'Serious Islamic plays in the English language are practically unknown. This venture, then, is an experiment whose outcome will be keenly watched by all concerned.'¹⁷³ Indeed, it was closely followed but never repeated. As it happened, all the performances were sold out and the production was a resounding success. Despite this, the Circle never again attempted a dramatic performance.

After many months of long rehearsals late into the night, the play was staged in the Bolton Hall, between 25 October and 1 November

1958. Everyone had worked very hard to get to the opening night. It took tremendous powers of organisation, planning, training and rehearsals by amateurs to complete the production, and to achieve full houses every night. It was a unique piece of amateur theatre in the context of South African theatre in general, and especially in the Muslim community's creative life.

The cast included Circle members but was drawn mainly from their friends outside the group. Ismail Manjra was Aswad and an extra, Baboo Bobat, was the 'Archbishop of Axum', Ebrahim Mahida took the role of Havildar, Abdullah Deedat performed the part of 'Treasurer of Ethiopia', and Essop Agjee was Najashi, the 'Emperor of Ethiopia'. Other members and numerous spouses worked in the background – on the set, making costumes, applying make-up and looking after the business and publicity sides of the production.

Major sponsors of the production included Dr MGH Mayat, whose wife, Zuleikha, served as an adviser to the production team. A range of Muslim and non-Muslim businesses supported various aspects of the production, such as the publication of the glossy programme, which contained the full text of the play. Alexander Films assisted with the publicity, Kathree's Radio Service with the sound system, and other firms with the furnishings and set design.

Judgement of the Lion was based on an episode early on in the prophetic career of Muhammad, when a number of his companions migrated to Abyssinia, 'where they lived as the first community of believers in Africa', as the programme for the play puts it. It centres on the Makkan opposition to the first Muslims and the subsequent migration to Africa of a party of neophyte Muslims. The play depicts the Qurayshite elite's suppression of the Muslims, contrasted with the sympathy of the Abyssinian Christians. Dr Mall wrote in his foreword:

Religious tolerance would appear to be one of the principal themes of the play: the high regards by Muslims for the teachings and mission of Jesus, and the tolerance and understanding of a great Christian monarch for the New Faith. It also depicts a turning-point in the history of Africa: ushering in of a faith and a civilisation which were to find permanent root in the hearts of its inhabitants north of the Equator.¹⁷⁴

Joseph Perdu had first suggested the idea of a play in the course of his Sunday lectures. William Branford, a young University of Natal lecturer, was then commissioned to write a script. Branford taught in the Department of English and he recalls that he had a few Muslim students who approached him to write a script. He remembers it as a ‘most delightful experience’.¹⁷⁵ His basic source was the classical chronicle of the life of the Prophet by Ibn Ishaq, as translated by Alfred Guillaume. Ahmed Essa, who was involved with the Circle, produced the play. Essa was then studying English literature and went on to become a professor of English at the University of Nevada in the USA.

After the final performance, each member of the cast was presented with a copy of the recently published autobiography of Muhammad Asad, *The road to Mecca*.¹⁷⁶ For most Circle members, this was the first encounter with Asad, who was to visit Durban, partly sponsored by the Circle, many years later.

CELEBRATING REVELATION

In February 1967, the Circle brought together numerous organisations to form the 14th Centennial Qur’ānic Anniversary Council to commemorate the year of the revelation of the first verses of the Qur’ān. For this commemoration, the Council planned one major outdoor celebration. According to the Circle’s minutes: ‘The entire Muslim world will be commemorating this occasion ... South African Muslims, too, should not miss this opportunity.’¹⁷⁷ It is not clear exactly how the event was celebrated elsewhere in the world, but Circle members believed it was their duty to organise activities in Natal. They and their fellow Durban Muslims appear to have been the only proponents of such a celebration in the country. In no other city was a similar celebration held, certainly not to the extent that it was in Durban. After this celebration, smaller towns in Natal imitated the Durban event.

The Anniversary Council decided on a Children’s Day, to be held at Currie’s Fountain sports ground on 12 April 1968, the public holiday of Good Friday. An estimated 20 000–25 000 people attended the

event. It took months of planning and organisation to muster schools, communities and individuals to participate in the day of celebration.

Circle members are unanimous in regarding the event as a ‘unique occasion’, ‘one of the most memorable gatherings’ in the history of Muslims in Natal.¹⁷⁸ The day began with a march past by the Durban and Overport Muslim Brigades, who marched from Grey Street to the Currie’s Fountain grounds. In mock stately fashion, the brigades were ‘inspected’ by Dr Mall and AM Moolla, symbolising the significant place of these two men in the Durban Muslim community. Moolla, the well-known businessman and philanthropist, was the person who came closest to being the premier secular political leader of the Muslims.

Since it was a Friday, the *jum‘ah salah* was performed at the stadium. Only after *jum‘ah* did the day’s activities really begin. Speeches by Mall and Moolla officially started the programme. However, a high point was the *jum‘ah salah* itself. It seems that this is remembered more than any other part of the day. A gathering of so many thousands praying together stirred everyone. It was yet another first for the Natal Muslims but, like so much else in the Circle’s history, it was criticised by conservatives who argued that it was not correct to perform the prayer in this fashion – in a space that was not consecrated for the purposes of communal prayer. However, a young *mawlana* by the name of Mufti Khan sided with the organisers and presented himself to lead prayers and give the *khutbah* (sermons given in Urdu and/or Arabic). There is no record of what he spoke about, but it presumably concerned the theme of the day, the Qur’ān. While praying in such a big group moved many adults, the children were excited by their participation in other aspects of the event. Various *madrasahs* were invited to attend in the national dress of a Muslim country of their choice. The point of this, according to Ismail Manjra, was that ‘it showed the richness of the Islamic *umma* that people from all walks of life, from all cultures could believe in one religion, one Islam, one Allah, one Prophet, one Qur’ān, which brought Muslims together’.¹⁷⁹

The origins of the event lie in the imagination of a Circle stalwart, Goolam Hoosen Ebrahim Vanker, an indefatigable figure in the Durban Muslim community. Goolam Agjee, a friend of Vanker’s and equally active in community affairs, remembers him as ‘always in the forefront

when it came to Islamic activities, a very sincere, modest and God-conscious personality. In short, a lovable character'.¹⁸⁰ GHE Vanker was born in Durban in August 1924. He was the eldest of several children and began his working life at the age of 17. Aside from a period of employment in Johannesburg, he worked as a sales representative for Kazi's Agencies. In 1957, together with Ahmed Deedat, he founded the Islamic Propagation Centre and left his job to devote himself to this organisation full time; between 1958 and 1982, he was its Secretary General. In 1979 he opened a bookshop that specialised in Islamic books, prayer mats and items of religious significance. He died in August 1987.

Not only did he come up with the idea of the children's day, he worked hard to see the idea become a hugely successful event:

He approached businessmen in the Indian market for their fruit ... He organised Pepsi Cola from the Pepsi Co. to be served at Currie's Fountain. He was able to get approximately 40 000 bottles of Coke. Bakeries supplied bread. Thus, he was able to organise enough food for over 20 000 Muslim men, women and children.¹⁸¹

Vanker composed the 'official' anthem of the celebration. 'A song for children' was rendered into English and Urdu. It opened with the words: '*Ya Allah ya Allah / We are your servants ya Allah / La ila ha illa Allah / Muhammadur Rasulular.*' The fourth section went: 'Let Allah be your guiding light / Be God-conscious day and night / You'll be precious in his sight / If you follow his guiding light.' Many of the groups prepared their own *qasīda*, which they recited at various points during the day.

At least 16 schools and *madrasahs* participated, each one representing a Muslim country or culture.¹⁸² They came in the 'national dress' of the country or region and carried banners displaying short verses of the Qur'ān. For example, Orient High came in 'Iranian' dress, Orient Primary pupils appeared as 'Chinese' Muslims, the Chatsworth Zanzibari Madrasah donned what were billed 'Nigerian' outfits, Anjuman Islam paraded in the garb of 'Armenia/Tashkent', and Crescent School wore the clothes of 'Albania/Yugoslavia'. One group of young boys and girls from Port Shepstone appeared in 'Tabligh Jamaat'

costumes! Prizes were awarded for best costumes, best banners, best speeches and best *qas̄da* recitation.

Commemorative items were produced specially for the occasion and were sold on the day. Envelopes, stamps, car stickers and gilt medals were among the popular items made and sold.

A special issue of *Views and News* was prepared many months later and captured the event in an array of pictures. It also reproduced a number of the speeches of the day, including those of two of the young speakers.¹⁸³ Its editorial stressed the aspect of Islamic brotherhood, which was displayed so clearly on the occasion. The magazine added: 'In South Africa, where the question of race and discrimination on the basis of colour is so marked Islam can play an important part and it is left to Muslims to show the way.' Underneath the editorial was a photograph of 'Muslim children of Zanzibari origin' performing a *qas̄da*. Indeed, the day was a rare moment of mixing and socialising by the assortment of ethnic and linguistic groups making up the Natal Muslim community. After this, however, divisions continued as before.

The play and the commemoration were separated by nearly a decade. Both were innovations, and both appealed to a broad public, across gender, class, colour and generational lines. Both expressed in different ways the will of the Circle to step beyond existing, conventional means of attracting attention to its agenda. Both were signs of 'being modern'. However, neither innovation was repeated. Their popular appeal should have made them more regular features of the Circle's community activities and education programme, and of use as 'public relations' exercises. However, Circle members must have seen these events as time and energy consuming, taking them away from their set tasks of learning, reading and studying.

7

CRITICS, DISSIDENTS AND ENEMIES

During its 50 years, the Circle has had a few staunch members and many sympathisers. In equal measure, as an innovative organisation, it has attracted critics and opponents. As we have seen, it brought into the small and insular Indian Muslim community of Durban innovations that nobody had thought possible and, indeed, which were considered impermissible. With a fuller appreciation of events and personalities, Circle members would now admit to their moments of immoderation, poor decision-making and absence of foresight. The general thrust of their work, however, would rightly be defended, if it needs any defence at all. Despite the enemies and critics, there is much about which the Circle can be proud. There are no buildings or fixed assets to show, but much human capital, many people who have given, and continue to contribute, to society. What did the critics and opponents, then, say and do to weaken and change the organisation?

All associations are born, struggle, strive, survive and either wither away or are reformed through competition and contention with similar or antagonistic associations. No organisation is an island. Even before the arrival of the Circle, Durban's Muslims had their share of tensions. The Circle, however, through its innovations in the public sphere of Muslim life, produced a number of opportunities for contentious engagement with other bodies seeking to address the same Muslim community.

