

**Lived Islam in Bangladesh: Contemporary religious discourse
between Ahl-i-Hadith, 'Hanafis' and authoritative texts,
with special reference to *al-barzakh***

Matt D. Yarrington

Submitted in fulfilment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

In the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies,
The School of Literatures, Languages & Cultures

Ph.D.

University of Edinburgh

2010

This thesis has been solely composed by me and the work is my own. The work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Matt D. Yarrington
1 September, 2010

Abstract

Lived Islam in Bangladesh: Contemporary religious discourse between Ahl-i-Hadith, ‘Hanafis’ and authoritative texts, with special reference to *al-barzakh*

Contemporary north-west Bangladesh is the scene of a religious contest between the self-described ‘Hanafis’, who include various expressions of Islamic faith and practice, and Salafi reformist groups known as Ahl-i-Hadith. Occasionally labelled ‘Wahhabis’ due to their affinity with the doctrine from Arabia, the Ahl-i-Hadith actively seek to purify local Islam of all practices which they consider to be *bida*^c. Local Hanafi Muslims, who form a majority, are resistant to these efforts at total religious reform. This thesis investigates the contemporary discourse taking place between these two communities in Rajshahi, Bangladesh, and between these groups and their authoritative Islamic texts.

The case study used to focus on inter-group debates is the contested issue of whether or not to perform rituals meant to assist the dead during *al-barzakh* – the conscious waiting period in the grave believed to last from death until the day of resurrection. Especially during a soul’s first forty days in *al-barzakh*, the Hanafi community observes rituals intended to reduce the torment of the grave and send *so’ab*, or merit, to the account of the deceased.

Participant observation at numerous *milad*, *chollisha* and *khotom* ceremonies for the dead, as well as interviews with local ‘ulama’ and other informants highlight the progress of Ahl-i-Hadith reform efforts, but also the way in which Hanafi leaders defend and interpret their ‘unorthodox’ practices using authoritative Sunni hadith and Qur’anic passages. Additional Islamic texts which are locally influential are examined. Special voice is given to “what Muslims say” in an attempt to let the words and actions of those involved in the debates direct the research agenda as they interpret and defend their respective positions.

This thesis provides other researchers with a field-based account of contemporary Islamic belief and practice in Bangladesh – an understudied Islamic context containing over 150 million people. Dozens of quotations from ‘ulama’ are reproduced in the original Bengali and in English. Additionally, this study complicates Islamic fundamentalist and Western scholarly conceptions of ‘popular Islam’ and ‘syncretism’ by showing that Hanafi ‘ulama’ in Rajshahi explain their (contested) beliefs and activities *in Islamic terms*, using universally recognised Sunni sources of authority, especially the hadith literature.

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations.....	vii
Acknowledgements.....	viii
Notes on Transliteration and Translation	xii
Chapter 1 - Introduction.....	1
1.1 Research Problem.....	2
1.1.a Project.	2
1.1.b An inter-disciplinary text-and-practice study	5
1.1.c Islam as a discursive tradition.	6
1.1.d Limitations and boundaries.	9
1.1.e The case study: Two Islamic views on death-related rituals.....	11
1.1.f The need for this study.	15
1.2 Methodology	18
1.2.a Ethnographic research methods	18
1.2.b Geographical limitation.....	18
1.2.c Research design and data collection methods.....	19
1.3 Theoretical Orientation.....	30
1.3.a Death studies as a means of inquiry into religious knowledge.....	30
1.3.b Western approaches to the study of Islam in local contexts.....	34
1.3.c Islam as discursive tradition elaborated.....	40
1.4 Chapter Plan	44
Chapter 2 – Religious Knowledge in Rajshahi.....	47
2.1 The research context: Rajshahi, Bangladesh	49
2.2 The Hanafi religious landscape	62
2.3 General characteristics of South Asian Islamic reform	65
2.4 Islamic reform movements impacting on Bengal	73
2.5 The Ahl-i-Hadith.....	80
2.6 Print proliferation in reformist movements.....	89
2.7 Authoritative texts in Rajshahi.....	93

Chapter 3 – Death Above Ground - community rituals during <i>al-barzakh</i>	103
3.1 Preparation of the soul before death	105
3.2 Death, <i>gosol</i>, and preparation of body	109
3.3 <i>Khotom</i>: Preparation of the soul by the community	114
3.4 <i>Bokshano</i>: Transferring merit to the account of the deceased	119
3.5 <i>Janaza Namaz</i>: The funeral prayer	123
3.6 Burial	128
3.7 <i>Milads</i>: Continuing to benefit the dead	132
3.8 <i>Ziarod kora</i>: Regular visitation of graves	142
3.9 Expressing grief	142
Chapter 4 – Death Below Ground - <i>al-barzakh</i> in the local understanding	149
4.1 <i>Barzakh</i>	151
4.2 Ordering the events of the grave - sources	153
4.3 Indications of consciousness in the grave	156
4.4 Removal of the soul from the body	159
4.5 The soul’s journey to the seven heavens and back to the body	167
4.6 The angel Ruman	170
4.7 Interrogation by Munkar and Nakir	172
4.8 The trial of the grave	175
4.9 The states of the grave	179
Chapter 5 – Assisting the Dead in Rajshahi	184
5.1 <i>So’ab</i> management in hadith thought	187
5.2 Assisting the dead in <i>al-barzakh</i>	195
5.3 Key example I: Speaking well of the dead	202
5.4 Key example II: Large numbers at the funeral prayer	209
Chapter 6 – Evaluations and Direction for Further Research.....	220
6.1 The sliding scale of reform	223
6.2 Local reform and global Salafism	236
Bibliography	243

List of Illustrations

Maps

2.1 Bangladesh	49
2.2 Rajshahi District with City	55

Tables

1.1 Interview Structure and Questions	25
2.1 Authoritative hadith compendia	99
3.1 Spectrum of local attitudes: <i>khotom</i> , <i>milad</i> , <i>bokshano</i>	148
4.1 Class five textbook – questions and answers in the grave	174

Photos

1. Shops near a residential neighbourhood in Rajshahi	53
2. Shaheb Bazar, downtown Rajshahi	57
3. <i>Khatia</i> (bier)	113
4. <i>Khotom</i> ceremony	116
5. Gravesite	129
6. <i>Milad</i> notices	141
7. Funeral procession	170
8. Hanafi mosque	196

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the faculty and staff in the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Edinburgh, where this thesis was undertaken. A generous studentship from the College of Humanities and Social Science, in addition to an Overseas Research Students award, allowed me to focus my time on research and writing in Edinburgh, in Bangladesh, and at the libraries at Yale University where I finished the writing phase.

In Bangladesh, the faculty, staff, and students of the Folklore Department at Rajshahi University patiently accepted me during my study there. Five separate ethnographic research excursions with the faculty and students to different parts of Bangladesh, each lasting two weeks, are forever etched into my consciousness. I especially thank Founding Chairman Professor Abdul Jalil, Professor Abul Hasan Chowdhury and Uday Shanker Biswas, my friend and classmate who is now a lecturer in the department.

Many other professors and friends should be thanked here. Professor Mahbubar Rahman, Professor of History at Rajshahi University and the founding director of Heritage Archives, was always generous with his time, providing numerous insights into the Islamic context and history of Rajshahi, for which I am indebted. Professor (Emeritus) Samsul Alam greatly aided my study of Bangladeshi Ahl-i-Hadith movements, directed me to important textual resources, and helped to open doors for me to visit with other Salafi scholars. ‘Uncle’ Eneyet °Ali, a respected leader in the neighbourhood where I lived, took me ‘by the hand’ to various mosques and instructed them to cooperate with me. I could not have achieved the same depth of exchange with local °ulama’ without his sponsorship.

Other imams and °ulama’ at numerous mosques and madrasas of Rajshahi extended warm-hearted hospitality. I wish to thank them for not only making me feel welcome, but for the many contributions of their knowledge of Islam, which I hope are conspicuous in the pages of this book. I thank other friends in Rajshahi for the many discussions we enjoyed

while drinking chai, and for the encouragement they gave me during the time of this research. Among these friends are Sheik Kamal Sumon, Jacob Thomas, Shahidur Rahman, Morshed Likhan and Md. Obaidul Muktadir.

Segments of the research on which this thesis is based were presented at conferences and lectures at the University of Edinburgh, at Yale University, and at the Society for Arabian Studies' conference in 2008 at the British Museum, London. I am grateful to the organizers of these conferences and lectures for the opportunities to discuss my work, and to the participants for their insightful comments and questions.

If I had only been allowed to take one or two courses with Professor Carole Hillenbrand (which I did), or if I had only rubbed shoulders with her at a department reception, I would have considered myself lucky, and would have been able to brag to my friends that I had met such a scholar. Instead, I have enjoyed four years of interaction and mentoring from Carole as my supervisor for this project. Neither being effusively American and 'gushing' about her, nor being understatedly British and saying too little will do. Her interests are broad-ranging – this is the third PhD thesis she has supervised on Islam in the Bengal region – extending far beyond her well-known achievements centring on Islamic medieval political thought, the work of al-Ghazali, the Crusades, Persian and Arabic travel accounts, the Turkish language and Seljuq history, and more. I have been the recipient of her attentiveness, her deft criticism and intellectual support, and also the encouraging word and warm-hearted kindness that are indicative of her character. I can only assume that her other fifty-six PhD advisees (a record?) have been as blessed as I have been. Thank you, Carole.

Others in Edinburgh made important contributions to this project. I thank Andrew Newman, my second supervisor, for helping convince me to take up studies at Edinburgh, and for guiding me through the first year of my work. David and Janice Anderson, David and

Ida Coffey (now at Oxford), and Chris Stewart all significantly encouraged my progress in various ways.

My wife Melissa Yarrington has been my constant companion and supporter throughout this project. While I was writing up this thesis, we lived for two years in New Haven, Connecticut, where Melissa was a Research Fellow at Yale University. Her fluent Bengali and long experience in the Bangladeshi context allowed her to participate with my work at an extraordinary level. She always found time to read chapters and sections when I asked, and provided many helpful suggestions as the research developed. This thesis is better than it would have been without her contributions.

Others at Yale contributed to this research. I thank John Hartley for discussions about Persian religious terms and their use in the Bengali context; and Yasir Qadhi, Joseph Cumming and Noah Salomon, each of whom provided valuable insights about global Salafism's divergent expressions in the Middle East, Africa and the West. All photographs in this thesis were contributed by the author unless otherwise noted. Mistakes which remain are, of course, all mine as well.

Matt Yarrington

1 May, 2010
Edinburgh,
Scotland

Notes on Transliteration and Translation

All translated portions from Bengali to English in this thesis are mine unless otherwise noted. In transliteration of Bengali terms into English, I have used my own system based on the modern Bengali pronunciation, rather than the conventional Sanskrit-based system. Bengali terms are italicised, but no attempt is made to differentiate retroflex consonants (ড, ঢ, ট, ঠ) from dental consonants (দ, ধ, ত, থ), or indeed to distinguish between the three ‘S’s (স, শ, ষ). The inherent vowel অ is always rendered with the English ‘o’, as in *shomaj* or *odhikar*. All other transliteration choices have followed this simple arrangement. Alternate English spellings of important Bengali terms (*samaj*) are noted in the footnotes to connect readers with related research.

Since the goals of this thesis do not include teaching readers to speak the Bengali language, I have opted for a transliteration system which focuses attention on research and analysis, while at the same time helping readers approximate correct Bengali pronunciation. For scholars who read Bengali, the original Bengali spellings of terms are provided in the footnotes when they are introduced. Similarly, Bengali readers will benefit from footnotes providing original quotations and local Bengali usages. Exceptions to this transliteration system are preserved in quotations from other scholars that use Bengali terms according to their own conventions, and in proper names of well-known figures or Bengali authors, whose personal choice of English spelling of their name could be determined.

Written Bengali is a phonetic script descended from Sanskrit. The modern spoken language has borrowed extensively from Arabic, Persian, Hindi, Urdu, and Assamese. Cognates from these languages are a regular part of daily speech in Bangladesh. In most cases borrowed terms are pronounced with local pronunciations, and in quite a number of instances, the way that these terms are used and understood has taken on a meaning in the local context that is distinct from their usage in the original language. In cases where the modern Bengali usage of a cognate varies significantly from its meaning in Arabic or Persian, discussion is provided in the relevant footnotes.

Arabic terms discussed in this thesis retain the *°ayn* and *hamza*, but do not retain other diacritical marks. Arabic terms that do not appear in the Oxford English Dictionary are italicised. However, certain well-known personal and place-names have not been italicised; for example, Qur’an and Ka’ba. The ‘s’ is used to denote plurals of most Arabic words (i.e., *muhajirs*), rather than their Arabic plural forms. Unless otherwise noted, Qur’anic passages in this thesis are taken from *The Qur’ān: Arabic text with corresponding English meanings* (Riyadh: Saḥeeḥ International/Abulqasim Publishing House, 1997). The *Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, edited by J. M. Cowan, was occasionally consulted without citation to comment on Arabic roots of Bengali cognates.

Abbreviations

BP	Banglapedia (Dhaka: Asiatic Society, 2002)
EQ	Encyclopedia of the Qur’an (Leiden: Brill, 2001-2006)
EI ²	Encyclopedia of Islam, 2 nd Edition (Leiden: Brill, 1954-2008)
EI ³	Encyclopedia of Islam, 3 rd Edition (Leiden: Brill, 2010)
ER ²	Encyclopedia of Religion, 2 nd Edition (Lindsay Jones, Ed., New York: Thomson Gale, 2005)
KJ	<i>Kitab al-jana’iz</i> , <i>Abwab al-jana’iz</i> , or <i>Ahkam al-mayyit</i> (chapters of hadith collections treating death rituals and funeral procedures)

For Richard and Eva Ludden

Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 Research Problem

1.1.a Project. This project investigates the contemporary discourse between the two most prominent groups of Muslims living in Rajshahi, Bangladesh,¹ and between these groups and their authoritative Islamic texts. The case study used to illuminate ongoing religious debates between the communities is the much discussed matter of death-related rituals, which are performed during the forty days following an individual's death. This forty day period corresponds in the understanding of the community with *al-barzakh*, or the term of conscious punishment or reward being experienced by the deceased in the grave itself.

The question of whether or not the community can assist the soul of the deceased during *al-barzakh* is a focus of inter-group contestation. Both groups studied, the 'Hanafi traditionalists' and the 'Ahl-i-Hadith reformists',² utilise the same set of authoritative Islamic scriptures, but variously interpret the sources to reinforce their respective practices and group identities. 'Ahl-i-Hadith reformists' attempt to embody and spread their vision of pure, original Islam, and use Islamic scriptures to argue that the traditional practices of the majority Hanafis are *bida*^c, or impious innovations. The 'Hanafi traditionalists' defend their centuries-old practices as being Islamically derived and based on the same Qur³an and canonical hadith collections used by the Ahl-i-Hadith. This thesis examines how the reformists and traditionalists alike use and interpret the authoritative sources of Islamic knowledge for

¹ Rajshahi is one of six *divisions* in Bangladesh. It is also the name of a *district* within Rajshahi division. And finally, it is the name of the main *city* in Rajshahi district, referred to as Rajshahi Town. Bangladesh is the name of the sovereign state created at the end of the Pakistani civil war in December, 1971, and is the same as the former territory of East Pakistan. 'Bangla' is the name of the language spoken in Bangladesh, and 'desh' means 'land'. So, the name of the country literally means 'land of the Bangla language.' The language of the country (Bangla) is known as 'Bengali' in English. 'Bengali' is also used to refer to the ethnic identity of those who claim it, which is approximately 98% of the citizens of Bangladesh, and another more than 90 million citizens of West Bengal, the state in India which borders on Bangladesh's western border (Calcutta is the capital city of West Bengal). Where the word 'Bengal' is used in this study, it denotes the areas now included in Bangladesh and West Bengal (India), which in the past were not always divided into separate polities.

² Rajshahi Muslims themselves use these ubiquitous categories ('Hanafi' and 'Ahl-i-Hadith') as self-descriptors and as a means to describe the two major modes of local Islamic practice. In Chapter Two these and related terms are examined with reference to their contextual associations in north-west Bangladesh.

contesting the practices of the other and training the younger generations of scholars and lay Muslims.

By focusing on contemporary Muslim debates about Islamic ritual practice, the present study addresses an important facet of cultural and religious knowledge which has been too often neglected by scholars. On the one hand, anthropologists and students of Islamic Studies working in various Muslim contexts have tended to avoid Islamic community rituals, such as the ritual prayer, fasting, circumcision and Islamic death practices, viewing these rituals as related to universal scriptural mandates of Islam and not produced by the agency of local cultures (and therefore not a means of investigating local cultures).³ On the other hand, where scholars have encountered ‘popular’ Islamic practices which differ from certain well-known standards expressed by centres of Islamic learning, they have interpreted these practices as ‘syncretism’ rooted in the local culture and not authentically Islamic.⁴ This inadequate assertion, usually advanced by outsiders to the traditional Islamic contexts being studied, agrees with the opinion of many Islamist groups and Islamic reform movements,⁵ who actively promote their versions of ‘pure’ Islam among and within their own ethnic and regional groups.

³ According to Bowen, “Anthropologists have preferred distinctively local elements—marabouts, mullahs, or meditation—to those ritual and scriptural forms that most explicitly link Muslims across societal boundaries.” John R. Bowen, ‘On Scriptural Essentialism and Ritual Variation: Muslim Sacrifice in Sumatra and Morocco’, *American Ethnologist* 19(4) (1992), 656-671 (656).

⁴ When it comes to South Asia, some anthropologists, and notably Imtiaz Ahmad, seem to celebrate Islamic syncretism in India and promote the view of Sufi shrines and cults as the authentic expression of Islam in South Asia. See Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld, eds., *Lived Islam in South Asia: adaptation, accommodation & conflict* (Delhi: Social Science Press, 2004), xxii-xxiii. These same scholars tend to gloss South Asian Islamic reform movements as ‘un-Indian’, and as intrusions ‘from the outside’. This type of scholarship can be dangerous if it strengthens the hand of *Hindutva* extremist rhetoric in India, potentially increasing community strife and persecution of whole sections of society. Osella and Osella note a “fondness for Sufism and a distaste for reformism” in South Asian anthropology studies. See Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, ‘Islamism and social reform in Kerala, South India’, in *Modern Asian Studies*, 42, 2/3 (2008), 317-346 (318).

⁵ The term Islamist refers in this thesis to Islamic movements or programmes which include the goal of bringing the state apparatus under an Islamic religious system. The category Islamic reformist, as discussed at length in Chapter Two, refers to all Muslim groups, individuals and theories which aim to re-organise Muslim life according to a ‘purist’ vision of the original, pristine Islam of the first Islamic period. Reformist efforts can include the Islamist goal of bringing the political system under religious control, but there are also many reformist efforts in South Asia which do not include this element, making the term Islamist inappropriate for these groups and individuals.

This project allows the reader to listen to actual statements of reforming zeal by the Salafi-minded⁶ Ahl-i-Hadith of Rajshahi who see the practices of the majority of the region's Muslims as un-Islamic, 'Indian', and 'Hindu' accretions to pure Islam. It also allows the reader to reflect on the ways these reformers use and interpret the authoritative sources of Islamic knowledge, especially the hadith. But what is perhaps more unexpected is the response of the majority Hanafi 'ulama' of Rajshahi, who explain and defend their (contested) religious beliefs and practices *in Islamic terms*, using authoritative, recognised hadith. Hanafi religious leaders reject the assertion that their Islamic practices are locally derived additions to Islam with roots in the local culture and history. They expertly handle the same hadith literature held to be authoritative by the Ahl-i-Hadith reformists in defence and explanation of their activities.

Given the religious debate current in Rajshahi between these two groups, and given the unique access to this debate which this author has been given, this project will seek to understand how this religious discourse is conducted in the Rajshahi context. It will also address how each side relates its understanding of Islam and its positions on beliefs and practices to the authoritative sources of the Qur'an, hadith literature, and certain other locally emphasised sources of authority. Special voice is given to "what Muslims say" in an attempt to let the words and actions of ordinary 'ulama' and a broader cross-section of informants in Rajshahi lead in the expression and interpretation of their own religious faith.⁷ It is believed

⁶ Ahl-i-Hadith leaders self-describe their movement as a Salafi movement, and use this word in the names of mosques, madrasas and even personal names. The modern Ahl-i-Hadith identification with Salafiyya is meant to connect the movement with the legacy and writings of Ibn Taymiyya, as well as the parallel movements (Wahhabism) inspired by his anti-rationalist and literalist approach. The Ahl-i-Hadith use of the term Salafi should not be conflated with the movement of the same name from the late 19th century, the reason-oriented and modernizing tendency associated with the writings of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) and the early writings of Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1935). For more on this important distinction, see Roel Meijer, *Global Salafism: Islam's new religious movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 34, 45; and Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in modern Islamic thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 149, n. 31.

⁷ William Roff is just one of a number of scholars to highlight the value of this approach, which, under the best circumstances provides the learner with access to "a dialectic accessible through, and only through, what the natives say." William R. Roff, 'Islamic movements: one or many?', in *Islam and the political economy of*

by the present author that when the research agenda is directly influenced by the issues which the informants and practitioners themselves find urgent and salient, then the fruit of the research and analysis will be more relevant and interesting. In fact, listening to “what Muslims say” in Rajshahi originally alerted the author to the community’s emphasis on religious debate and specifically the case study of community death practices and beliefs about *al-barzakh*.

Along these lines, this project will seek to demonstrate that, contrary to reformist claims and certain anthropological biases, Hanafi majority Muslims in Rajshahi explain all of their beliefs and activities *in Islamic terms*, using universally recognised Sunni sources of authority, especially the hadith literature. What is more, this thesis will demonstrate that virtually all of the practices condemned as innovations (*bida‘*) by the Ahl-i-Hadith of Rajshahi are in fact part of a wider global Islamic practice which flourishes from North Africa, through the Middle East, and all the way to the Malay peninsula and Indonesia. This comparative dimension of the research will be aided by published scholarly studies from throughout the Muslim world.

1.1.b An inter-disciplinary text-and-practice study. This project follows similar efforts by scholars working in other Islamic contexts, within several disciplines and across disciplines, to combine an understanding of local Muslim practice and its intersection with universal Sunni Islamic texts. It investigates “what Muslims say” as they interpret authoritative texts, relate those texts to vital questions of doctrine and ritual practice, and negotiate identities in relation to other Muslim groups. A number of individuals working in

meaning, ed. William R. Roff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 46. Also exemplary in this methodological approach is Daniel Brown, whose research in Pakistan and Egypt takes 1) only the most frequently occurring local discourses about the sunna by Muslims and, 2) only the religious publications that elicit a great number of responses in print and other media, as his bases for analysis of contemporary trends in ‘authority’ in Islamic traditions. Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 5.

diverse regions have successfully combined studies of “lived Islam” with studies of how authoritative texts are used in such contexts, or the intersection of textual and locally understood Islam. John Bowen has respectfully pursued this question among the Gayo Muslims in the highlands of Aceh in Java, Indonesia, for many years, and his reproduction and analysis of their speech acts, their understanding and use of Islamic scriptures, and the vitally important discourse and debates happening in Gayo society at the local and individual level is one example of this text-and-practice approach.⁸ Along with Bowen, others have pursued similarly creative endeavours in other Islamic contexts, notably Dale Eickelman⁹, Maimuna Huq¹⁰, Marion Holmes Katz¹¹, Magnus Marsden¹², Mark Woodward¹³, Michael Fischer and Mehdi Abedi¹⁴, and William Roff¹⁵, to name just a few.

1.1.c Islam as a discursive tradition. As is discussed in detail below, this thesis understands local variations in Islamic belief and practice according to the notion offered by Talal Asad of a “discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur’an and the hadith.”¹⁶ Asad and others elaborated a system for understanding diverse Islamic expressions as the process of local communities with local histories and contexts

⁸ See John R. Bowen, *Muslims through discourse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); ‘Death and the history of Islam in highland Aceh’, *Indonesia*, 38 (1984), 21-38; ‘On Scriptural Essentialism and Ritual Variation: Muslim Sacrifice in Sumatra and Morocco.’ *American Ethnologist* 19 (4): 656-671; ‘Elaborating Scriptures: Cain and Abel in Gayo Society.’ *Man* (NS) 27 (3): 495-516.

⁹ Dale F. Eickelman, ‘National identity and religious discourse in contemporary Oman’, in *International Journal of Islamic and Arabic Studies*, 6(1989), 1-20.

¹⁰ Maimuna Huq, ‘Reading the Qur’an in Bangladesh: the politics of ‘belief’ among Islamist women’, in *Modern Asian Studies*, 42, 2/3 (2008), 457-488.

¹¹ Marion Holmes Katz, ‘Women’s *mawlid* performances in Sanaa and the construction of “popular Islam”’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 40(2008), 467-484.

¹² Magnus Marsden, *Living Islam: Muslim religious experience in Pakistan’s North-West Frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹³ Mark R. Woodward, ‘The *slametan*: textual knowledge and ritual performance in central Javanese Islam’, *History of Religions*, 28:1 (1988), 54-89.

¹⁴ Michael Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, *Debating Muslims: cultural dialogues in tradition and postmodernity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

¹⁵ William R. Roff, ‘Whence cometh the Law? Dog saliva in Kelantan, 1937’, in *Shari’at and ambiguity in South Asian Islam*, ed. Katherine P. Ewing (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); and William Roff, ‘Islamic movements’.

¹⁶ Talal Asad, ‘The idea of an anthropology of Islam’, in *Occasional Papers Series* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1986), 14.

attempting to be faithful to the universal texts and prescriptions of Islam. While the result contains great variation, the focus is not on judging which expression of Islam is more authentic or orthodox; rather it is on listening to the process (the discourse) of how texts are used to negotiate faith, ritual and practice in community with others.¹⁷

Following the discourse approach, this thesis does not attempt to construct a *theory* for understanding diverse expressions of Islam – rather, it is employing a *method* of interpretation.¹⁸ The method used here is to listen to the Bengali Muslims of Rajshahi themselves, to record and consider their speech in relation to their beliefs, rituals, and sources of authoritative prescriptions. Exploring the dialectic that emerges as local Muslims interact with their texts and with opposing groups is the means for understanding how local groups in this area negotiate, produce, maintain and defend legitimate (though diverse) expressions of Islam which are related by the participants in each case to authoritative sources.

One of the most fruitful sources of understanding for the outside observer of such discourses is contemporary debates about religious practices. In his detailed account and analysis of contemporary Gayo Muslim discourses in Indonesia, John Bowen reproduces an archetypal argument which he personally heard between two local informants – one a strict reformist, and the other a traditionalist. During part of their argument about the ‘Islamic-ness’ of performing the *talqin*, a ritual ‘coaching’ of the dead corpse on how to answer the

¹⁷Along these lines anthropologist John Bowen, studying Islamic traditions in the Gayo highlands of Aceh, Java, places his focus on “the field of debate and discussion in which participants construct discursive linkages to texts, phrases, and ideas held to be part of the universal tradition of Islam. I am interested less in the overall cultural style (Geertz 1968) than I am in the *dīn* (religion) that emerges from the arguments.” See Bowen, *Muslims through discourse*, 8.

¹⁸William Roff insists on listening to and interpreting the statements of informants as a prerequisite to constructing any theories of religion in the introduction to his edited *Islam and the Political Economy of Meaning*: “[W]e are more concerned to practice interpretation than to elaborate theory. It is sometimes argued that theory must precede practice. ...it would be as curious to expect the practice of interpretation to be preceded by a theory of interpretation as to expect the lived life to be preceded by the examined life. The two must, indeed, proceed hand in hand, or perhaps more exactly dialectically...” See William R. Roff, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, in *Islam and the political economy of meaning*, ed. William R. Roff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 2-3.

interrogating angels in the grave, both men argued from the same authoritative scriptural sources for their respective doctrinal positions:

[Reformist:] “But there are others who refuse to change. They say that a practice has become part of local norms [*‘ädēt*], even when you show them that there are more scriptural proofs for changing—twelve against six, for example. It is clear in such cases: you should choose the [position backed by the] twelve.”

[Traditionalist:] “It is not just a claim about *‘ädēt*,” said Asyin. “They have their own proofs too, and they say that it is twelve to six for them. For the catechism [*talqin*] there is a reliable [hadith] that the prophet said you should ‘teach a person from the cradle to the grave.’ So people recite the words of the call to prayer into their newborn child’s ear, and they say the catechism to the dead...”¹⁹

Despite one of the two men representing the traditional group in Indonesia that strives to keep the centuries-old (*bid‘ati*, in the reformist’s eyes) Islamic practices and customs alive, “both men continually strove to occupy the high ground of scripture and to avoid any other rhetorical foundations.”²⁰ The Acehnese example is equally applicable to contemporary religious discourses in Rajshahi, Bangladesh, where both the ‘liberal’ Hanafis and the ‘conservative’ Ahl-i-Hadith groups strive to promote their positions based upon the same authoritative Sunni collection of hadith and scriptural sources.

Internal debates within Muslim communities (and within other world religions), rather than representing a ‘tradition in crisis’ or internal weakness, are a normal by-product of religious discourses, as local believers seek to apply scriptural commands and the universal prescriptions of Islam to their own local histories and cultures.²¹ The value of listening to and understanding these local Islamic debates has been recognised by scholars in recent decades seeking to understand how communities interpret their own identities in relation to society, their histories and their scriptures.²²

¹⁹ Bowen, *Muslims through discourse*, 18-19.

²⁰ Bowen, *Muslims through discourse*, 26.

²¹ Talal Asad discusses the historical and philosophical roots of this notion in Talal Asad ‘The idea’, 16.

²² On the value of listening to local Islamic debates, see Asad, *The Idea*; Dale F. Eickelman, ‘National identity and religious discourse’, 1-20; Michael Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, *Debating Muslims*; Michael Gilson, *Recognizing Islam: Religion and society in the modern Middle East* (London: Croom Helm, 1982); Serif Mardin, *Religion and social change in modern Turkey* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989);

Local religious debates have been present in South Asian Islamic contexts probably since Islam's arrival there, and have been documented for more than a hundred years.²³ Not only are religious traditions and practices debated from house to house and at tea stalls and between women washing clothes at the nearby pond – they are also debated in public forums.

Multi-day *waz mahfil* (preaching gatherings/camp meetings) in every city of Muslim Bengal have been the setting of fervently expressed polemical treatises on the rightness or wrongness of traditional religious practices. Specially organised *bahas*, or publically staged debates between two opposing imams or scholars, were organised in the early 20th century in Bengal to debate points of religious doctrine. Public *bahas* have continued in some areas right up to the present time, though these are becoming more rare.²⁴ These public debates, if nothing else, provide a visible indicator of the underlying and pervasive religious discourse which is salient in contemporary Bangladeshi Islam.

1.1.d Limitations and boundaries. Although tools from ethnographic research are used extensively in this project, it is not an 'ethnography' in the classic sense of a complete portrayal of a society's social norms and customs. Rather, I use these tools for more narrow aims, specifically to illuminate the contemporary discourse between 'Hanafis' and Ahl-i-Hadith groups in the Rajshahi urban environment. During extended periods of field research in Bangladesh between 1999 and 2008, I used participant observation at religious ceremonies and ethnographic interviews of 'ulama' and other local practitioners to collect data. These

Usha Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and his movement, 1870-1920* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

²³ For example, Arshad Alam reports that between 1934-1936 the whole town of Mubarakpur, Uttar Pradesh in north India was swept up in a series of oral religious debates locally called *munazaras*. The debates in Mubarakpur were between the Barelwis, 'traditionalists' who cherish customs of visiting shrines and *pir* veneration, and the Deobandis, 'reformists' seeking to rid Islam of locally derived *shirk* and *bida'*. Both sides claimed victory. Arshad Alam, 'The enemy within: madrasa and Muslim identity in North India', in *Modern Asian Studies*, 42, 2/3 (2008), 605-627 (611).

²⁴ Through Heritage Archives, a private collection in Rajshahi, I photocopied numerous original manuscripts of 1920s and 1930s editions of a Bengali language periodical called *Ahl-i-Hadith*. These manuscripts include detailed reports on local *bahas* in that period, which are treated at more length in this study.

interviews and outings do not take into account more than six years of actual time living in Bengali Muslim neighbourhoods of Bangladesh, where I regularly participated in the life cycle events of colleagues, neighbours, and their families. This thesis draws heavily on these former experiences, as well as on visits to mosques and madrasas for the present project, and in particular, on recorded interviews with ‘ulama’.

This project is not a study of ‘the afterlife’ in Islam, and does not treat issues related to the eschaton, such as Islamic beliefs about the future resurrection, the day of judgment, and the extensive body of religious knowledge related to Paradise and Hell. Local Bangladeshi views and Islamic literature related to *al-barzakh*, or the period between death and resurrection, is dealt with at length in Chapters Three and Four, because this period corresponds in the local understanding with the complex of community rituals performed ‘Above Ground’ by well-wishers and loved ones, in hope of affecting the state of the deceased. It is this complex of ritual practices and beliefs, and the disagreements concerning them, that provides the rich case study for accessing the underlying discourse taking place between traditionalists and reformists in Bangladesh.

Although this research looks at how specific Qur’anic and hadith passages are used in the Bangladeshi context, it is not a textual study of classical Arabic texts; rather, it is an investigation into the way Rajshahi religious scholars use these texts in local discourse, most often in the local Bengali vernacular. The focus is squarely on what local ‘ulama’ say about these texts, and how they use them in teaching and debate with rival groups. This study is *not* primarily interested in how early and medieval interpreters and jurists used or understood these hadith and Qur’anic passages. Rather, it seeks to illuminate how present day Ahl-i-Hadith reformists, who claim to disregard even the orthodox schools of *fiqh* in favour of direct recourse to the Qur’an and sunna, interpret and interact with the texts, especially as they seek to influence traditionalist Hanafis. Equally, it demonstrates how traditionalist

Hanafis in Rajshahi interact with authoritative texts to defend and promote their own understanding of correct Islam, in this case, their understanding of proper Islamic funerary rituals. It follows that there is no attempt to make theological²⁵ judgments about whether each group interprets each scripture ‘correctly’ according to any particular interpretation of Islam.

1.1.e The case study: Two Islamic views on death-related rituals. In the most densely populated country on the planet, and in an urban part of that country, death is not a rare event.²⁶ In densely packed neighbourhoods, encountering death is a near daily experience, and due to the collectivist nature of Bangladeshi society, people tend to know more people in general than the average Westerner, extending their awareness of families who have suffered a loss. Added to this is the reality that life in Bangladesh, for men, is an outdoor affair. After work hours (for those who have work), men spend time at outdoor tea stalls or strolling and talking, rather than relaxing indoors. Most families’ homes are too small and cramped to offer more than a shelter for eating and sleeping. In this particular Islamic society, women spend their days within the house or the courtyard in front of the house, and within certain prescribed areas in the densely organised immediate neighbourhood. But the place of men is definitely outdoors and generally beyond the confines of the immediate home. Simply by being outside and interacting socially for a large part of every day, men in Rajshahi are more likely to catch the local news of a neighbour’s death – and the numerous ceremonies that will be planned in the aftermath of each death.²⁷ In short,

²⁵ The term ‘theology’ is used throughout this thesis in a general sense, as in, relating to the study of God or the study of religious faith. At no time in this thesis is ‘theology’ or ‘theological’ intended to call to mind the rational theological system (*kalam*) espoused by the *mutakallimun*, which had its origin in the second Islamic century.

²⁶ Population density for the whole country of Bangladesh is 2805 people per square mile, with an estimated 156 million people in 55,598 square miles of total area. See the CIA World Factbook report at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>. Accessed Nov. 13, 2009.

²⁷ Very quickly after every death in the community, a bicycle rickshaw carrying a survivor and a sound system attached to a car battery begins to go through the nearby neighbourhoods repeating an announcement of the death, the name of the dead, his or her address, and a request for all to be present to say prayers at the *janaza*

death-related observances are a regular part of most people's lives in Rajshahi, making death-related questions a vital topic of discussion for normal residents, and a full-time job for local clerics.

This field-based ethnographic study brings to light an important issue that the people of Rajshahi themselves are currently debating, specifically, the nature of human existence in the *barzakh*,²⁸ the interregnum between the moment of death and the eventual resurrection. A closely related discourse revolves around the nature of the community's role, if any, in assisting the dead community member in the transition to the afterlife. For local Muslims of both reformist and traditionalist hues, the events believed to be taking place for the conscious dead in their graves are imbued with an urgent sense of reality. Both groups in Rajshahi believe the soul of the deceased is conscious in *alome barzakh*²⁹ (the realm of the *barzakh*) and undergoing either punishments or comforts, depending on one's deeds during life. An intriguing amount of specificity has been supplied to Muslim believers through the authoritative hadith and subsequent embellishments to these accounts by medieval Islamic scholars, a subject we take up in Chapter Four of this study.

For the Hanafi majority, during the forty days after death and also on the anniversary, an array of recitations, prayers, *milad* ceremonies, and feasts are observed. The overt purpose of these activities is to generate *so'ab*³⁰ (merit) for the deceased and then to send the collected *so'ab* to the person who is already in *al-barzakh*. These activities are explicitly

namaz (the time and location of this service being given as well). This announcement is quite loud and the message is usually perfectly audible inside closed doors.

²⁸ In Qur'anic thought, the *barzakh* was an existential barrier which prevented the dead from returning to or interacting with the life of this world in any way, so as to make up for lost opportunities to do good works. (See Qur'an 23:99-100). In later Islamic thought and in many hadith, *barzakh* came to describe both the *time period* between an individual's death and the day of resurrection, and the *place* of conscious waiting, which was generally believed to be the grave itself. For a discussion of the sources and evolution of this concept, see Chapter Four.

²⁹ আলমে বারযাখ

³⁰ *Ajr* is the most frequently occurring term in the Qur'an used to describe the concept of reward, but *thawāb/mathūba* also occurs nineteen times to describe this notion. (Wim Raven, 'Reward and punishment', *EQ*, vol. 4, 451). সওয়াব/সয়াব/হোয়াব, the Bangla cognate of the Arabic *thawāb* (reward) is used commonly in Rajshahi to discuss the merit accumulated through good works. See Chapter Five for a discussion of this pervasive concept in Bangladeshi Islam.

intended to lessen the torment being experienced in the grave, and to raise the total balance of *so'ab* in the person's account, which may cause the person's total good deeds to be sufficient on Judgment Day, resulting in entrance to *jannat*, or Paradise. These activities, representing the *status quo* practices of the majority of Rajshahi residents, have been pervasive for generations and are an important part of local Islamic culture. The belief expressed by my Hanafi informants is that if you love your deceased father or mother, then you will do all in your power to make their success in the afterlife as secure as possible, including by arranging and paying for *milads* and related ritual ceremonies.

Meanwhile, there are growing, multiple movements under the banner of 'Ahl-i-Hadith' in Rajshahi which have established mosques and madrasas to train young 'ulama' in the purist teachings which characterise this tendency across the Indian subcontinent. The Ahl-i-Hadith promote a return to the belief and practice of the original Muslim community established during the time of Muhammad and his Companions and their Successors. While virtually no Muslim alive today would dispute this notion, Ahl-i-Hadith groups reject the very idea of following any medieval school of law, insist on using direct individual recourse to the Qur'an and authoritative hadith to determine correct doctrine, and regularly take aim at any and all practices cherished by local Muslims which they perceive to be innovations and accretions from unauthentic, non-Islamic sources.