The Circle's focus on Arabic and the Qur'ān, and not an Urdu and the *mawlanas*, was itself a cause of continual criticism, but this was gentle and often unarticulated compared with other issues. Three moments that stand out in the history of the Circle require more extensive treatment.

The first is the controversy over Joseph Perdu. Three articulate and persistent men – Mohamed Makki, Adam Peerbhai and Advocate Ismail Bawa – led a concerted campaign against the Circle for hosting

Perdu. This occurred within the first decade of the Circle's history. The group survived the crisis but could well have disappeared, so severe and thorough were the attacks on the Circle and, especially, on its president, Dr Mall.

In the 1960s, when the Perdu controversy was over, the group came under persistent pressure from the conservative Natal *mawlanas*. The Perdu episode had put the Circle on the defensive and opened the way for previously less vocal critics to come into the open. A small band of Circle members – Ismail Manjra, Abdullah Deedat and Suleman Omar – asserted themselves against the older leadership of Dr Mall. Their claim was that Mall and the older members were too tolerant of the Circle's critics and a counter-attack was necessary. Thus, they freed themselves from organisational discipline and formed their own group. In 1959, they launched a fortnightly broadsheet called *al-Mujaddid*. The Young Turks, and their mouthpiece, soon disbanded and rejoined the fold of the Circle.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, criticism of the Circle resurfaced after the visit of Muhammad Asad, when members were involved in promoting and selling his impressive modern translation and commentary, *Message of the Qur'an*. The Circle's commitment to Arabic and Islamic studies had led them to invite Salman Nadvi and later Habib al-Haq Nadvi to take up chairs at the University of Durban-Westville. Since Asad spoke at the university, and the Circle was so closely associated with the departments there, critics began monitoring the texts and courses in Islamic studies offered at the university. Makki again worked on the matter and branded Asad a Qadiani, while others attacked Prof. Salman Nadvi.

THE PERDU CASE

Joseph Perdu was introduced earlier as one of the most influential figures in the early history of the Circle. Before we look at the campaign against him and the Circle, it is worth reconstructing the biographical outlines of this enigmatic figure.

There are many contradictory stories about Perdu, and when and why he arrived and left South Africa. What is clear is that he travelled

extensively up and down the country. However, it is unclear whether he first went to Durban or Cape Town and also where he last lived. He certainly moved between these cities frequently and also visited the Transvaal and many small towns close to the bigger cities.

The name Joseph Perdu has an obvious French ring to it and many South Africans who met him thought he was a Frenchman. He probably promoted this image himself. It is hard to understand why he adopted this name in particular. He had a French accent because his French was apparently better than his spoken English, of which, he used to say, he knew only 500 words. Consequently, Circle members and his opponents all referred to him as a Frenchman. His erstwhile friends thought he was a French Catholic convert to Islam. His detractors, at more extreme moments, cast him as 'sponsored by the French government as an anti-Islamic agent'.¹⁸⁴ In South Africa, he was considered a 'white man' and, as such, must have had some attraction to his hosts. White was the colour of power. A white Muslim, and a genuine European, must have been thought very exotic, attractive and special.

He was, however, Iranian. His father is said to have been a senior figure in the Baha'i community of Iran. His father probably came from Mazandaran, the place where Perdu was possibly born. He was raised in Teheran and both his parents were Persian, according to his ex-wife Joyce.¹⁸⁵ There is no record of when and why Perdu left his homeland; whether, for instance, repression of Baha'is in Iran led his parents to flee to French-controlled parts of the former Ottoman Empire, such as Syria or Lebanon, or to France itself. Oral sources are few and provide scant detail about him until the 1950s.

Perdu met and married Joyce, a British citizen, in Beirut, Lebanon. Joyce, was fluent in French and taught English as a second language in Beirut. Teaching English in the various cities where they lived would become a means to sustain their young family. They then travelled through the Middle East and parts of Africa, including the Sudan, until they arrived in South Africa in the early 1950s. According to Perdu's son, Nabil, who was born in Durban in 1955, his parents had travelled through or lived in Cyprus, Lebanon, Sudan and Madagascar before reaching South Africa.¹⁸⁶ The Perdus had two daughters (born in 1952

and 1953, in Sudan and Madagascar, respectively) when they reached the shores of South Africa.

We will look at Perdu's Cape Town experience first. He lived there on the outskirts of the working-class part of the city, District Six, operating a small take-away store called Snappy Snacks in Woodstock, which a Mr Kathrada had helped him set up.¹⁸⁷ He soon befriended the Muslim clerisy and other Muslim inhabitants of the city. He became friendly with respectable religious figures in the Muslim community, such as Shaykh Ismail Ganief, often called 'Professor Ganief', and Shaykh Shakier Gamiendien. Among the laymen he knew well were Cassiem Davids and the Gallow brothers (Amien, Aziem and Toyer).¹⁸⁸ In the small Muslim neighbourhoods of the city, families and friends kept in close touch with each other. Likewise, the clerisy and their congregants were in regular and informal contact all the time. Perdu's lay friends were companions of the shaykhs. Cassiem Davids, for instance, was a friend and student of Shaykh Edwards.

Once it became clear that Perdu was well versed in Islam, he was either invited or himself requested to give lectures in the city – in public halls, cinemas and mosques. His knowledge of Islam and Arabic was impressive. On occasion, he threw in some poetry in his native Persian as well. The Muslims took it for granted that he was indeed a devoted member of the community. 'The Azzavia people loved him. They even preserved a lecture by him on *Sūrah al-Shams* on tape!'¹⁸⁹ He taught an Arabic class in the basement of the Muir Street Mosque. However, there were those who soon came to doubt him and found his opinions unorthodox, if not heretical. At Cape Town's famous Drill Hall one evening during a public lecture with a stage filled with local shaykhs, he had a confrontation with Shaykh Ganief Booley on the esoteric issue of which people would go to heaven.¹⁹⁰ Perdu apparently espoused unpalatably liberal opinions on this matter. He picked all sorts of tricky theological issues to argue about – that the *mirāj* (ascension of Muhammad) was not physical at all, the nature of Adam, the validity of *hadith* and many other questions that had long been hotly debated among medieval theologians. More learned men, such as Shaykh Abubakr Najaar, then challenged his views. Perdu could possibly have just been introducing doubt into the consensus

and commonly accepted views of the community. It does not appear that he had a coherent logic to his questioning. However, oral evidence is partial and uncertain, so we do not know from the limited evidence available the exact nature of his arguments.

His motives were entirely unknown. Yet, it is now clear that Perdu was surreptitiously promoting Baha'ism. Even when he was being vilified, his detractors were not fully aware of his purpose. Baha'ism was unknown among the South African public at the time. There was reportedly one Baha'i believer in Cape Town. Perdu attempted to bring this entirely new message to the country, beginning with the Muslims. His approach was to directly address theological issues. He probably thought that the minority South African Muslim community was so cut off from the 'central Islamic lands' that their understanding of their religion was poor and their commitment slight. He ran into trouble, however. There was a literate Islamic clerisy (such as Shaykhs Edwards and Gamieldien, who were both educated at Al-Azhar University in Cairo), there were educational institutions, many mosques and social organisations to educate and inform the community about Islam.

Every Muslim learns from childhood: 'There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger.' It is a standard Islamic axiom that no prophet will come after Muhammad, who is the embodiment of goodness and mercy. Through his exegesis of the Qur'ān, Perdu gradually led members of his audience to entertain ideas about the continuation of prophethood (*nubuwah*). The last Islamic prophet had fulfilled his purpose according to this perspective, and another one had to come for the present epoch. Perdu's religious belief, as a Baha'i, was that a newly revealed messenger is required for every age.

The man to perform this function in the present historical era had already arrived and brought a message. He was the Persian notable Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri Baha'Allah (1817–92), the founder of what became known as Baha'ism.¹⁹¹ He announced this new faith in 1863, but had already adopted or founded it in 1844. Exiled from Qajarite Iran, first to Baghdad then to Istanbul and Edirne, and under severe repression wherever he went in the Ottoman Empire, Mirza Husayn Ali finally settled in Akka (Acre) on the coast of Ottoman Syria in 1868, where he remained until his death in 1892. His son, Abbas

Effendi, inherited his father's place, becoming 'Abd al-Baha. The site of his burial in Haifa would later become the site of the Universal House of Justice, the spiritual and administrative centre of the faith. A corpus of Persian and Arabic writings, ritual practices such as prayer and fasting, communal institutions and religious personalities endowed with authority emerged in the lifetime of and soon after the death of Baha'Allah. When Perdu visited South Africa, the leader of the movement was the Oxford-educated son of 'Abd al-Baha, and grandson of Mirza Husayn Ali, Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957). Under the latter, numerous administrative innovations were introduced. During this time, a body of primary sources – books by the founder, letters and prayers, essential for understanding and practising the faith – had already been translated into many languages, but certain key texts such as the *Kitab al-Aqdas* were not yet available to English readers.

The Islamic, and specifically millenarian Shi'ite, context of nineteenth-century Iran marks the entire fabric of Baha'ism.¹⁹² However, having made an uncompromising break with Islam, Baha'ism is not an Islamic sect but an independent religion, although patterned on an Islamic model.

From the 1890s the religion spread to Europe and North America, where, in the early twentieth century, an impressive new temple was established in Wilmette, Illinois. India became an important centre for the Baha'i community, but Western Baha'i missionaries spread the religion to new locations. By 1950, there were Baha'i communities in virtually every major country on the globe. By then, African countries and other parts of the colonised world had their first Baha'i missionaries. Perdu was in all probability sent, as Dr Mall found out in Bombay, as a missionary to Africa. He produced uneven results and, in the long term, was responsible for placing Baha'ism in a very bad light in important sections of the Muslim community.

Meanwhile, Perdu also fell out of favour with the Baha'i leadership. He was viewed as too egocentric and proved difficult to keep in line; in Baha'i parlance he was a 'covenant breaker'. Shoghi Effendi expelled him from the movement just before his departure from South Africa.¹⁹³ From holding a prominent missionary position, he became a total outsider.