As we examine below, the focus on ridding religion of heterodox additions and innovations has led the Ahl-i-Hadith groups in Rajshahi to denounce the types of ceremonies and accompanying beliefs which local residents perform to assist the recently dead, among other things. The reformist Ahl-i-Hadith claim is simply that these ceremonies and beliefs are un-Islamic innovations (*bida'*). Ahl-i-Hadith 'ulama' also use the Qur'an and authoritative hadith for arguing *contra* these practices. These arguments are made in Friday *khutbas*, on

religious television programming, at *waz mahfils* (outdoor multi-day meetings), and perhaps most effectively, on an informal basis in homes and at tea stalls.

Though little remarked upon by scholars and outsiders to the region, this purifying attempt at religious reform has been ongoing for more than a hundred years in Bengal, but with varied and questionable degrees of success in creating permanent changes.³¹ In the second half of the 19th century and throughout the 20th century, Hanafis and reformists organised public debates on disputed doctrines, called '*bahas*', as noted earlier. Today death related belief and ritual remains a vibrant area of regular debate for normal Muslims, many of whom have spouses from families who belong to the opposing group, and so must face what to do on this and a host of other reformist/Hanafi questions, including the question of which Islamic system will be passed on to the children.

Religious purifying reform of the masses has been spotty, impacting some neighbourhoods in Rajshahi city profoundly, some areas less so, and some neighbourhoods hardly at all. On an individual basis, Muslims of Rajshahi find themselves on a spectrum of reform-Hanafi belief which is more of a sliding scale, rather than a clear-cut either/or position. Professional 'ulama' interviewed for this project seemed to have internalised *some* of the Ahl-i-Hadith reform agenda, and at the same time maintained belief in other 'innovations' which the party-line Ahl-i-Hadith literature rejects. Nevertheless, the debate between these groups on death-related matters is a vibrant topic of current contestation, and provided the limited case necessary for focusing this research.

I myself became interested in this case study, not merely because it was a promising research device, but because in dozens of tea drinking sessions at dusty outdoor corner stands in Rajshahi, I overheard or was engaged in conversations about the afterlife, about a local neighbour who had died, about their probable whereabouts in the netherworld, and about

³¹ See Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: a quest for identity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 50-71.

ceremonies for accumulating merit on behalf of the dead which the survivors were organizing. This is not to say that there are not other good avenues for understanding the discourse between reformist and traditionalist groups in Rajshahi. Other case studies for investigating this discourse could have been used to similar effect, such as Muslim debates over the visiting of Sufi shrines, the use of *milads* to bless newly constructed homes, ritual healing practices, contested birth rituals, marriage rituals, and so on. These approaches remain open to further investigation in future studies.

1.1.f The need for this study. Although anthropologists and Islamicists have been engaged in similar processes of discovery among Indonesian and Malay Muslim peoples for a century, the ground is relatively untilled when it comes to ethnographies of religious belief and practice among Bengali Muslims.³² To date, few scholars have produced field-based studies of modern religious discourse in a Bangladeshi context, especially ones that are not limited to the village context. Nor are there any studies which focus on the case of contemporary death-related beliefs and practices in Bangladesh.³³ This contrasts with numerous such modern studies among Indonesian and Malay Muslim peoples.³⁴

Bengali Muslims living in Bangladesh make up the largest ethnically and linguistically unified group of Muslims within the borders of a single country. Though Bangladesh is only the third most populous Muslim country in the world (fourth if counting India), its population

³² Various ethnographic works and articles surrounding death in Indonesian Muslim contexts are discussed later in this chapter. For modern ethnographic studies of Muslim religion in Bangladesh, see Peter J. Bertocci, 'Elusive villages: social structure and community organization in rural East Pakistan' (PhD Thesis, Michigan State University, 1970); John Putnam Thorp, 'Masters of earth: conceptions of power among Muslims of rural Bangladesh' (PhD Thesis, University of Chicago, 1978); Jeff Kemp, 'Informal religious leadership in a Bangladeshi village' (PhD Thesis, Edinburgh University, 1998). Kemp's thesis examines authority structure in one village and how it relates to various religious roles, especially the 'ulama', texts and Sufi *pirs*.

³³ The present author has not found any such studies. This does not mean they do not exist.

³⁴ See Mark R. Woodward, 'The *slametan*', 54-89; John R. Bowen, 'Salat in Indonesia: the social meanings of an Islamic ritual', *Man* (n.s.), 24, (1989), 299-318, and John R. Bowen, *Muslims through discourse*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. *Muslims through discourse* contains a thorough investigation of the death rituals and beliefs of the Gayo people of highland Aceh, with analyses of textual and other authoritative sources, as well as lengthy discussions about the debates carried on between reformists and traditionalists about cherished rituals and beliefs. For the Malay peninsula, see. Roff, 'Whence cometh the Law?', 331-332.

is 98% Bengali in ethnicity and language.³⁵ This contrasts with the largest groups in Indonesia and Pakistan, the first and second most populous Muslim nations respectively, where there are more Muslims in total, but they come from multiple ethnic and linguistic groups.

For example, while a majority of Pakistanis speak Urdu as a second or third language (English and Urdu are the two official languages), only 8% of Pakistanis speak Urdu as their mother tongue.³⁶ The largest ethnolinguistic group in Pakistan are the Punjabis, who comprise 80 million speakers, or 44% of the population, with Sindhi (14.1%), Pushto (15.42%) and other languages having fewer speakers.³⁷ In Indonesia, the most populated Muslim nation, the Javanese comprise approximately 95 million native speakers, or approximately 40% of the population.³⁸ All of the remaining 741 languages of Indonesia obviously have fewer speakers than the largest group, the Javanese.

Bangladesh, with 130 million Muslim Bengalis out of a total population of 156 million (83% are reportedly Muslim, the balance being mainly Hindu Bengalis),³⁹ is unusually monocultural when compared with other Muslim nations. Despite the Bangladeshi people's tendency to emphasise the differences in various regional accents, Bengali is a comparatively unified language throughout the country.⁴⁰ The food, clothing, religious tendencies, music, and games are observed with only slight variations from one end of Bangladesh to the other, as my five separate two-week ethnographic excursions to various regions of the country and

³⁵ 98% of Bangladeshis self-identify as 'Bengali'. See <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>. Accessed Nov. 13, 2009

³⁶ 7.57% of Pakistanis spoke Urdu as their native language in 1998, according to the Government of Pakistan's 1998 Census Report, <http://www.statpak.gov.pk/depts/pco/index.html>. Accessed Nov. 13, 2009.

³⁷ See *Population Census Organization, Government of Pakistan*, <http://www.statpak.gov.pk/depts/pco/index.html>, accessed Nov. 13, 2009.

³⁸ The population of Indonesia was estimated at 235 million in July, 2007. Of these, the Javanese make up 40.6%, or 95.4 million people. See the CIA World Factbook report on Indonesia, at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/id.html#People>

³⁹ CIA population estimate from July, 2009 is 156 million, with 83% being Muslims and 16% being Hindus. See <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html>. Accessed Nov. 13, 2009.

⁴⁰ The exceptions to this are the Chittagonian and Sylheti dialects, which can be mutually unintelligible, though they are technically Bengali. But primary and secondary education in both of these regions of the country is in the standard national dialect. Most Chittagonians and Sylhetis I know have a mastery of their own local dialect, and the national dialect.

observations over ten years of close association with Bangladeshis would also suggest. Ninety-eight per cent of Bangladeshis claim the Bengali ethnic identity. What is more, local dialects are being eroded and disappearing through effective government primary and secondary education in every part of Bangladesh, where the standard Bengali being taught is not seen as a different language, but simply as the ‘uncorrupted’ and proper Bengali.

As the largest single ethnically and linguistically unified Muslim population in any country in the world, the Muslim Bengalis of Bangladesh have to date received surprisingly little attention in scholarly research. Indeed, one could be forgiven for asking why the fourth most spoken native language in the world cannot be studied in even one percent of Western universities. Certainly, the dearth of modern ethnographic studies of religious belief and practice in Bangladesh is not commensurate with the importance of this Muslim people group, whether in terms of population or of human interest.

Many factors could explain why there has been comparatively little scholarly research among Bangladeshi Muslims. This may be because there have been fewer modern studies done there by notable mid-20th century scholars (in former East Pakistan) to attract other researchers, as there certainly were for Indonesia. The difficulty of the Bengali language and the lack of supportive infrastructure and facilities, as well as semi-regular political upheaval and natural disasters all can discourage scholars from carrying out field work there. That being said, wherever one turns in Bangladesh, the opportunity exists for original ethnographic studies of Islamic belief and practice.

1.2 Methodology

1.2.a Ethnographic research methods

This study of local religious discourse significantly relies on qualitative field research done in Bangladesh using the tools of cultural anthropology, or ethnographic research methods. The term “ethnography” refers both to the primary method of research carried out in cultural anthropology, and to the written report of that research. This thesis is not an “ethnography of a culture” in the classic sense of a complete study of a community. Rather, it draws on the tools of ethnographic research to achieve more limited aims.

Three primary tools of ethnographic field research are participant observation in local life, ethnographic interviews with local informants, and accessing site documents, or locally produced documents which reflect the activities of the local culture. As discussed below, this thesis uses all three tools, but also analyses non-locally produced universal Islamic texts, which exert a significant influence on the local religious discourse.

1.2.b Geographical limitation

This study limits itself to the city of Rajshahi, Bangladesh (including its suburbs). As such, it is a study of South Asian urban religious discourse and does not attempt to reflect specifically rural religious discourses, in spite of the ongoing trend of population migration to urban centres occurring in Bangladesh, especially in the capital city, Dhaka. But Rajshahi is actually a place in which the local people, educated and uneducated, maintain extremely close ties with their parents and relatives in the villages of the greater district. Due to this persistent reality, I found a consistent connection between the accounts of religious belief I heard among Rajshahi’s Muslims, and the Muslims I interviewed in numerous villages around the country for other research projects I completed while studying at Rajshahi University.

In fact, compared with the truly urban characteristics of Dhaka, Rajshahi might be better described as a provincial town, and indeed government and scholarly publications seem to mix the two terms when attempting to describe Rajshahi.⁴¹ Rajshahi is the fourth largest city in Bangladesh and is one of only six government City Corporations.⁴² But in spite of its current metropolitan population of 775,000 and its numerous higher education institutions, it retains more of a provincial feel than most industrialised Asian mega-cities. Farm animals still roam residential unpaved and paved roads and the number of rural villagers seeking work in construction and transportation is high. Finally, an almost complete absence of industrial production in Rajshahi means that both economic production and the infrastructure and pollution that accompany it are not visible. The concrete, neon lights, beggars and air pollution of Dhaka are definitely a distant reality compared to Rajshahi's slower (and healthier) lifestyle during the first decade of the 21st century.

As was mentioned above, Bangladesh as a whole presents an unusually unified ethnic and linguistic context compared to other nations in the region and other Muslim nations generally. My own experience travelling through various districts of Bangladesh for research, as well as informal conversations in these districts, leads me to believe that religious and cultural factors that are true of Rajshahi city are often characteristic of other urban centres in the country. Dozens of visits to villages throughout Bangladesh have further impressed on me both specific variations and also notable uniformity in terms of religious knowledge.

1.2.c Research design and data collection methods

Participant Observation. Living as the only foreigner in Muslim Bengali neighbourhoods and studying for six years as the only foreigner at a state university of 25,000

⁴¹ See 'Bangladesh' in *Banglapedia 2.0.0*. (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2002). (Digital Reference Encyclopedia).

⁴² See *Statistical Pocket Book of Bangladesh 2008*, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. http://www.bbs.gov.bd/dataindex/pby/pk_book_08.pdf Accessed Dec. 5, 2009.

on-campus students naturally led to more opportunities for participant observation than could be documented here. Babies were born to some neighbours, while other acquaintances passed away. Friends had their children circumcised and gave their sons and daughters in marriage. Islamic (and Hindu) religious holidays abounded. Due to the friendly and outgoing character of Bangladeshi people in general, I was regularly overwhelmed with invitations to participate, of which I could only reasonably attend a fraction. All of these opportunities were antecedent to the focused and purposeful attention given to death-related ceremonies and practices during the last two years of my residence in Bangladesh. Field notes taken after participation at death-related ceremonies and events during this period form an important part of the data collected to write this thesis.

Interviews. An American man poking his nose into mosques asking questions in a city that generally sees very few foreigners is likely to face difficulties. Additional barriers could be imagined when we consider the prospect of entering mosques and madrasas associated with the Ahl-i-Hadith, one of the most religiously conservative Islamic purifying movements anywhere. To compound these factors, Rajshahi also happens to be the geographical centre of the most notorious Islamic terrorist organization in Bangladesh, the *Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh* (JMB, and other affiliates). Most JMB members attend Ahl-i-Hadith mosques and are drawn to its interpretation of Islam, creating a certain affinity and cross-pollination between the two movements.

Indeed, the principal of the most influential Ahl-i-Hadith madrasa complex in Rajshahi and the *amir* of the national organization *Ahl-i-Hadith Andalon Bangladesh* (AHAB), Muhammad Asadullah al-Ghalib, was in prison during the time of this field research. His arrest came about due to accusations of complicity and abetment in the August,

2005 JMB bombings which occurred simultaneously at 459 public locations throughout Bangladesh.⁴³ Al-Ghalib was subsequently exonerated and released in February, 2009.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, Bangladesh and South Asia are home to endless ambiguities and complexities, and as someone who has learned to navigate these to a certain extent, I was fairly certain that, despite being a young American male investigating mosques in a majority Muslim city, it would be possible to meet with openness and even depth of personal exchange about Islamic theology. My identity as an academic/student, my relationships in the community, my years of association with a respected local university, and my ability to speak the local dialect (including deferential speech for elders and authorities) were all factors which helped to open doors.⁴⁵

Interviews for this research project were sought through the South Asian way of a chain of relationships. I first explained my research project and need for interviews with senior members of the community with whom I had relationships. On my behalf, these professors and a mosque board chairman literally took me in person to various mosques and sat with me in person through subsequent interviews to lend trust and their approval to the proceedings. After my first interviews with two influential ‘ulama’, these same interviewees picked up the telephone in front of me and made phone calls to others throughout the city to request that they allow me to visit. In one case, a madrasa principal leaving the same afternoon to lead a Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca called all the teachers of the madrasa, about eleven teachers, into his office and instructed them to cooperate with me *on his behalf*, “so

⁴³ Council on Foreign Relations website: ‘Bangladesh: Nationwide Attacks Raise Fears of Growing Islamist Presence’, posted Aug. 29, 2005. <http://www.cfr.org/publication/8767/bangladesh.html> , Accessed Nov., 13, 2009.

⁴⁴ Telephone follow-up interview with Ahl-i-Hadith madrasa graduate in Rajshahi, Bangladesh. 26 February, 2010.

⁴⁵ All interviews were conducted completely in Bengali with occasional Arabic phrases from scriptures being discussed. My informants were often fascinated by an American who could speak the local dialect of Bengali well, and this seemed to be a very positive factor. Additionally, the Bengali (Bangla) language provides nuanced patterns of speech which communicate deference and respect where appropriate. (and I was accustomed to using these forms of respectful speech because of my time as a student at a local university).

that he can't even tell that I'm not personally here!"⁴⁶ In another astounding instance of hospitality, a different madrasa principal spread his arms wide and assured me that I was welcome to come as many times as necessary: "This place of ours is *open* to you!"⁴⁷ I attribute this welcome to the status of my friend who had taken me in person to make introductions.

Through this chain of relationships (and a few "cold calls") I was able to establish relationships with imams, madrasa principals and Arabic instructors at ten mosque/madrasa complexes in Rajshahi city and suburbs.⁴⁸ In most of the cases, it was a mosque/madrasa combination, but in one or two cases it was simply a madrasa. These institutions are roughly evenly divided between the two Islamic positions being examined in this study, the Ahl-i-Hadith and the "Hanafi traditionalists." It should be noted, however, that each *'alim* (scholar) and imam revealed his own precise combination of theological positions which more often than not mixed parts of pure Ahl-i-Hadith doctrine with parts of more popular doctrines.

In addition to mosque and madrasa functionaries from both backgrounds, my interviewee sample also included three senior professors at Rajshahi University who are involved with Ahl-i-Hadith organizations; the director and assistant director of the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, Rajshahi Branch;⁴⁹ senior leaders of two national Ahl-i-Hadith organizations, the *Jome'ot Ahl-i-Hadith* and the *Ahl-i-Hadith Andolon*; and a mosque board chairman of a neighbourhood (Hanafi) mosque.⁵⁰ About two thirds of the interviewees were

⁴⁶ "সে যেন বুঝতে না পারে যে আমি নাই!"

⁴⁷ "আমাদের এই জাইগা আপনার জন্য খোলা!"

⁴⁸ Rahman reports 285 mosques in Rajshahi city in 2007. Mahbubar Rahman, 'Rajshahi City Corporation', forthcoming in *Banglapedia* revision, Bangladesh Asiatic Society.

⁴⁹ Islamic Foundation Bangladesh is the primary government Islamic organization, which erects and manages mosques, provides funding to Islamic research scholars, builds and/or sponsors religious schools and madrasas, and maintains 29 Islamic Mission Centers throughout the country. The Foundation is directly involved in training of clerics through its seven training academies for imams, and has published several hundred volumes, mostly in Bengali, of Islamic texts, both classical and contemporary. BP, 'ইসলামিক ফাউন্ডেশন বাংলাদেশ', <http://www.banglapedia.org/httpdocs/HTB/100545.htm> . Accessed on Nov. 16, 2009.

⁵⁰ Neither the interviewees that I have specifically indicated here, nor the number of mosques and madrasas mentioned, fully account for my interactions with Muslim believers and institutions in Rajshahi. I have completely omitted numerous mosques and madrasas in which I have had learning experiences because they do

comfortable enough to allow me to turn on the digital recorder, providing me with a permanent archive of our conversations. For those who declined this request, I relied on field notes and also on a more thorough “write up” of the interview within twenty-four hours of the event. These notes are kept in my personal computer files along with the digital audio recordings.

Field interviews were centred around basic open-ended questions (see questions below) and lengthy periods of listening, writing and recording, punctuated with prompting/follow-up questions for additional information. Care was taken to structure interview questions in an open-ended way which would not be likely to lead to any particular outcomes. The first set of questions were more general, focusing on local beliefs and practices to do with the *barzakh* period and the afterlife, as well as funerary practices. After this, several questions were raised about opposing viewpoints which I had encountered visiting with imams and scholars of the other camp. Finally, usually in a second interview, I produced photocopies of specific hadith scriptures (commonly cited in the debates) which were interpreted and discussed.

In general, this approach was a useful way to bring to light contemporary discourses between the two groups, and for obtaining an “emic” perspective, or an insider’s look at the debates. ‘Ulama’ seemed eager for me to understand their theological positions, and explained their understanding of Qur’anic and hadith texts and theological positions with unreserved enthusiasm, while at the same time fully understanding my research goals.

Interview Structure: The interview introductions. As previously noted, a high level of trust was established early on by having a senior respected person either personally take me to the mosque or madrasa in question, or make a phone call to the desired

not directly apply to this project. These include visits to Sufi ‘*majars*’ (shrines) with mosques attached, and certain invitations I have received to attend functions at other local mosques.

interlocutor. As the interview began, I introduced myself as a Ph.D. student studying at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, who is involved in research on Bangladeshi culture and religion, and who is an alumnus of the locally respected Rajshahi University. After this personal introduction, interviewees were given the topic of my present research project, namely Islamic funerary beliefs and practices in Bangladesh and their relation to hadith literature.

Interviewees were then informed that without their express permission their name and other identifying information would not appear in the research report, and asked permission to digitally record our interview. In order to protect my informants from even a hint of negative or harmful effect for their generosity, names have been changed throughout this thesis, except where permission was obtained.