As has been shown, Perdu became more daring in his public utterances, but his views were challenged by the more Islamically

educated members of his audiences. However, there was a small group that he managed to convince. The Gallow brothers, Cassiem Davids and Munier ‘Michael’ Noor were among the Muslims who had attended Perdu’s lectures and whom he managed to convince of his interpretation of the Qur’ān. However, he did not convert them. He did not take them home and teach them the Baha’i covenant. Instead, he told them that if they wanted to follow the logical development of his ideas then they should write for more information to the Baha’i headquarters in Haifa, which by 1948 had fallen to the new Jewish state of Israel. These men then began a correspondence with the Baha’i movement and were sent literature. At some point in the process, they adopted the Baha’i faith. They changed their religious vision entirely. They sacrificed their Prophet Muhammad for Baha’Allah. They would spend the rest of their lives as devout members of the fledgling Baha’i community of South Africa. Once this change became known, their Muslim relatives, neighbours and friends largely rejected and even denounced them. Some of them suffered abuse and minor damage to their properties. In Muslim circles, Baha’ism became a negative term and a mysterious and subversive sect.

Perdu’s closest followers were the Gallow brothers, one of whom would later donate land to his new spiritual community to build the first permanent local Spiritual Assembly in Cape Town. Cassiem Davids was a student and close friend of Shaykh Ganief. He was a tailor and spent many hours in debate and discussion about religious and theological topics with friends in his tailorshop. Tailorshops, like barbershops, were spaces of community and debate – whether about matters political or religious. The shaykhs could not answer Davids’ metaphysical questioning and Perdu presumably satisfied his search. The story of Michael Noor, who was on the periphery of this group, is worth recalling.

Michael Noor was in his thirties and working in the clothing industry. He was married and residing in Claremont when he first encountered Perdu. He recalls that his brother Ameer wrote from Durban (where he was a neighbour of Circle member Sedick Burke) urging him to attend Perdu’s lectures if he came to Cape Town. When Perdu visited that city, Michael duly made his way to the lectures. He

recalls the first one on 'science and religion' at the Avalon Bioscope in District Six. He actually did not understand anything that Perdu said that time, but Perdu's other lectures, especially those on the Qur'ān, were most appealing to Noor. Like many others who remember Perdu's lectures, Noor was also most impressed with his exposition of *Sūrah al-Shams*. He still believes that the 'revolution he [Perdu] started in the minds of men, it went on for years after he left'.¹⁹⁴ Later, Noor chose the Baha'i faith. His appreciation of Perdu is remarkably similar to that of Circle members. They, however, did not convert.

Perdu thus struck it lucky in Cape Town. The shaykhs in Cape Town who had first supported Perdu, challenged him when his views became known. Perdu had impressed Shaykh Ismail Ganief, who later admitted:

It is true that we accepted him at first as a Moslem, after he was put to the task of answering many questions put to him. However, we detected many flaws in his lectures, which put us back in doubts about his 'real identity'. He is very clever in avoiding debates. We have made a mistake to accept him so soon.¹⁹⁵

In Durban, Perdu was less successful. His employer in Durban was the Arabic Study Circle, for which he produced the very polished journal, *al-Mu'minin*, referred to earlier. None of his Circle colleagues converted to Baha'ism. Dr Mall's brother-in-law, Dr Abdul Hak Bismillah, however, did convert but it is unclear how this happened. He was regarded as the first 'Asian in South Africa' to adopt Baha'ism.¹⁹⁶ What is certain is that the biggest campaign against Perdu and also against Baha'ism was launched in Durban. It is to the Durban anti-Perdu and anti-Circle campaigns that we now turn.

Ismail Mohamed Bawa went to Perdu's small and sparsely furnished office in Commercial Road for private Arabic lessons one Saturday morning. He had heard him lecture at the popular Circle meetings and wanted to improve his Islamic knowledge. Bawa was the ideal Circle member, highly educated, sophisticated, modern, but also very interested in his religion as a contemporary culture and way of life. He had qualified as a barrister at Lincoln's Inn, London, in 1941, and returned home in 1942, whereupon he immediately got involved in

establishing a Natal Muslim Council to co-ordinate all Islamic activities in the province. This was a short-lived venture that he would resuscitate a decade later with Dr Mall as his deputy president.¹⁹⁷ In the 1970s, he was involved in the formation of the equally briefly tenured Islamic Council of South Africa. These initiatives reflect Bawa's commitment to stability and unity in the Muslim community. Perdu's unorthodox views, and his secretive style of introducing them, challenged and deeply disturbed him.

He recalls Perdu saying that 'Islam will be taken away by God' because a 'second prophet would emerge after a thousand years' and 'a new revelation was needed', and that 'Islam was neither powerful nor respected in the world because its time had passed'.¹⁹⁸ Perdu also cynically asked Bawa whether saying the *kalima* was a necessary condition for being Muslim. Such questions and opinions confused Bawa, the young seeker who simply wanted conventional Islamic and Arabic language lessons.

He did not get into any argument with the charismatic Perdu. Instead, he went to Mohamed Makki, the well-known publisher of *Muslim Digest*, by then already an established monthly magazine of Islamic affairs. A wiry, bespectacled man, always in a dark suit and matching necktie, Makki was a modern-day Muslim campaigner. He was a disciple of Mawlana 'Abd al-Alim Siddiqui, the peripatetic shaykh of two major *sūfi* orders – the Qadiriyyah and Chistiyyah. After the *mawlana's* first visit to South Africa, Makki began publishing a yearly miscellany of mostly borrowed articles called *Ramadan Annual* in 1934. Throughout the apartheid era, the annual boasted a message to Muslims from the country's white prime minister. *Muslim Digest*, similarly composed largely of 'lifted' material, often without regard to copyright, was born in 1950. These publications showed a remarkable consistency and Makki produced them since their beginnings on a shoestring budget and without administrative infrastructure. Makki was a highly motivated publicist.

Makki had already worked with Mawlana Cassim Sema, then of Waschbank, on the Perdu question. Makki claims that Dr Mall's eldest brother, Muhammad, had approached Mawlana Sema to quietly inquire into Perdu's influence over his brother and the Circle. Muhammad, the

concerned brother, also agreed to finance the anti-Perdu campaign.¹⁹⁹ Sema had already confronted Perdu when he was touring the small towns of northern Natal. Makki found a new impetus when he heard from Bawa; they set out to stop Perdu once and for all. Initially, it was through correspondence and private communication with Perdu; then followed public campaigning.

Makki found a collaborator for his team in Adam Peerbhai in Cape Town. Peerbhai, who was educated at Aligarh University in India, was then in his thirties and beginning a career as a cricket writer and author of religious pamphlets for children.²⁰⁰ Makki knew Cape Town well, and spent part of the year there with one of his two wives.

The three, led by Makki, embarked on an exhaustive programme of action to expose what they called 'Perduism'. Bawa was the least fierce and confrontational of the trio. In the foreword to the publication *Verdict on Perdu*, IM Bawa writes:

Perdu would have rendered a great service to the Muslim Community if he had confined his thinking within legitimate bounds; but, as this booklet records, he exceeded all limits, and sealed his doom when he sat on the Holy Quran and on the Holy Prophet Muhammad!²⁰¹

From this 'soft' opening, the booklet proceeds in 15 short chapters to treat virtually every facet of the Perdu issue. The early sections are devoted to Perdu himself and his sponsors in Durban. Perdu is mistaken for a Frenchman spying for his government. The Circle is identified as the main culprit. Then follows an attack on Perdu's 'new prophet theories' and 'dangers in misinterpreting *khataman-nabeeyeen*' and other views purportedly held by him. Perdu had said that *khatam* meant 'beauty' and not 'seal' or 'final'. Hence, according to him, Muhammad was 'beautiful'; not 'seal of the prophets' as the Qur'ān (33: 40) says. The penultimate chapter of the booklet is devoted to an assault on Baha'ism, Babism and Qadianism. Perdu is not definitely identified as a Baha'i. In the final chapter, the author writes: 'Perdu and his fanatical adherents from the Arabic Study Circle, were thus doomed to be exposed in the eyes of the public opinion [sic]. Perdu should never have been given the inducement of remaining long in our community.'

This thoroughly polemical tract reveals the strong sentiments and passions that the authors wanted to evoke against Perdu and, by extension, against the Circle. They did not separate the two; neither did they make a distinction between individuals and their ideas.

Perdu left Durban, and finally departed from the country in January 1959. 'He said he was going to join his family and would return to South Africa "sometime". He gave none of his South African friends any address, but said he would write to them.'²⁰² He reportedly went to Brazil, and is said to have died in 1978.

Before his flight from South Africa because of the Muslim campaign against him, he suffered another blow when Shoghi Effendi, the 'Guardian of the Cause of God', excommunicated him from the Baha'i community, a rare occurrence in this small religious community. He was rehabilitated posthumously, but *Baha'i World*, the annual gazette of Baha'i affairs, which usually conveys information about leading Baha'is, never carried an obituary for him.

The Perdu episode was of titanic proportions for a little organisation like the Arabic Study Circle. Joseph Perdu's association with the Circle and the ensuing debacle brought together – ultimately to clash – diverse traditions of learning, individual passions and persuasive personalities. Personal and religious identity, friendship and commitment came into focus. Dr Mall had decided to cut ties with Perdu and did not make a big noise of it. The Circle did not question Mall and followed his gentlemanly style of dissociating from Perdu. They had made a mistake, and had better get on with their lives and their work, but the detractors of their cause had tried very hard to defame them in their fight against Perdu.

Perdu's departure did not clear the path for the Circle to pursue its activities unhindered. The Circle was branded a sponsor of Baha'ism in the country. This was done to persuade the community not to support the Circle either financially or morally. The 'Makki group' disbanded, but Makki remained opposed to the Circle and its members. He would recall with pride that he issued 13 pamphlets against Perdu, and reiterated his instinct always to suspect the motives of medical doctors and others with no formal theological training meddling in religion.²⁰³ He believed it was his duty to promote a basic purified Islamic creed

through his publications, and to criticise anyone who deviated from what he understood to be the religion of Islam.

Twenty years after Perdu had left the country, Makki was still closely following Circle activities. His criticism later was that it promoted not Baha'ism, but Qadiani literature. When Circle members, independently of the organisation, promoted *Message of the Qur'an* by Muhammad Asad, the German convert and respected student of Islam referred to earlier, Makki began his campaign by invoking the Circle's Perdu fiasco.

In a 1978 issue of *Muslim Digest*, Makki lashed out at the Circle below the interrogative headline: 'Arabic Study Circle leads the way to mislead Muslims and usher in "Perdu era" once again?' Makki held that Asad's translation was Qadiani-inspired. Asad interpreted the verses dealing with the elevation of Prophet Jesus metaphorically: Jesus is dead, although he was spiritually raised. This 'rational' approach is in keeping with Asad's medieval and modern exegetical influences, which he cites copiously in footnotes throughout the work. This is perhaps also the reason for the Circle members' interest in promoting Asad.

Makki made a direct link between the Persian 'Frenchman' Perdu in the 1950s and the German-Pakistani Asad in the 1970s. Numerous pamphlets issued in the late 1950s against Perdu were reproduced in Makki's 1978 article against Asad. The Circle was made out to be an organisation with a long and conscious commitment to undermining Islam, to subverting it from within. The members were cast as congenital conspirators against their own religion – 'self-hating Muslims', to coin a phrase. Other pamphleteers joined Makki. In addition to the Circle, Prof. Salman Nadvi, Head of the Department of Islamic Studies at the University of Durban-Westville, was attacked in this round of pamphlet fire.

THE AL-MUJADDID FACTION

The deluge of pamphlets attacking the Circle during the Perdu affair was the beginning in South Africa, according to Ismail Manjra, of the Muslim 'pamphlet wars'. Manjra and a few young Circle members 'were very angry because the Arabic Study Circle did not respond

to these attacks.²⁰⁴ They criticised Dr Mall and other officials of the organisation for not responding to Makki and his allies. Mall replied that the Circle had to remain focused and not listen to their critics. Just as Mall was not infuriated by Perdu's tactics, so was he not unduly perturbed by opponents to his cause.

Manjra, Abdullah Deedat, Ebrahim Mahida, Suleman Omar and Ismail Patel 'broke away from the Circle' and formed a new group, ambitiously called the Centre of Arabic Culture, but three months later renamed the Islamic Centre of South Africa, because the former name was seen as too narrow: 'Islamic' would cover more than 'Arabic'.²⁰⁵ They announced their presence with an equally ambitious newspaper, *al-Mujaddid*. They authored most of the articles themselves but also published material from elsewhere, particularly from South Asia. A central purpose of the newspaper was 'to break the monopoly of the mullahs on Islamic matters'. They were very frank about this.

Al-Mujaddid was four pages thin, but was fiery and topical. Unfortunately, it had a rather brief history. It sold for a 'tickey' (two-and-a-half cents), and 'a lot of people used to look forward to it', according to Abdullah Deedat. It started in January 1959 and came out monthly for just over two years. During this brief period, the rebel Circle members said what they wanted to but could not express through the Circle's media. Deedat recalls: 'It was forthright and we got away with all these things we thought at the time was opportune.'²⁰⁶

However, the cash-strapped but enthusiastic young men could not continue producing their broadsheet after the middle of 1961. Apart from the financial constraints, Deedat, who was a key figure at the paper, was leaving Durban's Ahmedia School for a better job at the Central Islamic Trust in Johannesburg. Yet the paper could have survived. It was not a demanding task to put it together. Ebrahim Mahida was a deft typist and was very happy to continue typing up articles. His job at *Indian Views* allowed him to work on *al-Mujaddid*; a few issues of the paper were even printed at *Indian Views*. Deedat was an enthusiastic and competent writer and could continue to write and correspond from his new base. Manjra, too, was a capable writer and was prepared to continue with the paper. The financial woes of the periodical could have improved with some fundraising. They lost their

momentum when these little problems arose. The solid structures of the Circle, however, remained in place even after the battering by Makki's team, and the *al-Mujaddid* group returned to work once again inside the organisation that had been their home all along. The dissidents retreated into the fold.

Al-Mujaddid represents the views and enthusiasm of young men frustrated at the slow pace of change in the Muslim community. The editors' intellectual formation in the Circle is apparent throughout the publication. It gets no clearer than in the very first issue, which carried a front-page article on the 'Clarity of the Quran'. The article begins: 'The idea that the Quran is difficult to understand and comprehend has done considerable damage to the Muslims of the world. We are still asleep with this obnoxious thought.' This is Circle philosophy; the editors passionately believed it and would repeat it many times. Then follows the editors' belief, frankly stated: 'We have been made to believe in it through the agency of some monopolists of religion who think that their position would be in danger if the Muslims at large had direct access to the Word of God.' The whole piece is an argument in favour of studying the Qur'ān and against the domination of the Book by the *mawlanas*.²⁰⁷ This is a more explicit and more elaborate appeal than the original Circle invitation to study the Qur'ān.

In introducing itself, the paper does not introduce its editors. The editorial expresses the need to return to the 'true spirit' of Islam and to dispense with pointless dogma and ritual inessential to Islam. The names of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Altaf Husayn Hali and 'the industrious Iqbal', who was to be an abiding presence in the paper, are invoked as modern heroes. The editorial calls on Muslims to strive for 'a United Islam, a Rational Islam, and above all a Living Islam'. This language prescribing a modern Islam would be invoked constantly. At the start of its third year, after many attacks on the *mawlanas* and vice versa, the editorial reminded:

the Moulvis of South Africa ... that if they still entertain any hope of commanding respect from the younger generation then they must change their present backward, retrogressive and almost impractical interpretation of Islam to a more dynamic, progressive and practical interpretation of Islam ... to fit this modern age.²⁰⁸

With its monthly instalments, the publication attempted to be a community paper and to assume a broad-minded approach to religious matters. In the end, it promoted its highly contentious views and a modernist Islam more than striving to unify the community. Yet it had a vision of unity. For instance, it had no concern over the particular Islamic sectarian origins of contributors. In various issues, it carried articles by the Agha Khan, leader of the Ismaili community, an article on the Prophet Muhammad by Sir Zafrullah Khan, a renowned Pakistani Ahmadi scholar, and a piece on the meaning of Islam by Turkish nationalist-feminist poet Halide Edib.

One dimension of the periodical was its promotion of a contemporary understanding of Islam. Another dimension was its persistent and critical interest in the role of the *mawlanas*. Indeed, these two aspects were related. The clerisy inhibited an appreciation of Islam that addressed contemporary society. Since they were considered to be the main hindrances to Muslim progress, they were constantly criticised and castigated.

The first area in which this emerged was the seemingly innocuous realm of sighting the moon to begin and end the month of Ramadān. Establishing the beginning of Ramadān fasting and Eid celebrations had become moments of confusion in the Muslim community. The editors felt this was an unnecessary waste of energy and time. The paper entered the debate by running, over a few months, an article by Dr Abdur Rahman Taj, Rector of Al-Azhar University, offering a 'liberal' solution to the problem. Instead of moon sighting, the young editors of the magazine were in favour of scientific calculation, and found support for this.

At the same time, the Circle arranged a debate between Mawlanas Khatieb and Ansari on Sunday 29 March 1959 on the moon question. The issue was whether news of moon sighting conveyed by radio stations – in Egypt or Pakistan or India – was acceptable as evidence for South African Muslims to start their fasting or Eid. This was not accepted by the two *mawlanas*. Mawlana Ansari was somewhat more sympathetic to solving the problem and proposed *hilal*, or moon-sighting committees. *Al-Mujaddid* welcomed Ansari's statements and would continue to inquire as to when these committees would be

formed.²⁰⁹ This issue of the paper welcoming Ansari's suggestions also carried an article from *Indian Views* expressing the opinion that radio news of sighting should simply be accepted and that *hilar* committees were useless. In June 1959, the paper published a piece, originally in Urdu, by Sayyid Ja'far Phulwari calling for the use of modern astronomy. The article concluded: 'Methods adopted for determining the date of appearance of the crescent moon are queer and absurd. The confusion exists because of the wrong interpretation that the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad have acquired.'²¹⁰

This was perhaps the first forceful argument in the country for using scientific methods for sighting the moon and establishing a lunar calendar. An accompanying editorial questions the then recently established Jamiatul Ulama of Natal on its silence over accepting scientific astronomical sighting of the moon. 'Mawlanas evade answer', ran the headline. After this, the vexed moon question was put aside for a long time.

The terrain shifted. The next area of concern was the Friday sermon given at all mosques by the *mawlanas*:

Does any one of them, like some of the leaders of other religions, protest against the many obvious wrongs and injustices that are daily perpetrated by the municipalities, provincial councils and central government on the non-Europeans of South Africa? Instead what we hear week in and week out is the reeling out of Stereotype Sermons that were delivered several centuries ago by people whose problems were quite different from ours.²¹¹

This was the paper's only explicit reference to the political situation in the country. In addition, it called for more English explanation of the *khutbas*. A speech by the president of Pakistan, General Ayub Khan, on the 'true role of the Ulema' was reproduced in the same edition.

The final matter about which the *mawlanas* were directly addressed for their inadequacies was the burial of Muslims. They were criticised for not attending funerals of ordinary Muslims but only those of the wealthy.²¹² The paper mentioned the names of *mawlanas* it felt were remiss in their duties.

In December 1960, *al-Mujaddid* denounced Ahmed Deedat and his Islamic Propagation Centre for the type of offensive *dawah*, or missionary work, being undertaken.²¹³ Ahmed was the older half-brother of Abdullah, an editor of the paper, but this did not deter Abdullah's opposition to him. This openly Islamic missionary group, founded along the lines of existing Christian organisations, was established in 1957 by members of the Circle (its origins in the Circle are addressed in Chapter 8). Ahmed Deedat was himself a regular at Circle gatherings and particularly enjoyed the discussions with representatives from other religions. The new organisation, however, quickly adopted an attacking position against Christian missionaries, and an *al-Mujaddid* editorial called on the Islamic Propagation Centre to change its 'present method of attacking the Christian faith and devote more time towards dispelling doubts and ignorance about Islam'.²¹⁴

Through its mouthpiece, *al-Mujaddid*, the Islamic Centre of South Africa brought into the public sphere some of the frustrations of young Muslims and the tensions and divisions inside Muslim society. It stated its opinions openly and frankly and pointed a finger at the 'establishment' South Asian-trained clerisy. As a dissident group in the Circle, it never really moved far away from its parent organisation. Indeed, through its editorials, articles and advertisements, it promoted many of the Circle's causes, especially the study of Arabic and the Qur'ān.

Dr Mall was a speaker at its first anniversary, as was AM Moolla, the businessman and philanthropist who supported many Circle causes. At that function, AM Moolla addressed the group and gave a gift of £25 to the paper. About 500 people attended the celebrations in Kajee Hall on 9 December 1959.²¹⁵ There was no second anniversary celebration; by the third anniversary, there was neither *al-Mujaddid* nor the Islamic Centre of South Africa. The paper had remained on the margins and died, and the editors were back at the heart of the Circle.

8

LEGACY AND LIMITS

In general, socially influential organisations are internally coherent and pursue a fairly consistent line of action. They not only build institutions and change lives but also create an entire climate, producing conditions for others, often far outside the organisation, to think in fresh ways, to initiate new associations and even to start new movements to address novel situations. This was indeed the case with the Circle.