The body of the interview consisted of three distinct phases which, due to sheer length, often required a break and a second visit to complete:

- **Interview Phase I:** Two open-ended questions about funerary practices requiring at least forty-five minutes (each) of listening and recording.
- **Interview Phase II:** A follow-up question regarding the discourse occurring between the scholar or cleric being interviewed and the opposing group of ‘ulama’ in Rajshahi. More follow-up questions clarifying several specific practices and the imam’s position on each practice, as opposed to or in agreement with certain other Islamic groups (usually requiring another forty-five minutes).
- **Interview Phase III:** Photocopies of authoritative hadith (in Bengali and Arabic) at the heart of the local inter-group discourse on death-related practices were hand-carried to the imam/scholar for a second interview. In many instances, the hadith I gave the ‘ulama’ seemed directly opposed to their practices and positions. I asked them to read the passages and explain them to me.⁵¹

⁵¹ For the questions about specific hadith traditions, I produced a photocopy of each hadith report from either *Sahih al-Bukhari* or *Sahih Muslim*, with recognizable photocopies of the *cover pages* of these books as well. The versions I used are the most commonly available versions to ‘ulama’ in Bangladesh, and are in Bengali and Arabic parallel translation.

Table 1.1 Interview Structure and Questions

Phase I	<p>Question #1: Can you please tell me, one-by-one and in order, all the religious and practical measures taken for the dying/deceased from the time when death is imminent, until the body is finally laid to rest in the grave? (45 min.)</p>	<p>প্রশ্ন #১ – যিনি মারা যাওয়ার অবস্থায়, এমন ব্যক্তির জন্য মারা যাওয়ার আগ মুহূর্ত থেকে মাটি দেওয়া পর্যন্ত কী কী কাজ করণীয়? অর্থাৎ ধর্মীয় দিক ও প্র্যাঙ্কিক্যাল দিক থেকে সমাজ ও পরিবারকে কী কী কাজ-কর্ম করতে হবে মায়েতের জন্য? অনুগ্রহ করে সেগুলি একে একে বলবেন কি?। (৪৫ মি)</p>
	<p>Question #2: After the body is laid to rest, there are still forty days of activity observed on behalf of the dead. I myself have been present at many such prayer ceremonies (<i>milads</i>) of my neighbours. Can you please tell me what exactly is required in Islam to do for the deceased in this period? Additionally, can you tell me what people actually do during the 40 days after death in this neighbourhood/area? (45min.)</p>	<p>প্রশ্ন #২ – লাশ মাটি দেয়ার কাজ সমাপ্ত করার পরেও মৃত ব্যক্তির জন্য আরও চল্লিশ দিন বিভিন্ন কর্ম-কান্ড পালন করা হয়। আমি নিজেই অনেক বার এমন মুনাজাতের আয়োজনে (যেমন মিলাদ, ইত্যাদি) শরিক হয়েছিলাম পাড়া-প্রতিবেশির ক্ষেত্রে। প্রশ্ন হল ইসলামে এই চল্লিশ দিনে মৃত ব্যক্তির জন্য কী কী কাজ ফরয হয়? এর সঙ্গে জানতে চাই, এই এলাকার লোকজন আসলে মৃত ব্যক্তির জন্য এই চল্লিশ দিনে কী কী করে? (৪৫ মি)</p>
Phase II	<p>Question #3.1 (for Hanafis): I was informed recently by certain imams/scholars in Rajshahi that _____ (<i>milads, chollisha, talqin, khotom</i>) is not truly Islamic, but a local innovation. Can you help me understand why they would say this?</p>	<p>প্রশ্ন #৩.১ (হানাফীদের জন্য) – রাজশাহীর কিছু ইমামগন অল্প দিন আগে আমাকে জানিয়েছেন যে _____ (মিলাদ, চল্লিশা, তাল্কিন, খতম) সত্যিকার ইসলাম থেকে আসে নি, বরং সেই সব কাজ লৌকিক নতুনত্ব বা বিদআত; তাঁরা কেন এই কথা বলেন, আমাকে বুঝতে সাহায্য করতে পারেন?</p>
	<p>Question #3.2 (for Ahl-i-Hadis): I was informed recently by certain imams/scholars in Rajshahi that _____ (<i>milads, chollisha, talqin, khotom</i>) is still practised widely in this area. In fact, I've been at such ceremonies recently for a neighbour who passed away. Why would they be performing these rituals if they are un-Islamic?</p>	<p>প্রশ্ন #৩.২ (আহলে হাদিসদের জন্য) – রাজশাহীর কিছু ইমামগন অল্প দিন আগে আমাকে জানিয়েছেন যে _____ (মিলাদ, চল্লিশা, তাল্কিন, খতম) এখনও এই এলাকায় ব্যাপকভাবে পালন করা হচ্ছে। আমি নিজেই এমন কিছু অনুষ্ঠানে অংশগ্রহণ করেছি মৃত প্রতিবেশির জন্য। এই সব রীতি-নীতি যদি অনৈসলামিক হয়, তবে কি তারা কেন সেগুলি পালন করে থাকে?</p>
Phase III	<p>Question 5: Discussion of Hadith 1 & 2, two pivotal hadith from <i>Sahih al-Bukhari</i> related to community assistance of the deceased.</p>	<p><i>*Please see Chapter 5 for discussion and interpretation by Rajshahi 'ulama' of these hadith.</i></p>
	<p>Question 6: Discussion of Hadith 3 & 4, two pivotal hadith from <i>Sahih Muslim</i> related to community assistance of the deceased.</p>	<p><i>*Please see Chapter 5 for discussion and interpretation by Rajshahi 'ulama' of these hadith.</i></p>
	<p>Additional Questions:</p> <p>Q: How would you characterise the authenticity and authority of the individual hadith reports contained in <i>al-kutub al-sitta</i>?</p> <p>Q: What written sources in Bengali would you recommend to me for learning about the events of the afterlife and the <i>barzakh</i> according to Islam?</p>	<p>প্রঃ যেসব হাদিসের কথা সিহাহ সিত্তাহ –র মধ্যে রয়েছে, যথার্থতা ও প্রামাণিকতার দিক থেকে আপনি সেগুলো কিভাবে মূল্যায়ন করেন?</p> <p>প্রঃ ইসলামে পরকাল ও আলমে বারযাখ সম্বন্ধে শেখার জন্য আপনি আমাকে কী কী বাংলা বই পড়তে বলে 'সাজেস্ট' করেন?</p>

Textual Sources. The present study draws on textual sources of more than one type. Because it is a study of local expressions of Islam and how these relate themselves to authoritative texts, the universal scriptures of Sunni Islam, the Qur'an and authoritative hadith, are the most important textual sources included here. Three additional categories of textual sources have also been utilised throughout this study.

1. **Qur'an and hadith.** Bengali 'ulama' and imams quote passages from the Qur'an and especially the authoritative *sahih* hadith collections as the primary sources of knowledge about the *barzakh*, the afterlife, and about prescribed funerary rituals. Informants similarly suggested that I should start with these sources in my investigations of proper Islamic belief and action.

2. **Important medieval Islamic works translated from Arabic into Bengali and popularly used** – mostly related to hadith literature. Works by Abu Hamid Muhammad b. Muhammad al-Tusi al-Ghazali (1058-1111), Imam 'Abd al-Rahim ibn Ahmad al-Qadi, and Imam Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (c.1445-1505) are available in book stalls and used by both 'ulama' and lay-persons around Bangladesh. These books significantly inform the discourse related to the afterlife, the *barzakh* period of the "life of the grave." The most popular of these works are discussed in this thesis.

3. **Locally produced Islamic books in the vernacular.** Most Bangladeshi Muslims do not understand spoken or written Arabic. Even those who have memorised suras of the Qur'an in madrasas are often still not taught Arabic grammar. The result is that many Bangladeshis can 'read' Arabic phonetically (without understanding) and can recognise many words, but cannot communicate in Arabic or understand prose. While this is slowly changing and improving, non-Arabic sources of religious knowledge

have been and remain essential to Islamic education in the subcontinent. Immediately after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, Urdu, which had been the *lingua franca* of the ethnically diverse united Pakistan, was preferred as a vernacular medium for madrasa education materials in Bangladesh. Since independence, however, Urdu has ceased to be understood by the new generations and my informants revealed that Urdu is rarely taught, understood or used in madrasa education currently.⁵²

Bengali vernacular translations of all important works, from the Qur'an and hadith to medieval commentaries to recent works, have replaced the Urdu translations. An ever-increasing treasure-trove of Islamic sources are being translated and published by the Islamic Foundation (established by national government) and private concerns. But a few hadith-based works from the early 20th century, originally written in Urdu but now available in Bengali, have a special place in the Bengali vernacular list of resources. In this regard *Bihishti Zewar* and *Faza'il 'Amal* are discussed in Chapter Two, along with the similarly popular hadith manuals of medieval provenance, *Mishkat al-Masabih* and *Riyad al-Salihin*. Such works are normally published in hardback with Islamic-looking covers that suggest scriptural authority. Collectively, they help make up the 'cross-currents' of religious knowledge in Rajshahi, being read by diverse Islamic groups and denominations. Local Muslims hear the stories and hadith contained in these volumes from neighbourhood female *talim*⁵³ preachers, at three-day outdoor *Waz Mahfil* preaching meetings, from itinerant

⁵² This finding differs from the results of Phil Bushell, who did research in Bangladeshi madrasas in and before 1987. He asserted that most of his madrasa-educated informants had a good working knowledge of Urdu at that time. Philip Anthony Bushell, 'Ritual Prayer and its consequences in the afterlife' (M.A. dissertation, All Nations Christian College, 1987), 22.

⁵³ Group instruction sessions, usually organized by Tablighi Jamaat, but also heavily attended by women affiliated with Islami Chattri Shongstha, the female student wing of Jamaate Islami.

Tablighi Jama'at lay-preachers, from Islamic television programming and at Friday *jumu'ca* sermons in neighbourhood mosques.

When it comes to truly local “site documents” reflecting contemporary religious debates, an abundance of material is available from the vigorous religious life of local scholars. Over one hundred locally produced pamphlets, prayer guides, madrasa course study guides, monthly magazines of religious organizations, and vernacular explanations of religious texts and practices were purchased and remain in the author’s collection. Numerous short books were purchased (or given to me by informants) with titles like *Popular Heresies Done in the Name of Worship*⁵⁴ and *Heresies and Superstitions Surrounding Graves and Tomb-Shrines*.⁵⁵ Polemical works by Ahl-i-Hadith and other Salafi-leaning groups abound. At the private *Heritage Archives* in Rajshahi I was guided to preserved manuscripts from the 1920s which report on contemporary local “*bahas*”, or publically organised staged debates between Hanafi ‘ulama’ and Salafi ‘ulama’ on disputed points of doctrine and practice. These and other sources are commented on throughout the current study.

4. Scholarly analytical works covering Islam in the subcontinent by Western and South Asian scholars. Numerous works by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars working in history, the social sciences and religion are referenced throughout this thesis. The footnotes and bibliography reveal the extent of their contributions to the present study. Not least among these guides are Francis Robinson, Muhammad Qasim Zaman, Barbara Metcalf, Aziz Ahmad, Asim Roy, Richard Eaton and Filippo and Caroline Osella.

⁵⁴ Hafez Mahmudul Hasan, ইবাদতের নামে প্রচলিত বিদআতসমূহ / *Ibadoter name procholito bid'at-shomuho* (Dhaka: World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), 2004).

⁵⁵ Hafez Mahmudul Hasan, কবর-মাজার কেন্দ্রিক শিরক-বিদআত ও কুসংস্কার / *Kobor-majar kendrik shirk-bid'at o kushongshkar* (Dhaka: World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), 2004).

As has already been noted, I am particularly indebted to those scholars who have successfully and respectfully combined studies of “lived Islam” with studies of how authoritative texts are used in such contexts, or the intersection of textual and locally understood Islam. John Bowen has cogently and respectfully pursued this question among the Gayo Muslims in the highlands of Aceh in Java, Indonesia, for many years, and his reproduction and analysis of their speech acts, their understanding and use of Islamic scriptures, and the vitally important discourse and debates happening in Gayo society at the local and individual level have served as an example for this research.⁵⁶ Along with Bowen, others have pursued similarly creative endeavours in other Islamic contexts, notably Maimuna Huq⁵⁷, Marion Holmes Katz⁵⁸, Magnus Marsden⁵⁹, Mark Woodward⁶⁰, Michael Fischer and Mehdi Abedi⁶¹, and William Roff⁶², to name just a few.

Comparison with lived Islam in *Dar al-Islam*. One final aspect of methodology deserves mention, which is the author’s tangential interest in comparing local expressions of Islam in Bangladesh with the findings of other researchers who have worked in the Middle East, North Africa and other Islamic contexts. I have included such comparative information in the footnotes of the relevant sections throughout. It can be a tempting intellectual response to the discovery of lived Islam in particular local contexts to imagine the practices and beliefs

⁵⁶ See John R. Bowen, *Muslims through discourse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); ‘Death and the history of Islam in highland Aceh’, *Indonesia*, 38 (1984), 21-38; ‘On Scriptural Essentialism and Ritual Variation: Muslim Sacrifice in Sumatra and Morocco.’ *American Ethnologist* 19 (4): 656-671; ‘Elaborating Scriptures: Cain and Abel in Gayo Society.’ *Man* (NS) 27 (3): 495-516.

⁵⁷ Maimuna Huq, ‘Reading the Qur’an’, 457-488.

⁵⁸ Marion Holmes Katz, ‘Women’s *mawlid* performances in Sanaa and the construction of “popular Islam”’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 40(2008), 467-484.

⁵⁹ Magnus Marsden, *Living Islam: Muslim religious experience in Pakistan’s North-West Frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁶⁰ Mark R. Woodward, ‘The *slametan*’, 54-89.

⁶¹ Michael Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, *Debating Muslims: cultural dialogues in tradition and postmodernity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

⁶² See Roff, ‘Whence cometh the Law?’, 331-332; Roff, ‘Islamic movements’, 34.

as more locally derived than is borne out by the evidence of comparative studies. Some Islamicists imagine a coherent unified Islamic practice in the heartland of the Arab Muslim world with increasing theological bifurcation corresponding to greater geographical distance from the Islamic “centre.” The footnotes in this thesis will hopefully assist other researchers to dispel this scholarly myth. These notes include in their purview nearly every part of the Islamic world, as well as spanning several centuries. Descriptions of “what Muslims say and do” in Arab, Persian, North African and other regions demonstrate that these practices have actually enjoyed a life that has been nearly as universal as the authoritative texts themselves. What conclusions can or should be drawn from these comparative notes remain to be examined in a subsequent study.

1.3 Theoretical Orientation

1.3.a Death studies as a means of inquiry into religious knowledge

Earlier it was noted that the case study being used to focus on the religious debate current in Rajshahi is death-related ceremonies, beliefs and practices, and that I was led to this case study first and foremost because I encountered this topic as a natural part of local conversations and activities in Muslim Bengali neighbourhoods. But death-related belief and ritual is and has been a highly favoured means of social scientists studying other cultures for more than a century, as the following pages make clear. Bowen, in his work with Muslims in highland Aceh, asserts that proper conduct regarding the dead is the “primary, salient, and unavoidable religious diacritic in Gayo society, the issue around which Gayo must publically sort themselves ...”⁶³

⁶³ Bowen, ‘Death and the history of Islam in highland Aceh’, *Indonesia*, 38 (1984), 21-38 (35). Though he limits his focus to developments in the first Islamic centuries, Muhammad Qasim Zaman has presented valuable information about religious authority and leadership in Islam through investigating early accounts of Islamic funerals, with special attention to how funerals can be “markers of conflicts and controversies in the community.” ‘Death, funeral processions, and the articulation of religious authority in early Islam’, *Studia Islamica*, 93 (2001), 27-58.

Similarly, if funerary practices comprise an important means for ethnographers and social scientists seeking to understand cultures, it is no less true that the afterlife and knowledge of death-related beliefs and practices is a foundational centrepiece of all three Abrahamic religions theologically speaking, and especially Islam.⁶⁴ One of the most famous Islamic preachers in Bangladesh (and a former member of parliament) Delwar Hussain Sa'idi, noted "If every verse with reference to *hasr, jahannam, jannat, sirat, mizan*...in other words, all the references to the life after death, were assembled together, it would be equal to one-third of [the length of] the Qur'an There is no page in the Qur'an where the afterlife is not mentioned either directly, or indirectly."⁶⁵ Another Islamic scholar, Muhammad A. R. Muhsin Al-Tuwaijri, succinctly stated: "The ultimate goal of every believer is entrance into paradise and avoidance of Hell. Everything else is of little significance when these two realities are mentioned."⁶⁶

From these statements, and from the observations which follow, it becomes clear that the study of death-related beliefs and practices in both the scholarly study of religions by outside observers, and in the religious traditions themselves, comprises a vigorous arena of cultural and religious debate, identity formation and representation, and the transfer of knowledge within cultures.

The study of death rituals in non-western cultures was an important part of socio-anthropological study during the first part of the 20th century. Famous for his *Rites de*

Passage, published in 1907 (English translation in 1960), Arnold van Gennep suggested a

⁶⁴ "Judaism, Christianity and Islam represent the three great contemporary religions which emerged in the Near East, grounded in the power of divine words addressed against evil and death." Douglas Davies, *Death, ritual and belief: the rhetoric of funerary rites* (2nd Ed.) (New York: Continuum, 2002), 118; see also 118-144.

⁶⁵ "কোরানে কারিমের সম্ভবত এমন কোন পৃষ্ঠা নাই যেখানে সরাসরি, অথবা আকারের ইঙ্গিতে পরলোকের কোন কথা বলা হয় নাই...কোরানে কারিমের ভিতরে হাশর, জাহান্নাম, জান্নাত, তার পরে সীরাত, মিয়ান, ইত্যাদি...আর্থাৎ মৃত্যুর পরে জীবন সম্পর্কে আল্লাহপাক কোরানে যা আলোচনা করেছেন, তা যদি এক জায়গায় করা যায়, তবে অন্তত গোটা কোরান শরিফের "one-third" দশ পারার সমান হয়ে যাবে! এখন চিন্তা করেন বিষয়টা কতই গুরুত্বপূর্ণ যার জন্য...কোরানের এক তৃতীয়াংশ আল্লাহপাক পরকাল সম্পর্কে আলোচনা করেছেন। খুবই গুরুত্বপূর্ণ বিষয়!" From Video Disk (VCD) of Allama Delwar Hossain Saidi, *Porokaler Alochona (Discussion of the Hereafter)* (Dhaka: Spondon Audio Visual Center, undated / c. 2001).

⁶⁶ From the introduction to Dr. Umar Sulaiman Al-Ashqar, *Paradise and Hell: In the light of the Qur'an and Sunnah*, Translated by Nasir Uddin Al Khattab (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House/IIPH, 1999), 10.

way to understand human rituals in any culture through his broad concept of rites of passage. He suggested that important life transitions, such as birth, circumcision, puberty, marriage and death are normally celebrated by rituals that include a termination of one stage (separation rites), a brief period spent in a 'liminal' phase (transition rites), and a re-birth into the next stage of social existence (reincorporation rites). Van Gennep pointed out the widespread use of death symbolism used to show the end of one stage of life (unmarried) and the use of birth symbolism to express the entry into a new stage (married life). The liminal stage is a brief period when an initiate is most closely associated with symbols of transition, and is ritually set apart from the rest of the group.

Though van Gennep was interested in all kinds of transitional rituals, he made a special survey of death rituals in various parts of the world for his research. A striking observation made by van Gennep is that although rites of separation are sometimes present at funerals, the most common type of death rites worldwide are not separation rites, but rites of transition and even reincorporation.⁶⁷ This observation suggests that many cultures around the world are as concerned with helping the deceased's transition into another state, as with simply marking the separation of the deceased from this life or from his or her loved ones.