LEGACY

The desire to study Arabic and the heritage of Islam became a long-term legacy of the Circle that has been dealt with at length already. Two organisations for which the Circle prepared the ground were the Islamic Propagation Centre and the Muslim Youth Movement. The former grew directly out of the Perdu lectures in the 1950s, while the latter was established only in 1970 after 20 years of Circle activity.

The Circle had become too limited for the youth, who found some guidance from their elders in the Circle but also implicitly knew their limits. There was the need for a movement that would be vibrant and sensitive to the lives of the growing body of high school pupils, university students and young professionals, and keenly aware of the conditions on South African campuses. Thus, the Muslim Youth Movement was born.²¹⁶ A few years later, in 1974, the Muslim Students' Association was started after Cape Town Muslim students combined their efforts with those of students in the north of the country. It is unclear whether the small body of Muslim students in Cape Town had participated in events of, or had even heard about, the Arabic Study Circle. In any case, when these movements got off the ground, the conditions were also laid for the contraction of the Circle's sphere of influence. These groups had their own policies and agendas,

determined by international and local political conditions in the 1970s that were entirely different to those in the 1950s when the Circle emerged.

Members of the Circle conceived the idea of an Islamic propagation organisation after a series of inter-religious discussions. One of the founders, and the leading light of what became the Islamic Propagation Centre, Ahmed Deedat, was a regular participant in Circle discussions, although he never served on the executive of the Circle. GH Agjee remembers:

Yes, the Arabic Study Circle gave birth to the Islamic Propagation Centre. Mr Deedat, Mr Vanker, Mr Abdul Khaleq Salejee ... and I were not only active in the Circle but were foundation members of the IPC ... Every Sunday, Mr Deedat read the relevant verses ... from Yusuf Ali's [translation of the] Qur'ān before Mr Perdu's talks.²¹⁷

Agjee recalls that after one Perdu class, a Mr Fairfax 'offered to conduct Bible classes in order for those interested to be equipped to have dialogue with members from various Christian denominations'.²¹⁸ This is the only reference to a white Christian man by the name of Fairfax at any of the Perdu lectures. It is possible that Perdu had invited friends or acquaintances to his lectures. It is not clear whether he was invited by Perdu himself or simply came out of interest.

Fairfax eventually did deliver four or five lectures on the Bible, but again there are no details on the nature of these classes. Without explanation, Fairfax gave up his tutorials. Ahmed Deedat stepped into his shoes. Since the 1940s, he had had plenty of experience with recently converted African and other Christian students studying to become missionaries at Adam's Mission, where he worked at a general dealer's store. He had many heated discussions with these students, who were imbued with missionary fervour and spoke unkindly about the Prophet Muhammad and other aspects of Islam. Deedat had been unprepared for them until he picked up a text called *Izhar ul-Haq* ('The truth revealed'), which helped him to answer the young missionaries. He also bought a copy of the Bible on one of his trips to Durban.

Deedat had invited those who attended Perdu's lectures to come to Fairfax's talks. However, Deedat turned out to be the real teacher and

leader, and proposed that an organisation be established to counter missionary activities in Natal. Deedat may have been stimulated by the neophyte missionaries, on the one hand, and by the Circle, on the other. A new organisation would be the outcome. To raise funds, a collection was made after every lecture and, thus, the Islamic Propagation Centre was born in 1957.²¹⁹ Circle stalwart GHE Vanker became its first president and, in the following year, its secretary general, when Deedat assumed the presidency. A handful of men who attended Circle functions – in addition to a few of its core members such as Agjee, who helped to steer the Centre – later joined the new organisation.

Deedat's forthright manner and oratorical powers may already have made some of the Circle members somewhat weary of him. Not all Circle members agreed with Deedat, nor were those with him in total agreement with his approach. Deedat's brother, Abdullah, who was a Circle member, says:

Unfortunately, with him it was everything must be around the Bible ... So really this was to an extent moving away from the Qur'ān ... this type of move has not brought about any change anywhere. As a matter of fact, it has had a negative impact on the entire Muslim community and on Islam as such, unfortunately.²²⁰

Ismail Manjra recalls:

He started his talks at the City Hall, inviting people to Islam. The majority of the audience were Muslims. There were a few Christians who would come to his talks, so in my opinion they did not really serve any purpose. At one of the lectures he gave I remember an old Christian man came up to the stage and he said, 'Call Muhammad whatever you like but don't call him holy.' We felt that this attack on the Prophet Muhammad was invited by the method which Ahmed Deedat used.²²¹

The style of the Circle was not to engage in any argument, least of all in public. Mall's displeasure with Deedat was never openly expressed. He was also restrained because a few leading Circle members were close to Deedat and, in fact, part of his propaganda body. The Circle faction under Abdullah Deedat and Ismail Manjra also opposed him. Unlike the mainstream Circle, they came out loudly in opposition to Deedat.

According to Abdullah Deedat:

Yes, all of us thought [it was problematic] because the *Mujaddid* had spoken out against it and the ASC was not really in favour of this type [of thing] as a whole. As a matter of fact, they used to discourage Ahmed Deedat from speaking at their functions, and so on.²²²

Serious arguments followed in public between Deedat and the *al-Mujaddid* faction of the Circle. The Islamic Propagation Centre and Deedat, however, were unperturbed and remained unaffected by the criticism, which came from all directions including Makki and his *Muslim Digest*, and the '*ulamā*'.

Deedat weathered all these storms. He faced the Christian evangelists and missionaries and, in the process, came to adopt a good deal of their style and methods. For a long time, the Hindus were free of his interest. Indeed, many of them may initially have welcomed his counter-attack against the missionaries, for they were seen to be converting Hindus as well. In later years, the Hindus, too, would fall under his rhetorical stabs. He became an international Islamic icon, an emblem of the brave Muslim reclaiming Islam from a new Crusade.²²³ From the Circle's initial dialogue with other faiths, he steered a path to confrontation.

Meanwhile, the dominant religious group among the Indians was in the process of what, with hindsight, may be called a 'revival' similar to that taking place in the Muslim community. Hindu ritual practice and worship became ever more popular, and neo-Hindu reform movements flourished in Natal. The latter emerged partly as a response to the growth of the Pentecostal Church among the Indian working class, where the church found numerous converts. Hindu festivals multiplied, especially those like *kavadi* and *draupadi*, which were rooted in south Indian traditions. As a reaction to the Pentecostal Church, and drawing on a longer history of Hindu reform, the established Hindu movements of the province also revived their activities and strategies. In the 1970s, new ones emerged such as the Hare Krishna movement.²²⁴

Thus, the terrain of religion was not static in Natal, and Deedat's rise and spectacular showmanship may have made some Muslims avid

fans. A more sober view would have seen the Deedat phenomenon as a passing phase in the expression of Islam in Durban. Such a view would have come from the *Jamaat-e tablighi*, newly arrived in 1959, which concentrated on reforming the practices of Muslims rather than on bringing more into the fold. Muslims had to go to the core essentials of their religion and leave aside schismatic inessential debates and the intellectualisation of Islam. This Tablighi movement was founded in India around 1927 by Mawlana Muhammad Ilyas and, by the time it reached South Africa, it had been spreading around the globe with what it saw as a purified Islamic message and simple programme of action.²²⁵ The type of muscular missionary approach of Deedat and company was anathema to the Tablighis. However, the Islamic Propagation Centre's longer-term impact may have been a measure of competition against missionaries in the African communities. Partly due to Deedat's efforts, in parts of rural Natal groups of African Zulu-speaking Muslims came to feature more strongly among the Natal Muslim communities. As noted earlier, a Zulu translation of the Qur'ān was published in 1980. At Circle events, such as the speech contests, a new feature was additional participation from these communities. They were already present at the Qur'ānic commemoration event of 1968.

It is abundantly clear that the influence of the Circle transcended any single area or moment. Its impact resides in the specific institutions that were formed but also in the broader cultural ethos it spread. Arabic language consciousness was born and grew swiftly. A different emphasis was placed on 'being Muslim' by many Muslims, who now became more conscious of reading and studying their history, religion and culture as Muslims, and not as Indians or Gujaratis.

While the Islamic Propagation Centre tended to be confrontational and aimed to protect Muslims from missionaries, a youth movement was born to address the internal and often only subtle external demands on Muslim youth. The emergence of the Muslim Youth Movement and many of its associated institutions and groups was enabled by the prior work of the Circle.

The Circle was a direct factor in the birth of the Muslim Youth Movement in 1970. Abubakr Mohamed, who would later become a well-known advocate, was one of the movement's founders and its first

president. He was involved in Circle activities while he was a student at the University College of Durban on Salisbury Island during the 1960s. He recalls the ‘inferiority complex of Muslim youth’ and the need for a ‘youth movement, but not along conventional lines.’²²⁶ He was against the ‘sentimentalism’ that he felt students had in matters of religion; instead, he was looking for a ‘functional Islam’, by which he meant Islam relevant to the everyday life of students. A 1963 survey found that 13 per cent of Muslim men attended mosque daily and 39 per cent on Fridays. If this said something about the religious observance of ordinary Muslims, then religious practice among students may have been even less intense.²²⁷ ‘Sentimentality’ in matters of religion was probably a replacement for either consistent practice or ‘proper’ comprehension of Islam, or both. There was an absence not only of a ‘functioning’ Islam but of any motivation for meaningful social activity other than studies among Indian students. A 1961 study of the Natal ‘Indian elite’ noted:

The Indian student has not time for casual delight, for leisurely education. The observer trained in a Western university will be surprised at the intimate knowledge held by Indian students of the details of academic requirements. Their success in examinations and their avoidance of unnecessary labour is dependent on an intimate understanding of the facilities offered by universities and correspondence colleges throughout the country ... The graduate’s bookshelves reflect his hastily acquired education. There you will see the flotsam of his degree set works in law or medicine or arts from his university days – but little else.²²⁸

This dismal situation amongst the student population – among them, the future leaders and heart of the new Muslim elite – is what groups such as the Muslim Youth Movement and Muslim Students’ Association hoped to change. Biographies of the Prophet and other important personalities, studies on the ‘contribution of Islam to civilisation’, on the position of women, and other tracts and pamphlets motivating Muslims to action were the materials that the youth movement, and indeed the Circle, wanted students to possess on their bookshelves. Most definitely, a well-fingered translation of the Qur’an would have to be a prominent part of the new student’s book collection. In future years, the Islamic Propagation Centre would print thousands of copies

of the Abdullah Yusuf Ali translation of the Qur'ān and distribute them for free. Before these students had buying power, the only readily available 'Islamic literature' was the imported, often idiosyncratic, tracts incidentally available at spice suppliers such as the Taj Company. The Circle's library played an important role in providing reading material to the more eager students.