Both van Gennep and his French contemporary Robert Hertz were interested in societies that see death as *a process of some days*, rather than something which occurs the moment the heart stops beating. In his essay, 'A contribution to the study of the collective representation of death', Hertz used the custom of secondary burial on the island of Borneo in Indonesia to suggest a broader understanding of how death is represented through manipulation of the human body in many cultures. Hertz observed that in Borneo there was an "intermediary period" in which the body is decaying, and is neither fully alive nor fully dead. The body is

⁶⁷ Arnold van Gennep, *The rites of passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 146.

perceived as a picture of the state of the soul, according to Hertz.⁶⁸ The decaying period is conceived to be a transition of painful difficulty where the deceased is not at peace, neither among the living nor the properly dead. After the bones have dried, they are collected and reburied. Finally, there is a great feast among the living as the deceased finds peace and is able to join the society of the dead.

The idea of death as *gradual* is not surprising to Muslim Bengalis, especially Hanafi traditionalists in Rajshahi. After death, the body is thought to be very sensitive to touch and to the temperature of the water used to wash it. Washers are even warned in medieval manuals of hadith not to use water that is the wrong temperature or touch the body carelessly, lest the dead experience tremendous pain.⁶⁹ After the body is buried and the mourners remove themselves forty paces from the grave, the angels come to ‘extract’ the soul from the dead person, who is still believed to be conscious. The removal of the soul, whether through the angel’s sword piercing the heart, or whether through the finger tips and toe nails, is an excruciatingly painful event which mortals can hardly fathom.⁷⁰ As in Borneo and many other Muslim and non-Muslim cultures across Asia, the soul is thought to linger near the body for a period of up to forty days, requiring various kinds of help or appeasement, before making a final (or semi-final) farewell. This corresponds to the ‘above ground’ or community activity of the *barzakh* period in Islamic thought, the interregnum between an individual’s death and their physical resurrection on the day of judgment. Chapters three and four are a detailed examination of the *barzakh* period as understood by Muslims today in Rajshahi.

⁶⁸ Robert Hertz, ‘A contribution to the study of the collective representation of death’, in *Death and the right hand* (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁶⁹ “Then his ruh cries out when it sees him naked with a voice that all creatures except jinn and men will hear, saying: “O Ghasil! [washer] By Allah, I ask you to remove his clothes with gentleness! For I have just rested from the pull of the Angel of Death!” When the water strikes him, it shouts: “O Ghasil! By Allah, do not make your water hot or cold on him, for my body is burnt by the removal of the ruh.” When they wash him, the ruh says: “By Allah, O Ghasil! Do not touch me with force, for my body is wounded by the departure of the ruh!”” See Imam ‘Abd ar-Rahim ibn Ahmad al-Qadi, *Daqa’iq al-akhbar fi dhikri al-janna wa’l-nar* (‘The Islamic Book of the Dead’), Tr. by ‘A’isha ‘Abd al-Rahman (Norwich, Norfolk, UK: Diwan Press, 1977), 43-44.

⁷⁰ Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira* (‘The Precious Pearl’). Tr. by Jane I. Smith (Harvard: Center for the Study of World Religions, 1979), 22-23.

1.3.b Western approaches to the study of Islam in local contexts

Another central issue in any approach to the conceptualization of Islam in local contexts is the nature and/or definition of ‘Islam.’ Is Islam an ‘orthodox’ universal set of doctrines and truths, which once understood properly (according to a few varying interpretations of law) can represent the whole? Or is Islam ‘whatever Muslims say it is,’ resulting in an infinite variety of conflicting expressions in local contexts? Or is it neither of these?

Dealing with these questions was a preoccupation of those who studied Islam in local contexts in the 19th and 20th centuries. At one end of the debate the Orientalists (and Islamic fundamentalists) assumed an essentialist Islam which was universal and fixed, while at the other end of the spectrum certain anthropologists and modernist Muslim scholars saw Islam in nominalist terms, as “whatever Muslims say it is” in various places and times. At the centre of this discourse stands the problem of how to reconcile the diversity in expressions of Islam found in so many places of the earth with the admitted fact that most Muslims believe there is an Islamic ‘essence’ which is universal (though that essence may not be the same from group to group).

The Orientalists 19th century ‘Orientalism’ as an academic discipline can be broadly defined as the study of languages, texts and culture histories of Islamic societies from a European perspective.⁷¹ Some 19th century Orientalists, like Snouck Hurgronje,⁷² E.A. Westermarck⁷³ and Edward Lane,⁷⁴ made great efforts to spend time among Muslim people in the Middle East and elsewhere in order to conduct fieldwork. Nevertheless, most Orientalist scholarship came under criticism in the second half of the 20th century for its

⁷¹ Robert Fernea and James Malarkey, ‘Anthropology of the Middle East and North Africa: a critical assessment’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 4 (1975), 183-206. (p. 183).

⁷² See C. Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka in the latter part of the 19th century* (Tr. by J.H. Monahan. Leiden: Brill, 1931).

⁷³ See Edward Alexander Westermarck, *Ritual and belief in Morocco* (London: Macmillan, 1926).

⁷⁴ See Edward William Lane, *An account of the manners and customs of the modern Egyptians written in Egypt during the years 1833-1835* (London: East-West Publications, 1978) [orig. 1836].

perceived role in creating and maintaining prejudice, for producing essentialist portrayals of races and cultures as monolithic constructs (“the Uzbeks are...”) and for enabling hegemonic relationships of state political power.

Since the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978, in which he argued that Orientalist scholarship was a body of knowledge used to create and maintain relationships of power between western scholars and their subjects, Orientalist scholars have been forced to respond to these challenges as well as to reorient some of the goals and methods of the discipline. Said effectively showed how a good deal of 19th century Orientalist writers portrayed Arabs and Muslims as symbols of eroticism, terror, and as opposing Christian religion and European standards of ethics.⁷⁵ These assumptions by Orientalists were seen by Said to support the European colonial domination of great areas of Africa and the Middle East during this period.

Whatever the interaction of Orientalist scholarship and colonial hegemony in Africa, Asia and Latin America may be, the way these scholars arrived at their knowledge of Islam provides an insight into their conception of Islam as a monolithic ‘essence.’ Orientalists were first of all textualists. That is, they accessed information about the ‘Orient’ by gathering texts – collections of religious writings (Mahabharata, Ramayana, Qur’an, hadith), narrative accounts by European travellers, and records and documents of British and French colonial administrations in the various regions. Being western, and being scholars, it was often in their interest to ‘define’ the Orient in their teaching and writing.

Orientalists of the 19th century therefore tended to present Islam as a static ‘essence’, much, in fact, as many Muslim scholars did and still do.⁷⁶ Orientalist scholar Edward Lane, for example, went to Al-Azhar in 1825, the famous Islamic university in Cairo, to learn Arabic (so he could read Arabic texts). There his *Shari’a*-based ‘ulama’ teachers influenced

⁷⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), 59-60.

⁷⁶ See Dale F. Eickelman, *The Middle East: an anthropological approach*, 2nd Edition. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989), 243-245.

him to see Islam as a fixed set of orthodox doctrines and practices, while local variations which actually have millions of practising adherents were seen by both Lane and the ‘*ulama*’ as outside of ‘real’ Islam. In this respect, Lane categorised belief in jinn, *pirs*/saints and Sufistic practices as un-Islamic.⁷⁷ Such a position by an Orientalist scholar like Lane reminds one vaguely of some Muslim fundamentalists groups who declare their own interpretations and practices as “Islamic” to the exclusion of all other Muslim interpretations. John Bowen neatly summarises the Orientalist textualist conception of Islam: “The approach was generally critical and philological—where did the text, its terms, and its ideas come from?—rather than ethnographic and semiotic—how did (and do) people understand, debate, and apply the text?”⁷⁸

Great and little traditions Although he was not the first to suggest that Islam could not be viewed as a monolithic unity,⁷⁹ Robert Redfield made an important, if imperfect step forward when he suggested a new theoretical paradigm in the 1940s. His concept held that world religions could be divided into Great Traditions and Little Traditions. Great Traditions belong to the literate, urban elite, and emphasise scriptures and formal education. This minority of cultural elites are conscious of their religion as a self-contained, universal and logical system of cosmological understanding.⁸⁰ Great Traditions are also referred to as ‘orthodoxy,’ ‘high traditions,’ and ‘philosophical religions.’⁸¹

Little Traditions are those shared by people on the cultural periphery and contain heterodox elements, which are part of other belief systems or local contexts. The Little Tradition is the religion of the masses, who do not necessarily think about their beliefs

⁷⁷See Edward William Lane, *An account*, 222-246.

⁷⁸John Bowen, *Muslims through discourse*, 5.

⁷⁹Ignaz Goldziher pointed out the diversity that existed amongst Muslim cultures from Islam’s inception until the 20th century in his *Introduction to Islamic theology and law* in 1910. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) [1910]. For a discussion of Goldziher’s earlier contribution, see Ronald A. Lukens-Bull, ‘Between text and practice: considerations in the anthropological study of Islam’, *Marburg Journal of Religion*, 4:2 (1999), 1-10 (p.4).

⁸⁰Robert Redfield, *Peasant society and culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 70-71.

⁸¹Ronald A Lukens-Bull, ‘Between text and practice’, 3.

reflectively. Little Traditions have been called ‘low traditions,’ and in speaking of Islamic contexts, ‘local Islam’ and ‘popular Islam.’

This dichotomy, as normally reported, contained an *a priori* prejudice, in that literate traditions were normally taken to be legitimate expressions of the ‘true’ religion, whereas folk and village religious expressions were downgraded to the level of ‘aberrations’ or vestiges of other, earlier (usually ‘animist’) religions, and did not represent the ‘real’ faith. Although Geertz and Ernest Gellner use this dichotomy in their descriptions of variations in Islamic expression, the concept has been largely abandoned since the 1980s in favour of other theoretical constructs.⁸²

‘**islams**’ Anthropologist Abdul Hamid el-Zein criticised the Great/Little Traditions dichotomy as merely following the biased assumptions of the ‘ulama’, who *a priori* limit what can and cannot be construed as true religion, while simultaneously affirming a “pure and well-defined essence of Islam.”⁸³ El-Zein sees anthropologists who attempt to define a true Islamic essence as really making theological judgments, something he says is beyond the ability of anthropology to do. He finds it amazing that anthropologists, while preferring to do ethnographic studies among the ‘Little Traditions,’ employ the assumptions, methods and value judgments of the ‘Great Traditions.’⁸⁴

In all fairness to Redfield, he actually did propose a more nuanced vision of universal and local expressions of religion than is usually credited to him. In *Peasant society and culture* (1956), he wrote that “Great and little traditions can be thought of as two currents of thought and action, distinguishable, yet ever flowing into and out of each other.”⁸⁵ Redfield also proposed that Great Traditions, in order to be great, by nature had to be adaptable to

⁸² Talal Asad, ‘The idea’, 6; Ronald A. Lukens-Bull, ‘Between text and practice’, 4-8.

⁸³ El-Zein, ‘Beyond ideology and theology: the search for the anthropology of Islam’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 6 (1977), 227-54 (243). Other meaningful criticisms of the Great/Little Traditions dichotomy are set forth by Talal Asad, ‘The idea’, 6; in John Bowen, *Muslims through discourse*, 4-6; and in Eickelman ‘The study of Islam in local contexts’, *Contributions to Asian Studies*, 17 (1982), 1-16 (2).

⁸⁴ El-Zein, ‘Beyond ideology’, 246-9.

⁸⁵ Robert Redfield, *Peasant society and culture*, 72.

many local contexts, and in fact do adapt their forms and meanings locally ('parochialization'). Similarly, all Great Traditions had to start somewhere, and so all Great Traditions are really Little Traditions grown large and codified ('universalization').⁸⁶ Thus Redfield certainly made more allowance for adaptation and exchange between Great and Little Traditions than is usually recognised.

Regardless of the actual flexibility of Redfield's model, el-Zein proposed exchanging the term Islam for 'islams.' As a reaction against both the 'ulama's desire to control the definition of 'true' Islam and the essentialists' view of an Islamic 'essence,' el-Zein believed anthropologists and students of religion should study each local expression of Islam as a phenomenon in its own right. Writes el-Zein, "We have to start from the "native's" model of "Islam" and analyze the relations which produce its meaning."⁸⁷

El-Zein's second important idea in this regard met with less sympathy from scholars. He further theorised that, although there are unlimited instances of localised expressions of Islam, these local expressions all reflect the 'embedded logic' of the Islamic system which is the same the world over.⁸⁸ So, although emphasizing the variations in local expressions of Islam around the world, el-Zein still held that the local varieties of Islam were all expressions of a single set of universal principles. His proposal, like the Orientalists and fundamentalists he differed with, continued to posit an ahistorical core that was 'Islam', and was at base still essentialist.⁸⁹

Geertz and interpretive anthropology In his celebrated collection of essays, *The interpretation of cultures* (1973), Clifford Geertz promoted a project of investigating cultures and religions in their own right, and understanding the meanings which they assigned to symbols (objects, words, gestures, events). Geertz opposed the reductionist theories of the

⁸⁶ Robert Redfield, *Peasant society and culture*, 94-96.

⁸⁷ El-Zein, 'Beyond ideology', 251.

⁸⁸ El-Zein, 'Beyond ideology', 252.

⁸⁹ For similar criticisms, see Dale Eickelman, 'Changing interpretations of Islamic movements', in *Islam and the political economy of meaning*, ed. William R. Roff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 18-19.

structuralists who reduced religion to either functional needs of society or theories of economic relationships, and he rejected functionalist “explanations” of behaviours in favour of the “interpretation” of cultures. Geertz emphasised studying cultures as a collection of symbols, and his approach to anthropology became variously known as symbolic anthropology, interpretive anthropology, or cultural anthropology. Like anthropologist Franz Boas, Geertz believed in the supreme value of ‘particular’ studies (ethnographies) over “general theories.”⁹⁰

Geertz proposed a theory of religion as the interaction between *world-view*, which amounts to the people’s beliefs about the nature of the world, and *ethos*, or the people’s tendencies to behave in ways which are in agreement with and also reinforce their world-view. He succinctly defined religion as “(1) *a system of symbols which acts to* (2) *establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by* (3) *formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and* (4) *clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that* (5) *the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.*”⁹¹

Geertz achieved lasting recognition for his field-based ethnography of Javanese culture, *The religion of Java* (1960), in which he employed ‘thick description’ to get underneath the surface of the meanings of actions and provide a descriptive analysis of a culture. In his most famous scholarly article, “Thick Descriptions,” Geertz borrows a notion from Gilbert Ryle in which two boys are “rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes.”⁹² From outward observation, both could be simply suffering from a physical twitch. But if one of the boys is winking at a friend, the meanings of the two boys’ actions are worlds apart. What is more, for the winking boy’s action to have the complex significance that it certainly does have, there must be assigned meanings to the action which are understood by a large number of people in

⁹⁰ Daniel L Pals, *Seven theories of religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 236-9.

⁹¹ Clifford Geertz, ‘Religion as a cultural system’, in *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90-91.

⁹² Clifford Geertz, ‘Thick description: toward an interpretative theory of culture’, in *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-32 (pp. 6-7).

a culture. Geertz takes the analogy further to posit a boy *practising* his winking at home alone in front of the mirror, and boys *mocking* another boy by *imitating* his wink. In each case, the actions are culturally learned and understood, dependent upon totally different motivations and impulses, and, for the cultural outsider, obscure in meaning until the actors themselves can explain their meanings to the investigator. Using his method of ‘thick description’, Geertz hoped to bring to light the nuanced, textured meanings of the cultural ‘symbols’ he observed.

Geertz did not feel it was an ethnographer’s job to propose and test a grand theory for the source of religion, as had Freud or Durkheim. He was concerned to avoid generalizations about culture, and instead offered a theory for *interpreting* the infinitely diverse forms of cultural and religious expression found in real life. He did appreciate the method of comparative study, which he employed in his *Islam Observed* (1968), a well-known ethnography which compares the development of Islam in two diverse, far-distant Islamic states, Indonesia and Morocco.

1.3.c Islam as discursive tradition elaborated

It was not until the last quarter of the 20th century that certain scholars put forward a framework for conceptualizing local expressions of Islam which avoided the twin pitfalls of essentialism and particularizing notions of Islam. In “The idea of an anthropology of Islam” (1986), Talal Asad suggested viewing Islam as a ‘discursive tradition,’ which has since become the favoured approach of anthropologists and scholars from other disciplines for conceptualizing diversity in Islamic traditions. Asad notes that there are those who approach the study of the nature of Islam from an essentialist perspective (Islam is universally fixed) and from a nominalist perspective (‘Islam’ does not designate anything real – it is a mental concept only). Asad suggests we should start “as Muslims do, from the concept of a

discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur'an and the hadith.”⁹³

The strength of the discourse approach is that it neither discounts local expressions of Islam as ‘illegitimate,’ nor does it dismiss the claim by the majority of Muslims that there are universally shared aspects of Islam. Rather, it begins from the point of view of “what Muslims say” and it tries to discover the meaning of ‘Islam’ at the exact point of the interaction between local behaviour and universal texts. The ‘discourse’ is the ‘working out’ of local histories and social contexts with what is perceived (locally) to be the universal prescriptions of Islam. William Roff explains the nature of discourse method as the “intricate analysis of the dialectic between any given, historically evolved set of structural relations...and the transcendental prescriptions as understood by those involved (a dialectic accessible through, and only through, what the natives say)...”⁹⁴ The job of the researcher then is to listen to the dialectic in order to grasp the significance of any disagreements or changes taking place in rituals and beliefs.

Thus far, ‘discourse’ as an lens of interpretation is sufficiently clear. Asad goes further to clarify his notion of ‘tradition’: “A tradition consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history.”⁹⁵ Traditions, says Asad, have a past, present and future. It could not be a tradition if it did not relate to a time when it was established (in the *past*), in a certain way, with certain meanings and significance. The tradition is debated or affirmed in the *present* because of a present concern for its *future*, that is, whether it should be changed or retained.

As an anthropologist studying Islamic traditions in the Gayo highlands of Aceh, John Bowen offers his approach to using the discourse method in the clear language of a

⁹³ Talal Asad, ‘The idea’, 14.

⁹⁴ William Roff, ‘Islamic movements’, 46-47.

⁹⁵ Talal Asad, ‘The idea’, 14.

practitioner: “My focus is on the field of debate and discussion in which participants construct discursive linkages to texts, phrases, and ideas held to be part of the universal tradition of Islam. I am interested less in the overall cultural style (Geertz 1968) than I am in the *dīn* (religion) that emerges from the arguments.”⁹⁶ Elsewhere Bowen promotes investigating “the social life of religious discourse: how written texts and oral traditions are produced, read and reread.”⁹⁷

Both Bowen and Abu-Lughod suggest that it is not only the Qurʾan and hadith which make up the sources of religious knowledge, as Asad seems to indicate. Rather, they point out that local believers in various contexts may also include diverse cosmological systems, oral traditions, and works written by local or medieval Islamic scholars as sources of received Islamic authority.⁹⁸

A few key points should be mentioned as corollaries to the assumptions implicit in the discourse method just described. First, the discourse method admits willingly that more or less all Muslims believe there is a universal essence to Islam, and that, to a great extent, such a unity of shared authoritative foundations of belief can be observed. The Qurʾan and canonical collections of hadith are quite nearly universally accepted by Sunni Muslims as authoritative and ultimate sources of religious prescription. Roff points out that Muslims also share “a group of symbols, a vocabulary of moral suasion, the practical knowledge in Islamic education and juridical institutions, and the sodalities of the Sufi orders.”⁹⁹

A second corollary to the discourse approach is the need to recognise that argument and conflict are normative in Islam (and other world religions), rather than being a sign of crisis or decline. Previously, Orientalist interpreters of Islam saw disagreement and disunity between Muslim groups as an inherent weakness in the religion, evidence of “Islam in

⁹⁶ John Bowen, *Muslims through discourse*, 8.