Another founder, and the second president of the Muslim Youth Movement, was Ebrahim Jadwat. He remembers that 'any progressive person in Durban was inevitably linked to the Arabic Study Circle, and later the Islamic Propagation Centre'.²²⁹ He gives credit to the Circle and other groups that invited people from all over the world, giving locals a much more global vision and understanding of the activities and ideas among Muslims.²³⁰ According to Jadwat, the relationship between the Circle and the youth movement was very close in the beginning: 'In fact, we didn't think of it as different organisations.' However, the Circle was far too limited in its scope and membership, which had remained unchanged for years, while the youth movement was bigger and more ambitious; it had visions of itself as a great movement of revival and reform. From the end of the 1970s through the early 1980s, the Muslim Youth Movement leadership had dreams of it being a local incarnation of a marriage between al-Ikhwan al-Muslimūn in Egypt and Jamāt-e Islami in Pakistan.

Despite the movement's unrealistic ambitions, and the growing international influences on it, its local grounding in Circle precedents is unmistakable. Jadwat recalls:

When we sat down to do things, the things that came to us were the things that we were familiar with. The Qur'ānic study [group], from the Arabic Study Circle, even the speech contest idea was now spreading to other places as part of the Circle's idea, but it was transcended. And then the idea of libraries, again from the Circle, right, literature and the printing of literature, again from the Circle. Bringing speakers down, right again probably, partly, the Circle's influence.²³¹⁾

From its formation in 1974, Dr Mall was involved in the Lajnatul Attiba (Doctors' Committee) of the Muslim Youth Movement. When it grew into the independent Islamic Medical Association of South

Africa, Mall felt it had become strong enough and he could withdraw from involvement in it. He was also a founding board member of the Islamic Council of South Africa when it was formed in 1975. This was a significant venture to unite South African Muslim organisations under a single umbrella. It succeeded in getting the *'ulamā'* bodies such as the Jamiatul Ulama of Natal and the Moslem Judicial Council of the Western Cape to sit alongside organisations run by laymen. After a positive beginning with some financial support from the World Muslim League, internal problems arose in the Islamic Council of South Africa. By the middle of the 1980s, it went into a decline from which it never recovered. The Council opposed the promotion of the Muhammad Asad translation of the Qur'ān in South Africa, in which Circle members were deeply involved. Mall, therefore, had time for other organisational commitments.

Ultimately, the effects of the Circle's influence would create the conditions for its own gradual disappearance as a tangible association with an agenda and direction. The Islamic Propagation Centre effectively made dialogue between representatives of Natal's religious communities a thing of the past. The Muslim Youth Movement, and later the Muslim Students' Association, made far more exciting appeals to the Natal Muslim student body than the Circle was capable of. Speech contests continued through the 1980s but by the end of the decade another contest – between the apartheid state and the mass democratic movement – rendered the Circle's efforts virtually irrelevant, except to a few high schools willing to participate in these contests.

LIMITS

A man with extensive experience in the welfare sector in KwaZulu-Natal, Essop Timol, asked of the Circle: 'But why did we not learn Arabic?' He had recently gone on a holiday to the Middle East and found himself at a loss to communicate with the people he met.²³² This is a simple but hard and direct question. The Circle's leadership would be at pains to answer it.

Consciousness of the Arabic language had definitely spread widely by the 1980s when all the Circle's programmes, and institutions for

which it had fought, were in place. Islamic studies was a respectable subject taught in schools and studied at some universities, eager students were going to Saudi Arabia (and elsewhere in the Middle East when possible) for intensive courses in the language, and awareness about Islam was more widespread than when the Circle had begun.

Nevertheless, Urdu was still a highly regarded language of devotion and culture. Its use in mosques and *madrasahs* had not waned; from 1983, students in selected Natal schools could choose to study it. In the 1980s, Buzme Adab was still a vibrant group devoted to Urdu and was led by a core of active local Urdu poets. One of its leading lights, Farooqi Mehtar, had published at least three volumes of poetry in Urdu. Despite all the effort thrown into promoting Arabic, no South African had yet published even a slim *diwān* of Arabic verse. Although Arabic had become a choice for parents and students, it had not completely supplanted Urdu. ‘*Ulamā*’ from South Asia still came to South Africa regularly, and local students still went to study there. In addition, seminaries were opened in Natal to impart the South Asian style of learning and, in these Darul Uloom, Urdu was highly valued. By the 1990s, there were five such seminaries in Natal, and one partisan of Urdu would write: ‘the majority of the Muslim community understands and speak [sic] Urdu. They maintain Urdu as their lingua franca ... and above all it is used for common communication when Muslims speaking different Indian dialects meet.’²³³ This, of course, is hyperbole, apart from being incorrect, because it ignores the Muslims of the Western Cape and the black Muslims in KwaZulu-Natal, but it does reflect a confidence in the position of the language. The numbers of students taking Arabic far surpassed those taking Urdu; in 1991, only 558 opted for the latter, while 5 667 took the former.²³⁴

The Circle had never been against Urdu. Its efforts were to popularise Arabic as the ‘language of the Qur’ān’ and, therefore, it wanted every Muslim to hold the language dear and to study it for no other reason than to understand the Qur’ān. Still, a degree of understanding could be attained through reading translations, and the Circle was quite adept at promoting translations, knowingly or unknowingly. This way of grasping at least the ‘spirit’ or ‘essence’ of the Qur’ānic message seems to have gradually become the preferred option. The Circle indeed

pioneered the study of the Qur'ān in translation, and the Muslim Youth Movement, through its *halaqāt* (study circles), took it much further. The study of Arabic – its grammar, morphology, syntax, dialectics, and rich ancient and contemporary literary traditions – stopped; yet such knowledge is essential to understanding the complex background to the Qur'ān and its multifarious commentaries.

Durban, South Africa and the world were changing. By 1980, Durban had 61 per cent of the national Indian population of just over 800 000. Indian Muslims now numbered 154 000. The African population of the city had also increased substantially. The Indian population was almost fully urbanised. Literacy and education levels had improved, and so had real income and employment through the halcyon days of the South African economy in the 1960s and early 1970s. The self-employed Gujarati Muslims were earning higher incomes than either their Urdu-speaking co-religionists or Indian non-Muslims. After 19 years, the University of Durban-Westville awarded more than 5 200 degrees by 1980. In 1981, 20 per cent of the undergraduates and 16 per cent of the postgraduates there were Muslim. Thus, there were many young Muslim men and women at university, although fewer than either the Hindus or Christians (in the case of postgraduate studies). It was estimated that 25 per cent of the students at the University of Natal Medical School were Muslim. Indian Muslims were also to be found at other universities in the Cape and Transvaal, usually in the medical or law faculties. As one study concluded with reference to the Muslims of Durban: 'The position of the Muslims in 1981 is ... certainly better than it was in the 1960s and 1970s.'²³⁵

In the 1970s, the old elite of Indian politics were in serious decline, given the repression and consequent departure of exiles during the 1960s. Among Indian students, the Black Consciousness movement won adherents and a few Indian student leaders became prominent spokespeople for Black Consciousness. African–Indian relations may have been on the mend but, once again, the links were largely between leaders. The hardening of the state practice of influx control and the continuing implementation of the Group Areas Act forced yet further separation between Africans and Indians. The structures created by the apartheid state to give Indians a semblance of democratic

participation in government were in place by the 1970s, but the impact of removals under the Group Areas Act caused a great deal of hardship and dislocation for families. In the new Indian townships, such as Chatsworth and Phoenix, a new set of social problems found fertile ground.

By the turn of the decade certain 'reforms' were proposed by the state, which included some form of recognition of African worker bodies and a limited amount of representative government. The 1983 elections for a so-called 'tricameral parliament' offered such a form of representation. Indians were to elect members to a 'House of Delegates', which was completely rejected. The announcement of these 'reforms' opened the doors for the re-emergence of populist politics which, together with worker militancy, eventually would be the major factors in the demise of the apartheid regime. In the process, the politics of Indian communities was altered. The Indian Congresses resurfaced with new energy and purpose, but so did the old 'collaborationist' parties. In similar fashion, Muslim communities were forced to make choices about the changing realities of South Africa. Since the Circle was not a political organisation, it never had to take a formal position on politics or the individual choices of its members, at least one of whom (Ismail Manjra) belonged to the famous writer Alan Paton's Liberal Party. He and Circle members were never persuaded by the rhetoric of the Natal Indian Congress, which they felt was too ethnic, directed at Indian issues only, despite its attempt to pursue 'non-racial' policies.²³⁶ In the course of all these changes, the Circle was not called upon to make decisions for 'the community'. The Muslim Youth Movement and newer groups that arose with specifically political agendas had eclipsed the Circle's position as a voice of authority and influence. The country was in the midst of change unlike that of any other period in the twentieth century.

The Circle, however, did not change. There was a distinct lack of transformation of the organisation. Dr Mall remained the president throughout its 50 years. According to IC Meer, a lifelong democrat, there was the appearance of a lack of internal democracy.²³⁷ Mall could easily be viewed as a petty dictator, were it not for his fellow Circle members who kept him on as the president. They were happy with

the situation, while they kept their respective positions. Although this comfortable consensus meant the easy operation of the organisation, it led to stagnation and an absence of innovation and fresh thought and people. From the available minutes of the biannual meetings, there is no sense or indication of periodic evaluation or assessment, neither of planning or goal setting. This was done to a certain degree in the early years, but then never again.

Furthermore, from the outside, many people had the impression that the Circle was a very closed group, and that there was 'rigidity in the people that were there'.²³⁸ In other words, they were closely bound together and inflexible about allowing in outsiders. The Circle was indeed a 'circle of friends', mostly from the same background; and they did meet regularly as friends. Bridge on a Sunday evening was a favourite pastime for many years when the men were younger, and at least two of them still played golf weekly in the late 1990s and into the new millennium. Closeness, intimacy, friendship, and the accompanying trust and faith, were important in sustaining the group, but bred an inwardness that blocked access for new men and women from different backgrounds and with other ideas.

The Circle represents a watershed in the twentieth-century history of South African Muslims. It was an elite grouping that clearly articulated a break with the hegemonic religious and cultural tendencies among Muslims. It may not have succeeded completely in its project, but it did put it firmly in the public consciousness. It stressed the necessity of taking South Africa's ambivalent modernity seriously and working with and through it instead of avoiding or denying it. While Urdu was stressed in certain sections of the country, the Circle went against the grain by emphasising Arabic as the language through which to understand the religious precepts and cultural histories of Islam. It favoured an intellectual appreciation of the complex civilisation of Islam and, in so doing, it actually also made the English language a means of communicating about Islam.

The Circle's enduring impact has been the way in which Arabic studies became integrated at all levels of the education system – formal and informal, secular and religious. This is undoubtedly its most overt success. Less conspicuously, but of vital significance, it introduced a

tradition of sophisticated conversation, debate and dissent. The Circle valued these elements of social interaction, which it saw as integral to the growth of Muslim communities. It was critical of the Muslim status quo, but it never adopted a mode of disruptive disputation and noisy protest against those it strongly disagreed with. It was criticised and strongly condemned from certain quarters for its work, but it never reacted in a way to silence its opposition. The Circle remained committed to unfolding its projects in civil society with perseverance and civility. More than fifty years since its founding, the surviving members can look back on this style of working as a lasting legacy. There is a lesson in it for those with more limited vision.

NOTES

A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

It has been extremely difficult to stick to a uniform system of transliteration, not least because multiple languages that do not employ the Latin script appear frequently in the text: Arabic, Urdu, Persian and Gujarati names and words came up constantly in the research. I have used the names of persons as they appeared in the primary sources; for example, Suleman remains unchanged even though a more exact transliteration of this Arabic name would be Sulaymān. Consequently, there is little consistency in the spelling of proper names, and the reader will encounter Syed, Sayed and Sayyid, all variations of the same name. The names of organisations also changed over time and appear in various spellings; thus, we have Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Natal, and later Jamiatul Ulama Natal. In most cases, I have relied on a slightly simplified version of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* system of transliteration.

- 1 From available evidence it would appear that Gujarati was about the third largest linguistic grouping among South African 'Indians' (see Mesthrie 1991: 15–18). In South Africa the category 'Indian' has to be problematised. It usually refers to the peoples who migrated from the western and southern parts of colonial India to South Africa, where they 'became Indian', not leaving behind all their local caste, linguistic and religious identities. In this book, however, I shall not be using inverted commas, except after an initial few uses, around the term, which should be seen as an identity constructed, negotiated and imagined in the historical frame and space that is modern South Africa, not modern India.
- 2 See Ebr.-Valley (2001: 155).
- 3 Ebr.-Valley (2001: 155).
- 4 See Mesthrie (2002: 339–355).
- 5 Most historical studies of twentieth-century South Africa provide details. See, for instance, Beinart (2001: 143–169).

- 6 This is not well-covered terrain for Natal, but for the Western Cape Muslim community, see Jeppie (1987).
- 7 Of Deoband, KA Nizami (2003) has written: ‘The system of instruction is traditional and the emphasis is more on building up a religious personality than on imparting knowledge with a view to fulfilling the requirements of the modern age.’ This could be a general comment on all the Muslim seminaries of South Asia.
- 8 On Fanakalo, see Adendorff (2002: 179–198). The principal of the *madrasah* in Newcastle published a Zulu translation of the Qur’ān.
- 9 Gilsenan (1982: 31).
- 10 There is a huge literature covering the issues mentioned in this sentence. For aspects of the milieu of South Asian *madrasahs*, Hanafi *fiqh* and Urdu, see Smith (1963), Metcalf (1982) and Robinson (2001). The Hanafi school of Islamic law is named after its founder Imām Abū Hanīfa who lived in Kūfa and died in Baghdad, Iraq in 767 AD.
- 11 On Christian National Education, see Kallaway (1984).
- 12 On statistics for this community, see the 2000 edition of the *Annual Review of Islam in South Africa* published by the Centre for Contemporary Islam at the University of Cape Town. The best place to start on the literature is Haron (1997).
- 13 See Shell (1974) and Jeppie (1996); see also various parts of Bickford-Smith (1995). Achmat Davids (1980, 1993) is a most important point of reference.
- 14 See lists of publications and research projects in process in various issues of the *Annual Review of Islam in South Africa*, See also Haron (1997).
- 15 On the Arabic–Afrikaans literature, see Davids (1993).
- 16 See Da Costa & Davids (1994).
- 17 As a beginning, see the essays in Mohamed (1997).
- 18 See the recent work of Goolam Vahed (1997, 2002).
- 19 Ebr.-Valley (2001) provides an overview of the historiography.
- 20 See references for details of works by Bill Freund (1995), Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie (2004) and Goolam Vahed (1997, 2001, 2002).
- 21 See Vahed (2001, 2002).
- 22 See, for instance, Comaroff & Comaroff (1991) and Chidester (1996).
- 23 See Bozzoli (1987).
- 24 Tayob (1995).
- 25 The report of Prof. Fatima Meer of her visit to Iran (Meer 1985) is a reflection of the enthusiasm for it in many sections of the South

- African Muslim community. Far more positive views were circulated in pamphlets and in community papers such as *Muslim News* and *Al-Qalam*. See also Jeppie (2002).
- 26 The literature on this subject is huge and continues to grow, but see Tayob (1995), Piscatori (1983) and Stowasser (1987).
- 27 See Kurzman (1998).
- 28 A view of the Islamic intellectual tradition and the need for reform that is in keeping with the Circle's sentiments is provided by Rahman (1982), especially in Chapters 3 and 4.
- 29 This is most clearly expressed in *al-Mujaddid (The Reformer)*, a publication issued by Circle members, discussed in Chapter 7.
- 30 See Rippin's (2003) short introduction to this topic.
- 31 Dessouki (1986).
- 32 See, for instance, Mitchell (1986).
- 33 See, for instance, Hourani (1962), Chapters 5–7, and Fakhry (1983), Chapter 12; on Sayyid Ahmad Khan, see Smith (1963) and Lelyveld (1996).
- 34 Taylor (1991: 40).
- 35 Bhabha (1995: 2).
- 36 On oral history in the South African context, see Bickford-Smith, et al. (2001).
- 37 Brijlal (1989).
- 38 See Pillay, et al. (1989).
- 39 On these movements, see Metcalf (1982) on the Deobandi, and Sanyal (1999) on the Barelvi.
- 40 For instance, the Madrasah Anjumna Islam Trust began its activities in 1917 as an offshoot of the West Street Mosque.
- 41 See Vahed (2001).
- 42 Arkin (1989).
- 43 Bramdaw (1935).
- 44 See Arkin (1986).
- 45 Bhana & Brain (1990).
- 46 See Mesthrie (1991) and Bhana & Brain (1990).
- 47 For example, the founder, Dr Daoud Mall, came from a family of northern Natal merchants that earned two entries in the *South African Indian Who's Who*; AM Bobat's father was one of the first Indian insurance brokers in the country; and the Mohamedys were traders.
- 48 Freund (1995: 72).

- 49 Davies & Rajah (1965).
- 50 On social arrangements, see Meer (1969), Chapters 5 and 6, and Rampal (1989).
- 51 See Mesthrie (1991).
- 52 The Mia Bhai are Indians with origins in the Gujrat region of India but who speak Urdu (rather than Surtee or Memon, for instance).
- 53 See, for instance, Alam (2004: 178–184).
- 54 Sham-e-Adab lectures, Durban. Buzme Adab of Natal 1977.
- 55 See Arkin (1989).
- 56 On the importation of Indian films into South Africa, see Jeppie (1990: 104–128).
- 57 Freund (1995: 10).
- 58 Swann (1987: 192).
- 59 See Meer (2002: 141–155).
- 60 See Mesthrie (1995).
- 61 Author interview with IC Meer.
- 62 Freund (1995).
- 63 See Meer (2002).
- 64 See Padayachee & Vawda (1999).
- 65 Gerdener, in Freund (1995).
- 66 On these movements, see Sooklal (1992) and Singh (1989).
- 67 On these organisations, see the Muslim Darul Yatama wal Masakeen's Diamond Jubilee Souvenir Brochure, 1994.
- 68 Women's Cultural Group brochure commemorating 35 years of community service, 1954–1989.
- 69 See Vahed (2002).
- 70 The Orient Islamic Institute and the Orient Islamic Educational Institute refers to the same organisation. Both names were used during the period covered by this work.
- 71 See the report on the arrival of Prof. Hussain and the purpose of his visit in *Indian Views*, 07.06.50.
- 72 Address by AM Moolla, Chairman, at the official opening of the Orient Islamic Educational Institute's Educational Centre at Curries Fountain, by the Administrator of Natal, AE Trollip, 30 April 1960.
- 73 Mahida (1993).
- 74 Naidoo (1989).
- 75 Oosthuizen, et al. (1981).

- 76 This is the translation of AJ Arberry (1955), but over the years, Mall would use many translations including Abdullah Yusuf Ali's (1944).
- 77 Author interview with Mall.
- 78 Mall, notes to author, 1998.
- 79 See Ali (1944). For important background and biographical details on Ali, see Sherif (1994).
- 80 See Sherif (1994).
- 81 Ballim, notes to author, 1997.
- 82 Author interview with Mall.
- 83 Author interview with Mall. (Mall's translation of the Arabic.)
- 84 Author interview with Mall.
- 85 *Annual Report* 1954/5.
- 86 *Annual Report* 1954/5.
- 87 Author interview with Mall.
- 88 Author interview with Mall.
- 89 Author interview with Mall. A *hafez/hāfith* (Urdu/Arabic) is someone who has memorised the whole Qur'ān, which can be divided for purposes of recitation into 30 roughly equal parts or *sipara* (Urdu, while the Arabic is *juz'/ajzā'*).
- 90 Author interview with Mall.
- 91 Author interview with Mall.
- 92 Author interview with Mall. This is very similar to the experience of other students, such as future African National Congress President OR Tambo (see Callinicos 2004: 99–133).
- 93 Author interview with Mall.
- 94 See Smith (1963: 367–372) on this movement and its offshoot, the Ahmadiyyah movement, and their missionary impulses.
- 95 Author interview with Mall.
- 96 Author interview with Mall.
- 97 Author interview with Mall.
- 98 Author interview with Mall.
- 99 Author interview with Mall.
- 100 Author interview with Mall.
- 101 Author interview with Mall.
- 102 Author interview with Mrs Zuleikha Mayat.
- 103 Report of the committee of the Arabic Study Circle presented to the 15th Biennial General Meeting, 29 April 1981. (Note that the AGMs had become biennial by this time.)