⁹⁷ John Bowen, *Muslims through discourse*, 8.

⁹⁸ John Bowen, *Muslims through discourse*, 10; Lila Abu-Lughod, ‘Zones of theory in the anthropology of the Arab world.’ *Annual Review in Anthropology*, 18 (1989) 267-306 (p. 297).

⁹⁹ William Roff, *Islam and the political economy of meaning*, 1.

crisis.”¹⁰⁰ But according to the discursive view, Muslim argumentation over which beliefs and practices are orthodox should no longer be seen this way. Rather, argumentation about what is orthodox is seen as normative, as individual communities interpret their own identities in relation to society, their histories and their scriptures.¹⁰¹

Writers using this approach tend to point out that the discursive method is just that – a *method of interpreting* the dialectic visible and audible, as local Muslims deal with their own context and prescriptive texts, rather than any sort of theory of religion. Roff makes this perspective clear in the introduction to his edited *Islam and the Political Economy of Meaning*:

“...we are more concerned to practise interpretation than to elaborate theory. It is sometimes argued that theory must precede practice...it would be as curious to expect the practice of interpretation to be preceded by a theory of interpretation as to expect the lived life to be preceded by the examined life. The two must, indeed, proceed hand in hand, or perhaps more exactly dialectically...”¹⁰²

Following these scholars, this thesis is not so much employing a *theory* of interpreting Islam – rather, it is employing a *method* of interpretation. The method used here is to listen to the Bengali Muslims of Rajshahi themselves, to record and consider their speech in relation to their beliefs, rituals, and sources of authoritative prescriptions. Exploring the dialectic that emerges as local Muslims interact with their texts and with opposing groups is the means for understanding how local groups in this area negotiate, produce, maintain and defend legitimate (though diverse) expressions of Islam which are related by the believers in each case to authoritative sources.

¹⁰⁰ Asad makes this point and discusses the historical and philosophical roots of this notion in Talal Asad ‘The idea’, 16.

¹⁰¹ Talal Asad, ‘The idea’, 16.

¹⁰² William Roff, *Islam and the political economy of meaning*, 2-3.

1.4 Chapter Plan

In **Chapter Two**, ‘Religious Knowledge in Rajshahi’, we are introduced to the research context for this thesis – Rajshahi, Bangladesh. Historical factors in the arrival and assimilation of an Islamic identity in the Bengali environment are treated first, along with a brief overview of Rajshahi City and its place in the economic and religious environment of a modern state. The core of the chapter examines the patterns of Islamic religious reform in Bengal from the 18th-20st centuries against the backdrop of the broader ‘Hanafi’ religious environment of South Asia. The local and somewhat unconventional Bangladeshi usage of the term ‘Hanafi’ is noted, and the primary Salafi reformist movement active in Rajshahi, the Ahl-i-Hadith, is introduced in detail. Finally, the religious texts which provide the ‘data’ for the disagreements and debates between the majority Hanafis and their reforming coreligionists are explored. In addition to the uncontested Qur’anic revelation and the universal Sunni collections of Hadith (affirmed by both groups), a number of religious texts with quasi-authoritative positions are noted for their importance in contemporary discourses.

Chapter Three, ‘Death Above Ground – community rituals during *al-barzakh*’, showcases the ethnographic fieldwork conducted for this thesis by describing a complex of rituals which the living perform on behalf of a deceased community member in Rajshahi. Rajshahi Muslims are aware of their religion’s affirmation of the conscious life in the grave, or *al-barzakh*, and seek to reduce the torment of this period and increase the chances of a positive outcome at the future judgment through performing ritual acts meant to generate *so’ab* (merit). For forty days following each death in the community, *khotom* recitations of scripture and other repeated blessings are recited at various gatherings, including at the time of the funeral and at numerous *milads* which follow. During and after these ceremonies, the merit generated is transferred (*bokshano*) to the account of the deceased. In some cases, local ‘ulama’ coach the deceased in the grave on how to respond to the interrogating angels

Munkar and Nakir in a ritual called *talqin*. Descriptions of these activities which are current at the beginning of the 21st century in northwest Bangladesh give a valuable ethnographic account of one South Asian Islamic context, while also providing a useful case study for understanding the larger discourse taking place between the Hanafi majority community and the purifying Ahl-i-Hadith movement in Rajshahi.

While Chapter Three examines ‘what Rajshahi Muslims do’ in relation to a death in the community, **Chapter Four** ‘Death Below Ground: *al-barzakh* in the local understanding’ takes the reader ‘below ground’ to the cosmological framework of belief that undergirds these public observances. The Qur’anic and subsequent understandings of the Islamic concept of *al-barzakh* are examined fully here. In addition to the authoritative Sunni hadith collections, locally influential texts which specifically inform the Muslim understanding of the chronological events of *al-barzakh* are utilised, along with statements from ‘ulama’ gleaned from interviews, to give the reader a ‘sense’ of the composite understanding of the life of the grave held by Rajshahi Muslims. Because the possibility of exchange and communication between the living and the dead is the most vigorously contested issue of debate and reform in Rajshahi, exposure to these Islamic religious concepts provides the reader with the necessary context for understanding the contemporary discourse between the Ahl-i-Hadith and local Hanafi Muslims.

Chapter Five, ‘Assisting the Dead in Rajshahi’, draws the helix of ethnographic and textual strands discussed throughout this thesis together with a presentation of four key hadith traditions which local Ahl-i-Hadith and Hanafi ‘ulama’ interpreted for this research project. Discussions about these hadith reports which directly relate to the local discourse were held during interviews with Islamic community leaders. Questions are raised inside their mosques about the opposing group’s views. Reformist Ahl-i-Hadith leaders struggle to assimilate sometimes incongruous hadith traditions with reformist doctrine, while others roundly

condemn Hanafi excesses. Hanafi imams admit that some local practices are of local origin and describe their own unique efforts at gentle reform from within. Other rituals are legitimised as being authentically Islamic, with exegetical and scriptural proofs elaborated. Through listening to the debates between Ahl-i-Hadith and Hanafi ‘ulama’ about death-related practices in Rajshahi, the reader becomes aware of the methods used to interpret scripture by these groups, and simultaneously, is exposed to just one of hundreds of contexts in South Asia where religious reform and traditionalist Islam are being defined and contested.

Chapter Six offers reflections based on the discourse observed in Rajshahi, and provides considerations for future research building on this work.

Chapter 2 - Religious Knowledge in Rajshahi

In this chapter the reader is introduced to the contemporary Islamic milieu in northwest Bangladesh, including the major Islamic purifying movements now active and their historical and theological roots within broader South Asian Islam. We begin with an introduction to Rajshahi City, the location where field interviews and participant observation for this thesis were conducted, and note important religious terminology that is specific to the Rajshahi context. Rajshahi residents themselves classify the Muslim population of Rajshahi into two major categories, the ‘Hanafis’ and the Ahl-i-Hadith. These terms with their unique local usages are carefully defined.

Next we survey the broad phenomenon of pietistic Islamic reform which spread throughout the Indian subcontinent during the 18th-20th centuries. The reader is acquainted with the general characteristics of Islamic reform during this period, along with specific Indian reformist movements, such as the Tariqa-i-Muhammadiyah, the Deoband movement, and the early Ahl-i-Hadith of north India. The focus of this historical background is on those movements and figures that impacted on Bengal particularly, and eventually led to the growth of the modern Ahl-i-Hadith movement in contemporary northwest Bangladesh.

No discussion of reform movements in South Asia should ignore the role of print technology in the spread of Islamic reform ideals. Great works of Islamic reform based primarily on hadith literature spread into Muslim homes and villages throughout the last two centuries, effecting a renaissance in individual Muslim piety and a heightened sense of personal religious responsibility. Among these works in Urdu and Bengali, a few were especially noteworthy for their influence and popularity among the Muslims of Bengal. These works, described at the end of the chapter, form an important strand in the cross-currents of Islamic knowledge that combine to create the religious environment of Rajshahi today.

2.1 The research context: Rajshahi, Bangladesh

Rajshahi City¹ is situated on the high banks of the Padma (Ganges) river in northwest Bangladesh directly across the water from West Bengal, India. It sits on a raised alluvial formation known in this region as the *barind*,² or the *Varendra* area in Sanskrit. Formerly called Rampur Boalia,³ the Rajshahi settlement has witnessed many of the great events of regional history since Islam first became a political force in Bengal in 1204. To begin with, the Hindu Sen (Sena) Dynasty that was displaced by the first Muslim invasion of Ikhtiyar Uddin Muhammad Bokhtiyar Kholji (d. 1206) established their first capital, Bijaynagar, only nine miles west of current



Rajshahi in the mid 12th century. Shortly before the Muslim arrival, the Sen capital had been shifted about forty miles further west to the famous location of successive Hindu and Muslim kingdoms, the walled city of Lakhnaboti (also known as Gaur).⁴ Impressive buildings and ruins remain at Gaur and include some of the region's most important archaeological sites.

After the initial Muslim invasion in the 13th century by Turko-Afghan forces from the Iranian plateau (loyal to the Sultan in Delhi), additional groups of adventurers, traders and holy men of similar extraction continued to arrive and establish themselves in the area.

Between 1204 and 1526 five successive Delhi Sultanates and their related (but sometimes

¹ Rajshahi is one of six *divisions* in Bangladesh. It is also the name of a *district* within Rajshahi division. And finally, it is the name of the main *city* in Rajshahi district, referred to in official publications of different periods either as Rajshahi Town or Rajshahi City. Rajshahi gained the status of a City Corporation in September, 1988. The map of Bangladesh is from http://www.hazelwick.w-sussex.sch.uk/subject_resources/geography/website/year9/bangladeshfiles/bangladeshfloodsproject.htm, accessed on 27 April, 2010.

² বরিন্দ / বরেন্দ

³ Dr. Ashraf Siddiqui, *Bangladesh District Gazetteers: Rajshahi* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Government Press, 1976), 1.

⁴ Siddiqui, *Bangladesh District Gazetteers: Rajshahi*, 29.

independent) Bengal Sultanates ruled the western half of the Bengal region. Then, from the 16th through the 18th centuries the Mughals of Delhi extended their control to the area, establishing a provincial capital at Dhaka, and expanding the cultivation of rice, taxation, communication and even Islamic religion in the as yet unsettled hinterlands of the eastern half of Bengal.⁵

In the late 1600s, during Mughal rule of Bengal, Dutch traders established a production centre for silk at Rampur Boalia (later Rajshahi) and also built a notable building on the bank of the Padma river. ‘Barakuthi’,⁶ as the building is known, is the oldest building in Rajshahi today, and was purchased by French traders, and then by British traders with the East India Company.⁷ As British trading interests grew, first Bengal, and then most of India came under colonial administration in the 18th and 19th centuries.⁸ During this period Rajshahi remained a production centre for silk and later indigo. But as Rajshahi was not directly included in the rail links to Calcutta and Dhaka until a relatively late period (1930), trade, production and the population of the town did not grow significantly.⁹ During the British Raj, the town was able to produce a limited number of jobs primarily in provincial administrative posts and in the education and health professions. In many ways, the same limitations in the types of professions available in Rajshahi continue to the present day.

⁵ The standard history of the settlement of Bengal under the Sultanates and the Mughals is Richard Eaton, *The rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

⁶ বড়কুঠি

⁷ Mahbubar Rahman, রাজশাহী সিটি কর্পোরেশন (Rajshahi City Corporation), 2.

⁸ The signal events which effected British control of Bengal were the British victory over Nawab Sirajuddaula and his French allies at the Battle of Plassey (Palashi) in 1757, followed by British victory at Buxar in 1764 over the combined forces of the Nawab of Oudh, Mir Qasim, and the army of the Mughal emperor. See Muin-ud-Din Ahmad Khan, ‘Muslim Reform Movements’ in *History of Bangladesh, 1704-1971*, ed. Sirajul Islam (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1997), 188. The East India Company obtained the *diwani* of Bengal (right to collect taxes) from the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II in 1765, bringing Rampur Boalia (Rajshahi) under formal Company control, although the existing administrative structures were left intact. Siddiqui, *Bangladesh District Gazetteers: Rajshahi*, 34. Barbara Metcalf comments that, “This was one of the earliest and most complete examples of European domination of a former Muslim power. The decades that followed in Bengal were ones of unmitigated plunder.” *Islamic revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 9.

⁹ Rahman, রাজশাহী সিটি কর্পোরেশন, 3.

At the partition of India into India and Pakistan in 1947, the border that was drawn by the colonial administration placed Rajshahi on the East Pakistan side of the new international boundary. As a result, Rajshahi was one of the many communities that was deeply affected by partition-era migration of Muslims to East Pakistan and Hindus to India (see below). The Two-Nation Theory supported by the Muslim League in India, which during the years leading up to partition had sought separate state polities based on religious affiliation, had succeeded. However, East Pakistan (formerly the eastern part of the Indian province of Bengal) had little else in common with Pakistan's western half. The East Pakistanis were ethnically Bengali and culturally distinct from their taller, lighter-skinned compatriots. Additionally, they were separated geographically by more than a thousand miles of Indian soil. A perceived unequal distribution of the rewards of independence, as well as unequal investment in infrastructure, industry and government in the eastern province, created a sense of disillusionment in those Bengalis who had argued for a separate state.¹⁰ Perhaps most significantly, the East Pakistanis were linguistically distinct from their West Pakistani compatriots. West Pakistanis spoke a variety of diverse languages, including Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi and Pushto, with most using an Arabic-based script. East Pakistanis, by contrast, were not only more numerous, but all spoke Bengali (Bangla), written using a Sanskrit-based script.

Therefore, the major issue to galvanise resistance to West Pakistan in the east was the Pakistani government's refusal to acknowledge Bengali as one of the state languages. When several language protestors were killed by the Pakistani army during a demonstration on February 21, 1952, the protest movement was carried to a new level. Throughout the two and a half decades of a united Pakistan, tensions continued to grow over perceived inequalities between the West and the East wings. The central government in Lahore and many provincial

¹⁰ Siddiqui, *Bangladesh District Gazetteers: Rajshahi*, 41-43.

posts in the East were mainly staffed by West Pakistanis. Bengalis were almost totally unrepresented in the army.¹¹ Bengalis were also disillusioned by the unequal distribution of funds for infrastructure and development. Critics at the time pointed out that although the East wing's annual export margins exceeded those of the West wing's by a small fraction, in no year of united Pakistan did the percentage of export earnings returning to the East wing exceed those returning to the West wing.¹² Finally, when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman of the Awami League party (based in East Pakistan) won a majority in the first democratic national election of 1970,¹³ the central Pakistani government at Lahore could not abide Awami plans for a revised constitution or their proposals for a federal system of government with increased provincial autonomy. Talks broke down in March 1971, and the West Pakistanis used the army to brutally crush dissent in the East wing, which led to the nine-month Bangladesh War of Independence¹⁴ and culminated in the establishing of Bangladesh on December 16, 1971.

Rajshahi today is the fourth largest city in Bangladesh. As indicated above, it is built on the high banks overlooking the Padma River (Ganges). Across the vast river valley to the south India can be seen on a clear day. It is one of only six city municipalities in Bangladesh, and serves as the headquarters for both the smaller *district* and the larger country *division*, both having the name Rajshahi.¹⁵ But in spite of its current metropolitan population of 775,000 and its numerous higher education institutions, it retains more of a provincial feel than many industrialised Asian mega-cities. Farm animals still roam residential unpaved and paved roads and the number of rural villagers seeking work in menial construction jobs and as rickshaw drivers is high. In fact, compared with the truly urban characteristics of Dhaka,

¹¹ Craig Baxter, *Bangladesh: from a nation to a state* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), 65.

¹² Baxter, *Bangladesh*, 67.

¹³ The Awami League captured 167 seats out of 313 in the National Assembly of Pakistan. Siddiqui, *Bangladesh District Gazetteers: Rajshahi*, 42.

¹⁴ Officially in Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Liberation War / *Mukti Juddho* / মুক্তিযুদ্ধ. Occasionally referred to as the Pakistani Civil War.

¹⁵ See *Statistical Pocket Book of Bangladesh 2008*, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. http://www.bbs.gov.bd/dataindex/pby/pk_book_08.pdf Accessed Dec. 5, 2009.

Rajshahi might be better described as a provincial town, and indeed government and scholarly publications seem to mix the two terms when attempting to describe Rajshahi.



1. Shops near a residential neighborhood in Rajshahi

The Shah Makhdum *Dargah* (Sufi tomb-shrine) centrally located in the city provides an important reminder of the medieval migration of Sufi *pirs*¹⁶ to Bengal during the Sultanate and Mughal periods. Attached to the tomb-shrine of Shah Makhdum (d. 1634), is the tomb of his crocodile (on whose back he is reported to have come up the Padma river to Rajshahi), a large Hanafi mosque, a *hefz-khana* (madrassa exclusively for memorizing the Qur^ʿan), and opposite the road overlooking the Padma river, a large two-story madrasa with a full curriculum.¹⁷

Rajshahi city's numerous universities and colleges cater especially to families in the Rajshahi division, and the city is often called a '*shikkha nogori*.'¹⁸ or 'Education City' because of its abundance of educational institutions. Notable among these institutions are

¹⁶ The term *pir* always denotes a 'mystic guide' in the Bengal context. He can be a member of a Sufi order or simply a holy man who claims special powers. A *pir* always gathers *chela*, or disciples, and the *pir-chela* relationship is an important mode of spirituality in Bengali culture and history. Shrines constructed at tombs of dead *pirs* are locations of special spiritual power in popular belief, and pilgrimages and other devotions are commonly performed at these sites in hope of achieving some spiritual or worldly gain.

¹⁷ See A. K. M. Yakub Ali, রাজশাহীতে ইসলাম (Islam in Rajshahi) (Dhaka, Tamralipi, 2008), 22, 44-49; Aktar Banu, *Islam in Bangladesh*, 13;

¹⁸ শিক্ষা নগরী

Rajshahi University, with over 25,000 students, Rajshahi University of Engineering and Technology, Rajshahi Medical College, and Rajshahi College. The city also has large hospitals and numerous medical clinics, providing medical care not only to the city's residents, but to millions of others from the villages and towns of the division.

Historically, the city was accessed most easily by way of river transportation. In the first part of the 20th century, transportation to Calcutta, the administrative hub of British Bengal, was still being facilitated by a daily ferry taking passengers to rail heads connecting southward. During the Pakistan and Bangladesh eras, Rajshahi struggled to connect with national commerce and industry due to continued under-developed communication infrastructure. Until the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge (Bangabandhu Bridge) was built across the Jamuna (Brahmaputra) River in 1998, there was no direct road or rail link with Dhaka, the capital. The entire northwest quadrant of the country had depended on long waits at river ferry crossings for public and private vehicles. Given the chaotic nature of road manners, a hot and sticky tropical climate and the former journey time of at least 8-9 hours to Dhaka (197 km./122 mi. by air), communication and transport were difficult. More recently, with trains and fast bus services, the trip takes around five hours, though it can still be a harrowing and dangerous undertaking. Wrecked buses in highway ditches are a near daily sight for travellers and are all too often the 'end of the road' for the unlucky – most people personally know friends or loved ones who were injured or lost in road accidents on the way to Dhaka.