- 104 Author interview with Mall.
- 105 Author interview with Mall.
- 106 Author interview with Mall.
- 107 A *taweez* is an amulet produced by a religious figure learned in spiritual and occult matters.
- 108 Author interview with Mall.
- 109 *Apa* literally means ‘elder sister’ in Urdu, but is also used for a woman teacher of the basics of Islam to young children.
- 110 See Marsot (1986), Chapter 6.
- 111 The Orient Islamic Educational Institute, official opening brochure, 1960.
- 112 Extracts from the report were published in *al-Mujaddid* 2(2), February 1960.
- 113 See correspondence between Quraishi and Mall in ‘Circle papers’.
- 114 Dr Aziz was founder of the Union of Muslim Organisations of the United Kingdom.
- 115 See conference material in ‘Circle papers’.
- 116 *Annual Report* 1954/5.
- 117 Siddiqui (1931–1996) was then little known but became a well-known writer and speaker, with a devoted following among sections of Muslim youth in the West. He also had a handful of South African followers. At the time of his death, he was leading the ‘Muslim Parliament’ in the United Kingdom. See Siddiqui (n.d.).
- 118 Mall notes.
- 119 *Indian Views*, 19.02.54.
- 120 Author interview with Mall.
- 121 Only in 1967 was the first public library opened in an Indian residential area of Durban (see Armstrong 2000).
- 122 Al-Ansaar’s ‘Islamic library: Vision’ and ‘Memorandum of Agreement between Arabic Study Circle and the al-Ansaar Islamic Society’.
- 123 Report of the Committee of the Arabic Study Circle, presented at its 19th and 20th annual general meetings, 11 May 1971.
- 124 Mawlana Ansari was a highly respected leader in the Muslim community and authored numerous pamphlets on the basics of Islam. He barely spoke English and gave his lectures in Urdu. He died at the age of 83 in 1990.
- 125 *Al-Mujaddid* 1(1), January 1959.

- 126 For details on the history of Arabic language instruction in South Africa, see Mohamed (1997).
- 127 Mahida (1993: 73).
- 128 Handwritten copy of financial figures prepared for author by MA Mohamedy.
- 129 Kapliwatzky (1953).
- 130 See letter by al-Faruqi (dated 27 June 1972). Islamic studies file in 'Circle papers.'
- 131 See, for instance, al-Faruqi's (1983) programmatic statement, *Process of Islamization*.
- 132 Author interview with Mall.
- 133 Oosthuizen, et al. (1981: 32).
- 134 Oosthuizen et al. (1981: 35).
- 135 Oosthuizen et al. (1981: 124).
- 136 His most famous work is *Reconstruction of religious thought in Islam*. He is also the author of many collections of poetry.
- 137 Author interview with Prof. Salman Nadvi.
- 138 On the institutions and Sulayman Nadvi, see Gibb et al. (1960–2002).
- 139 Dangor completed all of his studies, including postgraduate, at the University of Durban-Westville. His PhD supervisor was Prof. SS Nadvi. Although his dissertation was on early Islamic history, his subsequent research and publications have largely concerned the history of Islam in South Africa, including important work of Shaykh Yusuf of Macassar.
- 140 *Annual Report 1954/5*.
- 141 *Circle report for December 1965–August 1967*.
- 142 A 13 CD set of his 1966 South African tour was released by *Par Excellence* in 2001.
- 143 Author interview with Deedat.
- 144 *Circle report for 1967 to May 1969*.
- 145 *Circle report to May 1969*.
- 146 Correspondence, al-Faruqi to Mall, 18 January 1972.
- 147 Correspondence, Quraishi to Mall, 10 July 1975.
- 148 Author of *Laws and principles of Quranic sociology*.
- 149 Author interview with Deedat.
- 150 Author interview with Mr Mohamed Makki.
- 151 Author interview with Mr 'Mike' Allie, a Capetonian muslim who met Perdu.

- 152 Author interview with Mr Ganief Allie, a Capetonian muslim who met Perdu.
- 153 Author interview with Mall.
- 154 Mall notes.
- 155 Author interview with Mall.
- 156 See *Annual Report* 1954/5.
- 157 Author interview with Manjra.
- 158 Author interview with Burke.
- 159 *Annual Report* 1954/5.
- 160 Author interview with Mall.
- 161 Statement of income and expenditure from January to June 1955, *Annual Report* 1954/5.
- 162 Information provided by Perdu's child, Nobel Perdu Honeyman, who was born in Durban. Email, 28 October 1998.
- 163 Author interview with Mall.
- 164 Report of the committee of the Arabic Study Circle, presented to the 19th and 20th Annual General Meeting, 11 May 1971.
- 165 Mall notes, 'public lectures'.
- 166 See Asad (1957) for further details.
- 167 See Asad (1980).
- 168 Author interview with Manjra.
- 169 Author interview with Manjra.
- 170 Author interview with Manjra.
- 171 Report to the Circle's 16th Annual General Meeting, 3 May 1967.
- 172 *The Message* (1976), produced and directed by Mustafa Akkad.
- 173 Foreword, to programme for *Judgement of the Lion: A play by William Branford*. Durban: Arabic Study Circle, 1958.
- 174 Foreword, to theatre programme for *Judgement of the Lion*.
- 175 Author interview with Branford, the Professor Emeritus at Rhodes–University, Grahamstown, 18 December 1998.
- 176 Asad (1957).
- 177 Report to the Circle's 16th Annual General Meeting, 3 May 1967.
- 178 Author interview with Manjra, and notes by Ballim to author.
- 179 Author interview with Manjra.
- 180 Author interview with Agjee.
- 181 Author interview with Agjee.
- 182 See list in *Views and News* 53(23): 27, 15 August 1968.
- 183 *Views and News* 53(23), 15 August 1968.

- 184 See Appendix, in Peerbhai (ed.) (n.d.).
- 185 Author interview with Joyce Honeyman, 4 February 1999. One report described him as 'Farhang Fazel, the son of Fazel Shirazi'. Information obtained by Houchang Cehabi in the United States, e-mailed to me on 27 November 2001.
- 186 Email communication from Nabil Perdu to author, 28 October 1998.
- 187 Author interview with Naomi Rasiet, a member of Cape Town's Baha'i community.
- 188 Author interview with Naomi Rasiet, and with Ishak Gallow.
- 189 Author interview with Mohamed 'Mike' Allie. An alternative view is that of Imam Ali Gierdien who says that the Azzavia's members were fully aware of Perdu's background. Gierdien email, 6 August 2005.
- 190 Author interview with Ganief Allie.
- 191 On Baha'ism, see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, and Eliade (1986).
- 192 See, for instance, MacEoin (1994).
- 193 Author interview with Geoff and Amy Marks, members of the Baha'i community in Cape Town.
- 194 Author interview with Michael Noor.
- 195 Letter by Shaykh Ganief, reproduced in Peerbhai (n.d. 48).
- 196 Johnson & Goodman (1992: 44)
- 197 *Indian Views*, 17 December 1952.
- 198 Author interview with Ismail Bawa.
- 199 Author interview with Mohamed Makki.
- 200 See short profile on Peerbhai, 'Adam Peerbhai: A luminary never fully appreciated', in *Muslim Views*, April 1999.
- 201 Foreword, in Peerbhai (n.d.).
- 202 Written information from Dr M Walker, Department of Mathematics, University of Cape Town, 16 November 1998.
- 203 Author interview with Mohamed Makki.
- 204 Author interview with Ismail Manjra.
- 205 *Al-Mujaddid* 1(3), March 1959.
- 206 Author interview with Abdullah Deedat.
- 207 *Al-Mujaddid* 1(1), January 1959.
- 208 *Al-Mujaddid* 3(1), January 1961.
- 209 *Al-Mujaddid* 1(5), May 1959.
- 210 *Al-Mujaddid* 1(6), June 1959.
- 211 *Al-Mujaddid* 1(10), October 1959.
- 212 *Al-Mujaddid* 2(6), June 1960.

- 213 This criticism of Deedat's work is a forerunner to later Muslim critiques of him. See, for instance, the article 'Saudi stooge Deedat escapes assault at meeting!' in *Crescent International*, August 1991. This was reproduced and circulated in South Africa.
- 214 *Al-Mujaddid* 3(1), January 1961.
- 215 *Al-Mujaddid* 2(1), January 1960.
- 216 See Tayob (1995).
- 217 Author interview with GH Agjee.
- 218 Author interview with GH Agjee. This Fairfax is referred to as Jack Elred Fairfax in an anti-Circle pamphlet issued by the *Muslim Digest* in November 1957. In this pamphlet, Fairfax was said to be collecting funds for *al-Mu'minun* in Stanger.
- 219 Author interview with GH Agjee.
- 220 Author interview with Abdullah Deedat.
- 221 Author interview with Ismail Manjra.
- 222 Author interview with Abdullah Deedat.
- 223 See Sadouni (2000).
- 224 See Maxwell, et al. (1995).
- 225 See Haq (1972). On aspects of the movement's South African history, see Moosa (1997).
- 226 Author interview with Advocate Abubakr Mohamed.
- 227 Argyle (1981).
- 228 Hey (1961: 49).
- 229 Author interview with Ebrahim Jadwat.
- 230 Author interview with Ebrahim Jadwat.
- 231 Author interview with Ebrahim Jadwat.
- 232 Author interview with Essop Timol.
- 233 Mahomed (1994).
- 234 Mahomed (1995).
- 235 Argyle (1981). The statistics on education in this paragraph are also taken from Argyle. For a slight revision of aspects of Argyle's argument, see Padayachee (1984).
- 236 Author interview with Ismail Manjra.
- 237 Meer (2002).
- 238 Author interview with Ebrahim Jadwat.

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UNPUBLISHED SOURCES

I cite a number of sources from the Circle's own remaining small collection. I was given access to several boxes of minutes, annual reports, correspondence and other unpublished materials by members of the Circle. These are all un-catalogued and remain un-archived. I have used various of these sources, referring to them in the Notes simply by title or as 'Circle papers'. In addition, I received comments from members of the Circle on earlier draft chapters and sometimes I was sent long essays, which I have also used and cited.

INTERVIEWS

Between May 1997 and December 1998, I interviewed in Durban: GH Agjee, AS Ballim, S Burke, AM Bobat, I Bawa, A Deedat, E Jadwat, M Makki, DS Mall, I Manjra, Z Mayat, AB Mohamed, MA Mohamedy, S Nadvi, I Meer, F Meer and IM Timol. Most of these interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

I also had unrecorded interviews and conversations, of which I kept written notes, with: G Ali, M Allie, W Branford, I Gallow, A Gierdien, J Honeyman, A Marks, J Marks, M Noor, N Perdu and N Rasiet.

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