2.2 Lower left inset shows Rajshahi City, an inverted ‘T’ shape, facing southwards across the Padma River towards West Bengal, India.¹⁹

Due to poor communication with regional centres, Rajshahi never developed an industrial base, and as a result, industry related jobs are practically non-existent in the area today. One benefit of no industry is a nearly complete lack of industrial air and water pollution that residents of Dhaka (the capital) and Chittagong (the port city) must face. As noted above, production of fine silk was encouraged and facilitated from an early period, so that Rajshahi today is the region producing the majority of Bangladesh’s fine silk saris,

¹⁹ Map from *BP*: ‘Rajshahi District’. Accessed 23 February, 2010, http://www.banglapedia.org/httpdocs/HT/R_0079.HTM

blouses and material. Several important silk factories are located in the north of the city, and the city itself, in addition to being known as an ‘Education City’, is also known nationally as the ‘Silk City’. The ‘Silk City Express’ is a new train service that was recently added to other daily train routes to the capital.

Approximately 80% of Bangladeshis still live in rural areas and are involved in agriculture related activities. In addition to the pervasive cultivation of wet rice, lentils, potatoes, vegetables, livestock and local fisheries that are the region’s agricultural mainstays, Rajshahi’s inhabitants are justly proud of the region’s reputation as a superior mango and lychee producing centre. Numerous varieties of mangoes are grown and their individual qualities are described with precision by average residents and even children. Every summer during July and August, thousands of tons of mangoes are harvested from large orchards to the west of Rajshahi near Shibganj, as well as other locations. Brought to the towns and to Rajshahi’s main bazaar, the fruit is sold, packed for shipping, and distributed across the country and to India.

Religiously, the population of Rajshahi district today is estimated to be 93% Muslim and 5% Hindu.²⁰ This represents a heavier Muslim concentration than the national average, which was estimated at 90% Muslim and 9% Hindu in the most recent national census.²¹ We noted that an important modern event which affected the social and religious development of the city and district was the two-way mass migration of ordinary residents along the new international boundary during the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan. At that time, government estimates placed the number of Muslims from across the border in India who moved to Rajshahi (district) at 75,900.²² Local residents who themselves moved from India as children during partition were still alive during the time of this research and recounted

²⁰ ‘Rajshahi District’ in *BP*.

²¹ Bangladesh Census of 1991. Accessed 13 February, 2010 at http://www.bbs.gov.bd/dataindex/census/bang_atg.pdf

²² Siddiqui, *Bangladesh District Gazetteers: Rajshahi*, 49.

their stories to the author. Many stories included accounts of informal arrangements made between Rajshahi Hindu property owners and Indian Muslim property owners – literally to swap properties across the newly created international boundary.

Dr. Mahbubar Rahman, a historian at Rajshahi University who has written extensively



2. The main street at Shaheb Bazar, the center of commercial activity in Rajshahi City.
[courtesy of Jacob Thomas]

on the history of Rajshahi district, relates that those who left India for Bangladesh during Partition were self-styled *muhajirs* (an Arabic term for emigrant, which often signifies emigration in God's cause), seeing the Islamic facet of their personal and community identities as important enough to uproot and leave the land of their birth. He believes that these *muhajirs* were not only responsible for tipping the Muslim/Hindu percentages of the district to the heavy Muslim majority that exists today, but also that the level of Islamic identity and commitment of these emigrants has contributed to the success of Islamist groups

and their allies in local elections, as well as the fundamentalist tendencies which are prominent in Rajshahi today.²³

Islamic fundamentalism in Rajshahi.²⁴ After the War of Independence in 1971, the general atmosphere in Bangladesh was not favourable towards Islamic fundamentalism or Islamist parties, due to the collaboration of the Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat) and other Islamically conservative groups with the Pakistani Army against the Bengali freedom fighters.²⁵ The first constitution of Bangladesh established by the founding Awami League government in 1972 declared Bangladesh to be a secular democracy and outlawed political parties based on a religious identity.²⁶ Most of the Jamaat leadership took refuge in Pakistan.

Three years after independence, however, a coup brought to power the General Ziaur Rahman regime (1975-1981), which began to cultivate a stronger Islamic identity to bolster its own weak political legitimacy. This regime and the one that followed it, led by General Ershad, promoted an Islamic national identity to the detriment of the secularist values of the independence struggle.²⁷ The constitution was revised to remove the commitment to secularism and the ban against religious political parties, and strong ties were forged with Saudi Arabia, the Gulf and with the Pakistani army. The Jamaat-e-Islami party was re-established in 1979, and then in 1988, Islam was declared the state religion of Bangladesh.²⁸

There are two major Islamist political parties in Bangladesh, and three or four noteworthy Islamic terrorist organizations, all of them having as one of their goals the

²³ Interview: Mahbubar Rahman. Interviewed by Author. Digital recording. Rajshahi. 31 December, 2007. Ahl-i-Hadith madrasas are similarly concentrated in the cities of Northern Punjab in (West) Pakistan that received the largest numbers of *muhajirs* from India during Partition: Gujranwala, Faisalabad, Sheikhpura, Kasur. See Mariam Abou Zahab, 'Salafism in Pakistan: the Ahl-e Hadith movement' in *Global Salafism: Islam's new religious movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 141.

²⁴ Unless otherwise noted, information in this section is from 'Bangladesh Today', a report of the International Crisis Group, 23 October, 2006. Accessed 1 March, 2010 at www.crisisgroup.org.

²⁵ "Islamists, especially the Jamaat-e-Islami party (Jamaat), are often accused of siding with Pakistanis, joining in genocide and allegedly actively assisting massacres, especially targeted killings of intellectuals in Dhaka in the last weeks." 'Bangladesh Today' (ICG report, 23 October, 2006), 2.

²⁶ Baxter, *Bangladesh*, 87-88.

²⁷ 'Islam in South Asia', ER², 4654.

²⁸ 'Bangladesh Today' (ICG report, 23 October, 2006), 15.

creation of an Islamic judiciary and government in Bangladesh. The largest legitimate party is the Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat), which maintains a very active and influential student wing, *Islami Chattra Shibir (Shibir)*. The other Islamist party that participates democratically is the Islamic Oikya Jote (IOJ), which won only two seats out of 300 in the 2001 national election and no seats in the 2008 election. Although the *Jamaat* has never fared well in national elections either, gaining only a very small percentage of seats if any,²⁹ it has succeeded in creating a disproportionate influence through its partnership with larger political parties, through its organised political cadres, by cultivating strong sources of foreign funding, and especially through the activism of its organised student political wing, *Shibir*.

Rajshahi University, with 25,000 students, is an active field for *Jamaat/Shibir* recruitment and training of students to take part in the project of Islamisation in Bangladesh. Scholarships, grants and monthly stipends are given to students who join the organization, along with better dorm rooms and other types of support. But disciplined commitment and participation in *Jamaat/Shibir* activities is the price members must pay. Many students resist these lucrative hand-outs because they do not believe in *Shibir's* goals, while others join.

Since 2000, the national government, the various security agencies and the media have grappled with the appearance of Islamic terrorist organizations which have seemed to be centred for the most part in the suburbs of Rajshahi city. Specifically, the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and its mirror organization Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB), had their primary support base in the northern suburbs of Rajshahi. The JMB claimed responsibility for the 17 August, 2005 bombings that occurred simultaneously at 400 locations in 63 out of 64 of Bangladesh's districts. Both groups were officially banned on 23

²⁹ In the most recent election on 29 December, 2008, Jamaat and the other Islamist parties were decisively defeated, with Jamaat gaining only 2 seats in parliament out of 300 contested seats. No other Islamist parties won any seats in 2008. The BNP, the major party which has been aligned with the smaller Islamist parties, was defeated at the polls, gaining only 30 out of 300 contested seats. This represented a significant reverse in the national will (as far as the elections can be seen to represent it), as the BNP had won 193 out of 300 seats in the previous national election in October, 2001. See Interparliamentary Union website. Accessed on 1 March, 2010 at http://www.ipu.org/parline/reports/2023_E.htm.

February, 2005, and a number of the top leadership were arrested and executed by the military caretaker government in early 2007. Importantly, one of the three top leaders of the JMB/JMJB is Muhammad Asadullah al-Ghalib, a lecturer in Arabic at Rajshahi University – and also the *amir* (head of organization) of one of the two largest Ahl-i-Hadith organizations in the country – the Ahl-i-Hadith Andolon Bangladesh (AHAB). While his close colleagues were executed in 2007, Al-Ghalib was exonerated and released in February, 2009. In early 2010 he was once again actively preaching in the Ahl-i-Hadith madrasas and other public venues of Rajshahi.³⁰

The influence of foreign funding on the religious atmosphere of Bangladesh, and specifically of Rajshahi, is always difficult to ascertain, as the Islamic political parties and other recipients of funds are consistently opaque about their financial sources. But Rajshahi residents interviewed in this regard confidently asserted that outside money is responsible for much of Jamaat's ability to run its programmes, and also for the appearance of so many new private hospitals, educational institutions and shiny big mosques under construction around Rajshahi. Local residents specifically named Kuwait and Saudi Arabia as the chief sponsoring countries, whether through official government cooperatives, charity and development organizations or other non-public channels.³¹

To cite just one of numerous visible examples of foreign influence that Rajshahi locals face daily, on Airport Road in Rajshahi near Nawdapara there is a very large new Medical Training College that was being constructed in 2006. Locals asserted that it was constructed with funds from the Gulf, though I was not given any details. A graduate of a large Ahl-i-Hadith madrasa in Rajshahi mentioned in an interview that representatives from Saudi Arabian funding bodies used to attend meetings at his madrasa regularly (before the 2001 attacks in New York City). Rajshahi residents sometimes refer to certain new mosques

³⁰ Telephone interview with Ahl-i-Hadith madrasa graduate in Rajshahi. 26 February, 2010.

³¹ Multiple interviews: Names withheld. December 2007/Jan-Feb., 2008. Rajshahi.

being built as ‘Kuwait mosques’, demonstrating the presence of foreign funding at least in the popular imagination, if not in much more concrete terms. Islamic finance and banking also extend their long reach into most corners of Bangladesh by offering interest-free loans to the poor:

“Almost all of Bangladesh’s districts are now home to Islamic microcredit schemes; where others, such as Grameen Bank or BRAC, have to charge interest rates of over 15 per cent to make the projects work, the interest-free Islamic models run at a loss, which has to be covered by their organisers. Some funding comes openly from sympathetic donors such as the UK-based Muslim Aid; the sources of other funds, however, are opaque.”³²

In terms of religious influence, there is no shortage of new mosques and madrasas coming online for new recruits in Bangladesh. In 2001, there were 9000 government-registered madrasas, 8000 private madrasas under the Bangladesh Qawmi Madrasa Education Board, and “thousands more which are neither registered nor have their curriculum regulated.”³³ There are already 220,000 mosques in Bangladesh, with an untold number being added annually, as unrestricted and unaccounted funds flow into the country from various sources and interests. The basic pattern in the poverty-ridden countryside³⁴ is for young boys to be sent to residential madrasa programmes by poor parents. The madrasas provide board and accommodation free of charge, relieving poor households of the burden of maintaining at least some of their children. From where this constant flow of cash comes in an economy like that of Bangladesh is a highly relevant question and journalists have met resistance in the search for answers. In many cases the Islamist parties like Jamaat and IOJ later funnel these madrasa students and graduates into political activism for state Islamist ends.³⁵

³² ‘Bangladesh Today’ (ICG report, 23 October, 2006), 20.

³³ ‘Bangladesh Today’ (ICG report, 23 October, 2006), 13, 20.

³⁴ 86 per cent of Bangladesh’s more than 150 million inhabitants reportedly live on less than US\$ 2 a day. Interparliamentary Union website. Accessed on 1 March, 2010 at http://www.ipu.org/parline/reports/2023_E.htm.

³⁵ Interview by author. 15 January, 2008. Rajshahi.

One can only guess at the impact of all of these programmes, job opportunities, and health care and educational provisions on families and individuals. While Bangladeshis on the whole remain largely disinterested in the Islamist state project, one cannot deny that thousands of individuals are personally touched, assisted, and perhaps inspired toward more conservative expressions of Islamic faith and identity by these groups and interests.

2.2 The Hanafi religious landscape

The great majority of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent follow the Hanafi *madhhab* of Sunni law.³⁶ The attitude of the majority of Hanafi ‘ulama’ in the Bangladesh countryside has been generally inclusive of diverse Islamic expressions for many centuries, as has been noted by numerous authorities on South Asian Islam.³⁷ In spite of centuries of vigorous purifying reform programmes by conservative Muslim groups, vast numbers of Indian Muslims have remained either untouched by these efforts or resistant to them.³⁸ Fieldwork in Rajshahi, Bangladesh certainly confirmed a religious environment that is still dynamic and vigorously contested between traditionalists and reformists.

‘Hanafi’. Although the term Hanafi normally represents one of the four classical schools of Muslim Sunni jurisprudence, in Rajshahi the term has taken on a more general meaning in current usage.³⁹ Today the term is a ‘catch-all’ for any mosque or belief system which supposedly adheres to the Hanafi system of law, but which also accepts as legitimate many diverse religious customs, celebrations, beliefs and practices which may be seen by reformists to have extra-Islamic origins. ‘Hanafi’ beliefs are commonly juxtaposed in the

³⁶ Aziz Ahmad, *An intellectual history of Islam in India* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969). Some Sunni communities in south and south-western India, and Sri Lanka, follow the Shafi’i *madhhab*. ‘Islam in South Asia’, ER², 4644.

³⁷ Both Roy and Eaton support a theory of Islamisation in Bengal which began by peaceful inclusion of new Islamic elements while still retaining the old beliefs and deities. See Asim Roy, *Islam in South Asia: a regional perspective* (Denver: iAcademicBooks, 2001), 48-73; and Richard M. Eaton, *The rise*, 269-280.

³⁸ “The reform movements induced a change in the way of life of only a few.” See the lengthy discussion of this topic in Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 39-71.

³⁹ This account of ‘what Muslims say’ about Hanafi/Ahl-i-Hadith identities in Rajshahi is taken from field interviews in 2006-2008 in Rajshahi.

conversation of locals with the ‘Ahl-i-Hadith,’ who are seen as the categorical opposition entity to ‘Hanafi’ practice.⁴⁰ Hanafi mosques, as collectives of individual Muslims, can belong to any number of religious organizations or associations, and can be *shari‘a*-based, inclusive of Sufi *tariqa*, or both. These mosques generally allow *milads* (ritual meals of blessing), ceremonies to assist the dead, *pir*-followership, and other traditional practices.

‘Traditionalist’. Another important category being used in this thesis is ‘traditionalist’, which is used to describe the type of inclusive Hanafism that is found in Rajshahi. A number of scholars writing about Islam in north India, Bangladesh and Indonesia use this term to signify Muslims who cherish age-old beliefs and practices which are nonetheless opposed by the reformists, or purifiers of Islam.⁴¹ From one angle, we can conceptualise these ‘heterodox’ notions as being part of the local practice ‘before’ the arrival of the reformist influences, or at least the most recent wave of reformist influence. This thesis is *not* using ‘traditionalist’ to mean *traditionist*, in the sense of an expert in hadith (*muhaddith*), a familiar term to scholars of Islamic studies. The ‘traditionalists’ in this study do use hadith regularly, but so do the reformists. There is no conceptual connection in this study between ‘traditionalist’ and the concept of *muhaddith*. Residents of Rajshahi do not use ‘traditionalist’ or any Bengali equivalent to describe themselves. Rather, as was noted in the previous paragraph, Rajshahi residents use the term ‘Hanafi’ to describe the majority of Bangladeshi Muslims who allow all the practices criticised by the reformists. This term is

⁴⁰ In Kerala, South India, Osella and Osella report that the terms ‘Sunni’ and ‘Mujahid’ have become similarly reified in oppositional categories. There, the self-described ‘Sunnis’ are Shafi’i traditionalists who oppose the efforts of the purifying reformist group, the Mujahids. The ‘Sunnis’ want to retain rituals and ceremonies which are considered to be *bida‘* by the purifiers. One of the Osellas’ informants wanted to attend a ritual celebration at a local tomb shrine of a Muslim saint, but could not out of fear for her reputation: “I can’t be seen at the *nercha*. People will talk and say that I am a Sunni.” See Filippo and Caroline Osella, ‘Islamism and social reform’, 320, 324.

⁴¹ See Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 72ff; John R. Bowen, ‘Death and the history of Islam’, 21-38; John R. Bowen, *Muslims through discourse*, 21, 54-89; Filippo and Caroline Osella, ‘Islamism and social reform’, 318, 320; Filippo and Caroline Osella, ‘Introduction: Islamic reformism in South Asia’ (*Modern Asian Studies*, 42, 2/3 (2008), 247-258), 250; Roff, ‘Whence cometh the Law?’, 331-332.

used both by Hanafis as a self-description, and by non-Hanafis to describe the majority group or individuals belonging to it.

A significant sub-category of ‘Hanafi’ Islam that is active in Rajshahi is the variety of Sufi *tariqas* and their associated *mazars* (tomb-shrines)⁴² in the area that have large followings. A great many Sufi tombs of dead *pirs* (saints)⁴³ dot the town and countryside. Baul sects are also, broadly speaking, in this category.⁴⁴ Most of the Sufi shrines have an annual *Urs* (anniversary celebration of the saint’s death; *orosh*⁴⁵ in Bengali), which usually lasts a couple of days, and includes performing spiritual music with song and instruments, as well as sharing a feast. Some of the more secretive Sufi celebrations can include taking mind-altering drugs and even secret sexo-yogic rites.

The present work does not focus on this sub-category, that of the Sufi movements in Rajshahi. A few studies have recently been carried out on both Baul and Sufi orders in West Bengal and Bangladesh.⁴⁶ Sufis in Rajshahi reported during fieldwork that they tend not to spend much time using Islamic texts, scriptural or otherwise. As Sufi devotees in Rajshahi commented to the author on numerous occasions, one doesn’t need *books*—you just need a

⁴² মাজার. The four most widespread Sufi *tariqas* in the subcontinent are Chishtiyya, Suhrawardiyya, Naqshbandiyya, and Qadiriyya. For an introduction to each in the Indian context, see Aziz Ahmad, *An intellectual history*, 34-43.

⁴³ পীর

⁴⁴ Bauls are a cult of mendicant mystical musicians with a highly developed cosmology of the universe which is centred on the human body. This cosmology combines elements from Sufism, Vaishnavism and the Shahajiya cults of northern India. Their most popular leader, Lalon Fakir (d. 1890) left a rich legacy of spiritual lyrics and also a style of instrumental and vocal worship music which is loved by Bengalis of various walks of life today, even those who do not follow the Baul path. The central shrine, where Lalon is buried, is in the town of Kushtia, about 100 kilometres directly west of Dhaka. Bauls in Bangladesh are mostly from a Muslim background, and Bauls in West Bengal, India, are mostly from a Hindu background. See Anwarul Karim, ‘Baul’, in *Banglaedia: national encyclopedia of Bangladesh* (10 volumes) (Dhaka: Asiatic Society, 2003); Jeanne Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁴⁵ ওরশ

⁴⁶ On Bauls, see Jeanne Openshaw, *Seeking Bauls of Bengal* (Cambridge: Foundation Books, 2005); For a recent study of Sufi religion in Bangladesh, see Phil Bushell’s study of the Shah Jalal mosque complex, the central shrine of Sylhet, in ‘Shah Jalal(r): patron saint of Sylhet and Bangladesh’ (PhD Thesis, Brunel University, 2006).

guide.⁴⁷ Since this study investigates the discourse between current practices and texts, it is perhaps more fruitful to spend time comparing the religious lives of ‘reformists’ with the more textually oriented Hanafi traditionalists, rather than with their Sufi brethren. It should be noted that, although some Hanafi mosques are sympathetic to local Sufi practices, ‘Hanafi traditionalist’ does not equate with Sufism in this thesis. It is a broad category designating a diverse, inclusive Islam, or the ‘pre-reform’ beliefs and practices of the majority. Finally, although Sufi organizations and local Sufi shrines are not included in the focus for this study of text-and-practice Islamic discourse, the effects of reformists’ endeavours *contra* Sufi practices will be commented on where relevant.

2.3 General characteristics of South Asian Islamic reform

‘**Reformist**’. Indian and Western scholars of South Asia normally use the word ‘reformist’ to describe Islamic purifying movements such as Deoband and Ahl-i-Hadith, which seek to revive the original pure religion of the first generations of Islam. This is in contra-distinction to the way ‘reformist’ is regularly used by Western journalists to describe politically liberal, modernizing movements in Iran and elsewhere.⁴⁸ Similarly opposed conventions also occur for the necessary but multifarious terms ‘traditionalist’ and ‘orthodox’.⁴⁹ These observations serve to highlight the difficulty of using *any* term to describe a diffuse tendency which comprises numerous groups and organizations with a vast spectrum of doctrinal, ritual and political positions. Choosing any gloss whatsoever to

⁴⁷ During informal conversations with members of Sufi orders in Rajshahi in 2005-6, I have more than once been reminded of this maxim in response to my questions about specific verses in the Qur’an. In this case, a *guide* is a guru figure to whom one pledges (*bayat*) devotion and obedience in a spiritual order.

⁴⁸ The term ‘reform’ in the South Asian Islamic context is often amplified by scholars by using terms such as ‘purifying’, ‘renewal’, ‘revivalist’, and even ‘protestant Islam’.

⁴⁹ The traditionalist Muslims of Kerala, South India are pejoratively labelled ‘orthodox’ by the reformist Salafis because of their adherence to the Shafi’i school of law. The reformists believe it is a sin to adhere to any of the ‘man-made’ *madhhabs*. See n. 40, page 63.

describe these movements risks bringing together under one heading what is in fact substantially different.

In spite of the inherent risks, this thesis conforms with the majority of scholarship on Islam in South Asia by choosing to use the term ‘reform’ to imply not liberalization along modernist lines, but rather a conservative restoration of the idealised original and pure Islam of the Prophet and his Companions.⁵⁰ Before examining the Ahl-i-Hadith movement of Rajshahi, a growing reform movement of the 21st century and one of the two foci for our investigation of contemporary Islamic discourse, it is necessary that we continue to lay a foundation of understanding by addressing the historical context of reform efforts in 18th-20th century India generally.

Loss of Muslim political power and ensuing crisis. The reigns of the Mughal emperors and the Sultans of Delhi before them had been characterised by the interaction of a ruling Muslim minority with a vast citizenry of Hindus – a state of affairs which was the status quo for over five hundred years. The reign of the last great Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (d.1707) witnessed the fragmentation of the empire, as more and more regions rebelled against the central authority, especially the Hindu Marathas in the Deccan to the south, and the Sikhs in the Punjab. In the mid-18th century, with the disintegration of the Mughal empire underway, the delicate social and political equilibrium which was particular to medieval Mughal India was at an end. Although the Mughals maintained titular Sultans in Delhi for most of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries, imperial control of the various states and regions of India rapidly disintegrated. Under these conditions, Muslims all

⁵⁰ For discussions of Islamic ‘reform’ as the notion of returning to the original principles of the first Islamic period, see Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 22-23; Dale F. Eickelman, *The Middle East: an anthropological approach* (4th Edition) (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002), 287; Maimuna Huq, ‘The Politics of belief: women’s activism in Bangladesh’ (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2006), 2; Ira M. Lapidus, *A history of Islamic societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 457; Magnus Marsden, *Living Islam*, 12, 250; Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 12; Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, ‘Introduction: Islamic reformism in South Asia’, 247-258; Francis Robinson, ‘Islamic reform and modernities in South Asia’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 42, 2/3 (2008), 259-60; Muhammad Qasim Zaman, ‘Religious education and the rhetoric of reform: the madrasa in British India and Pakistan’, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 41 (1999), 294-323.

across the continent found themselves subjects of realms ruled by newly established non-Muslim powers.⁵¹ One can only imagine the sense of shock and bewilderment for many of India's Muslims during this period, for whom political ascendancy and religious faith were inseparably linked.⁵²

This crisis of identity and political leadership was largely explained by the community itself as a result of having forsaken the original and pure Islam of the first followers of Muhammad and their immediate successors. "They had no difficulty diagnosing the illness: Muslims had strayed from the pure, unadulterated sunna of the Prophet and were being poisoned by dangerous innovation (*bid'c a*)..."⁵³ *Bida'c* (plural of *bid'c a*) were the dangerous additions and compromises which had been allowed to seep into Indian Muslim beliefs and practices over five centuries of (beguilingly comfortable) Muslim political control in India.

There were other pressures felt in the face of foreign encroachment which created the impulse to shore up personal and community Islamic identity. The original incursions and military victories of the British colonialists had been pitched against Muslim forces rather than Hindu ones, setting up an uncomfortably antagonistic relationship with their new Muslim subjects.⁵⁴ It seemed to the Muslim Indians that they were especially singled out for suspicion and animosity by the British, and that as a result they were being bypassed when it came to participation in the administration of the provinces.

⁵¹ For discussions of the new realities confronting Muslims in pre-colonial and colonial India, please refer to Metcalf, *Islamic revival*, 7-8; 20-23; 80-86; Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 39-71; Francis Robinson, 'Ulama of South Asia from 1800 to the mid-Twentieth Century' in *Islam, South Asia and the West*, ed. Francis Robinson (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2007), 59-98; and Francis Robinson, 'The Muslims of Upper India and the shock of the mutiny,' in *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*, ed. Francis Robinson (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000). Two useful general sources for Islam in India are Annemarie Schimmel's *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent* (Leiden, Netherlands, 1980) and Muhammad Mujeeb's *The Indian Muslims* (London, 1967). See ER² 'Islam in South Asia' for additional bibliographic sources.

⁵² Muin-ud-Din Ahmad Khan, 'Muslim Reform Movements', 188.

⁵³ Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 22. For a discussion of this view, see also Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 41: "They attributed the political, social and economic disaster that had overtaken the Muslims to their religious 'degeneration' and embarked on a programme of spiritual regeneration, side by side with their attempts to defend the faith of Islam against its enemies."

⁵⁴ See Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic culture in the Indian environment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 263, for a discussion of British attitudes towards Indian Muslims in the early colonial period.

A parallel difficulty for the Muslims was a rising Hindu middle class, favoured by the British for management and lower administrative positions.⁵⁵ This class, which was already used to living under a political system that was controlled by cultural outsiders, was perhaps more easily able to cooperate with the colonialists and thereby take advantage of English language learning and English style education. As a result, this Hindu group of middle class administrators began to grow in wealth and influence in the new order of the British Raj. Muslim fear of increased Hindu economic and political influence was heightened by the increasingly important local and regional representative councils which were introduced by the British to allow for and encourage (in stages) self-government through representation of electorates.⁵⁶ Where Muslims formed minorities, as in most of India, this presented yet another crisis in Muslim perceptions of their own well-being. Additional pressures rapidly mounted for Indian Muslim communities with the arrival of European schools, which introduced secular values in education, creating concern among Muslim parents about the perceived threat to the spiritual well-being of their children and culture. Western missionaries who came to India to preach the Christian faith also began to make headway, further heightening the sense of crisis. Also, as Western scholars began to study and interact with the Indian and Islamic intellectual traditions, Indian ‘ulama’ faced for the first time published attacks on the authenticity of hadith literature by Western scholars.⁵⁷

All of these factors combined in 18th and 19th century Indian Islam to produce a proliferation of new Islamic movements that sought to preserve the leadership role of Indian

⁵⁵ The Permanent Settlement of 1793, in which the Company established a policy for extracting wealth from Bengal that sought to “acknowledge the subordinate Hindu officers who dealt directly with the husbandmen,” thus setting up a class of Hindu middlemen who effectively exploited the lower caste Hindus and Muslim cultivators for 150 years. British dependence on this class of Hindu administrators led naturally to increased alienation between this class and the poorer Muslim and Hindu farmers from whom they were to collect revenues. Aziz Ahmad, *Studies*, 263.

⁵⁶ During the late 19th and early 20th centuries the British administration embarked on a programme of gradually establishing representative systems at various levels of governance in India. This was done by establishing district and municipal boards and provincial legislative councils which were at first composed of some elected Indians and some appointed Europeans. As the decades passed and Independence drew closer, these bodies won greater autonomy, with fewer Europeans as members. Craig Baxter, *Bangladesh*, 35-47.

⁵⁷ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 16-45; Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 21.

‘ulama’ and to revitalise the authentic practice and commitment of Muslim individuals and communities. At first, a number of these movements attempted to mitigate against British, Sikh and Hindu advances through armed struggle (see below). But after the Indian Mutiny of 1857-58 (The First War of Independence) was ruthlessly crushed by British force, with Muslims receiving a disproportionate share of the wrath, the repertoire of Muslim responses to the entrenched political order was of a distinctly unarmed, non-activist and conciliatory nature that sought to avoid conflict with the British Raj at all costs.

Distinct from strictly pietistic and conservative scripturalist movements in India, Islamic modernism was another significant response to the now unassailable British power in post-mutiny India. This was a movement dedicated to the collaboration of the Muslim elites with the colonial power through cultivating English language and manners, the adoption by Muslims of Western science and technologies, and through building a new relationship of trust between the British and their Muslim subjects. In India, its chief representative was found in the person of Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) and the highly important Aligarh movement, college, and its associated figures. Khan attempted to demonstrate that the Muslims of India had played a much smaller role in instigating the unrest and rebellions of the recent Mutiny and that in fact numerous Muslims had been loyal subjects and protected British families during the crisis. He hoped to elevate the Muslim community in India to its previous position of leadership through bringing Islamic revival to Muslims, but a religious revival that simultaneously participated in the benefits of modern science and technology, which were held to be necessarily consonant with God’s law.⁵⁸ The Aligarh movement has been treated by scholars elsewhere⁵⁹ and in any case does not represent the larger stream of

⁵⁸ In Khan’s famous formula, there could be no contradiction between the words of God and the works of God. Aziz Ahmad, *An intellectual history*, 13.

⁵⁹ On the Aligarh movement and Islamic modernism in British India, see Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 313-335; David Lelyveld, *Aligarh’s first generation: Muslim solidarity in British India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 32-42.

pietistic Islamic movements of the same period, which often opposed Islamic modernism as an inappropriate compromise with power and a rationalization of faith based on expediency.

An ‘inward turn’. Pietistic Islamic movements that were quietist and non-political but strongly committed to Muslim renewal along ideal and scripturalist lines came to represent the aspirations of a great number of India’s Muslims in the later 19th and 20th centuries. Scholars have described a growth in inward-focused individual and community pietism, and efforts to shore up the Muslim community from outside threats by Hindu religious outreach, secularist principles imported from Europe, perceived British colonial oppression, and innovations to Islam (*bid‘a*) from the inside. Though some reformist groups were politically active,⁶⁰ the movements with widest support in the Muslim community were non-political and chose to focus on personal and community religious revival. As Metcalf notes,

“In this period the ‘ulama chose a strategy of turning within, eschewing for the time all concern with the organization of the state and relations with other communities. Their sole concern was to preserve the religious heritage – the classic role of the ‘ulama from the post-‘Abbasid centuries on – and to disseminate instruction in authentic religious practice and belief. They sought to be, and to create in others, personalities that embodied Islam.”⁶¹

The most significant manifestation of this new approach was the Deoband seminary that was founded north of Delhi in 1867 as well as the thousands of associated madrasas that were founded by its graduates and associates in the years following this. The emphasis was on training men and women from ordinary Muslim households and young ‘ulama’ to lead pious lives and become capable of teaching those under their personal influence. Rather than seeking financial maintenance or support from the political establishment, as had been the *modus operandi* for vocational *pirs* and religious scholars in the Mughal period, the founders

⁶⁰ For example, the Jama’at-i ‘Ulama’-i Hind was a religious reform movement that was politically active in the years after World War I. Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 13-14, 133.

⁶¹ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 11; See also 85-86.

of Deoband seminary and their followers appealed to their own Muslim constituencies for subscriptions to underwrite the work.⁶²

Theologically speaking, these reformers and the movements they inspired shared notable similarities with the preaching and activism of the Wahhabis of Arabia, who were also growing in influence during the 18th century. Many of the men who led the reform movements in India from the 18th century until now spent prolonged periods of time studying Islam under purifying Wahhabi and Salafi figures in Mecca and Medina. This fact notwithstanding, many Indian reformers denied a close association with Ibn ʿAbd al Wahhab himself, stressing instead their view of the more ancient bases of Islamic reform (points 1-5 below) and other scholarly genealogies based in India, especially the scholarly tradition founded in Delhi by Shah Wali Allah (d. 1762).

This widespread and multi-faceted reform tendency set in motion a prolonged and vigorous re-examination of the sources of Islamic authority. The resultant reform movements which grew and spread were not only an attempt to recover what was viewed as the pure religion of the golden age of Islam. They also aimed to rid religion of any and all additions which had been added either by misguided Islamic scholars through the ages, or by mixing with local non-Muslim cultures in various places where Islam spread. These reform movements, though many and diverse, shared certain important tendencies to greater or lesser degrees:

1. A desire to recover the spirit and guidance of the original, pure Islam of the earliest Islamic period. The time of the Prophet and his Companions, their Successors, and the Successors of the Successors, known collectively as *al-salaf al-salih* (pious forebears), is considered by reformists to be the golden age of Islam. Since this period is idealised as a time of religious, social and political perfection, it follows that

⁶² On the creative system for financial subscriptions pioneered by Dar-ul Ulum, see Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 96-98. Francis Robinson underscores the need for the Muslims of this period to create new modalities to sustain Islamic institutions: "British rule brutally removed much of the institutional support for Islamic society. This helped to create a general anxiety about how a Muslim society might be sustained without power. Specifically, it meant that 'ulama, who had once received land grants and jobs in government, now turned to society at large to sustain them in their role.'" *Islamic reform and modernities*, 261-2.

imitating the laws, decisions, and daily habits of these *salaf* would be key to restoring Islamic glory in the world.

2. A reassertion that the sunna should be the basis of Islamic law and daily life. Indian reformists took a generally sceptical view of the medieval schools of law and their scholarship, and emphasised that the legal status quo should be submitted to reexamination with direct recourse to the Qur³an and the sunna of the Prophet. Following this, reformists reject *taqlid* (Ar., imitation), or ‘blind’ adherence to any scholar or school of law, instead choosing to submit each point of consideration to critical reflection against the scriptural sources.
3. Critical consideration of every legal decision against the scriptural sources requires using individual effort or *ijtihad* to interpret these sources. This method is open to any trained *‘alim* or judicious layman.
4. All of the points above generated a renewed, vigorous emphasis on learning and using hadith literature. The Sunni canonical collections of hadith were elevated in importance as the best direct source of knowledge about the earliest age of Islam, and as the primary source of authority for reinvigorating Islamic law and piety. Study of hadith literature was expanded in madrasa curricula across India.
5. Activism against *bida^c* and *shirk* constitutes a final important facet of Indian Islamic reform movements.⁶³ The desire to revive ‘pure’, original Islam in India led to activism against perceived ‘innovations’ (*bida^c*),⁶⁴ and any and all heretical practices and beliefs which might imply ‘associating’ (*shirk*)⁶⁵ the power of God with anything but God. Specifically, visiting the *dargahs* (tomb-shrines) of dead pirs and performing acts of worship there; observing Shi’i celebrations during *Muharram*, including making processions with *ta’ziyas*; performing the *fatiha*,⁶⁶ *milad* and *urs* ceremonies for the dead; following customs from the Indian environment, such as holding expensive wedding and funeral ceremonies; and especially the Hindu custom of prohibiting the remarriage of widows.⁶⁷ All these practices were opposed by reformists in India.

⁶³ “There was a running attack on all Sufi customs that, following Ibn ‘Arabi, suggested that God might be immanent rather than purely transcendent, which was expressed most frequently and forcibly in attacks on any practices that suggested that Sufi saints might be able to intercede for man with God.” Francis Robinson, ‘Islamic reform and modernities’, 259-281 (262).

⁶⁴ For reformist efforts at removing the twin evils of *shirk* and *bida^c* in north India and Bengal, see Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 53ff; and Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic revival*, 12, 148, 182; and Aziz Ahmad, *An intellectual history*, 9-11; and Aziz Ahmad, *Studies*, 201-217.

⁶⁵ *Bida^c* come in many forms, for example using a talisman of the hand of Fatima to ward off sickness – something which does not come in the Qur³an and authoritative hadith, nor was it part of the practice of the early Muslim community. *Shirk*, widely believed to be an error most commonly practised by the Christians who associate a trinity with God, is also a danger in many mystical Islamic movements, where Sufi writers or *pirs* espouse monistic conceptions of the joining of the whole created order with God. Other Sufi saints have sometimes got in trouble by pursuing mystical union with God to the point where they claimed to be indistinguishable from God, shouting in ecstasy, “Ana’l-Haqq!” (I am the Creative Truth, i.e., I am God). Many Bangladeshi Sufis continue to be fascinated with this utterance (and the cosmological viewpoint it encompasses), which was made famous by the ninth century mystic Al-Hallaj (b. 858). See Louis Massignon, *The passion of Al-Hallaj, mystic and martyr of Islam*, 4 volumes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), Volume 2, 57-61. Additionally, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 66.

⁶⁶ The *fatiha* was a widely practised recitation ceremony for the dead very similar to the *milad* being described in this thesis. See Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 63-65.

⁶⁷ For a summary of the salient reform issues in 19th century India, see Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 57-63 and Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 60-69.

These basic elements of Indian reformism were by no means new to the 18th century and were not original to Indian Islam. Reformist groups, especially the Ahl-i-Hadith, commonly point to the group known in the 2nd Islamic century as the *Ashab al-Hadith*, the first group which was compelled to re-assert (in the reformists' view) the primacy of the hadith as the foundation of Prophetic sunna, and therefore of Islamic law. This was necessitated by the *Ashab al-Ra'y*, a sectarian tendency in 2nd century Islam to prefer the considered opinions of scholars of a given region in the empire (see below).

During the middle ages these same reformist principles, such as the focus on the sunna as the primary basis for law, the avoidance of extra-Islamic innovations like visiting tomb-shrines, and the emulation of the *salaf* were kept alive by the Hanbali school of law. Famous figures such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), a Hanbali theologian, produced numerous written works supporting these doctrines, works which have been widely translated and printed by Indian reformists (under various movements) since the 19th century.⁶⁸

2.4 Islamic reform movements impacting on Bengal

In the first half of the 18th century, the Islamic scholar Shah Wali Allah (1703-1762)⁶⁹ founded a school and a tradition of religious scholarship in Delhi which was to influence nearly every strain of Islamic reformist thought in India for the next three centuries. His life coincided with the disintegration of Mughal power throughout India, and it is likely for this reason that he came to view his own career as that of a restorer of the faith, a *mujaddid* of Islam. Through training disciples, writing letters and in numerous works, the most important

⁶⁸ Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 277-278; Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 30.

⁶⁹ Barbara Metcalf has produced a concise study of Shah Wali Allah's achievements and doctrinal positions, along with a short bibliography of sources for further study (*Islamic Revival*, 35-45). Additionally, see Aziz Ahmad, *Studies*, 201-217; Aziz Ahmad, *Intellectual History*, 8-10; Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 41-42; Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 22-25; and Roel Meijer, *Global Salafism*, 5-6.

being *Hujjat Allah al-Baligha (The Perfect Proof of God)*, Wali Allah left a legacy that is unequalled in its influence on reformist Indian Islam.

Central to Wali Allah's programme of reform was his fundamentalist position against *shirk*, or the association of God with anything other than God. This focus on the unity of God, or *tawhid*, meant that none of God's attributes could be ascribed to saints or prophets. Such persons might be able to intercede for believers, but they should not be called upon for help, nor worshipped either directly or indirectly. Following this emphasis on *tawhid* was a strong affirmation of the Qur'an and hadith as the only sources for religious doctrine. All other sources, whether human teachers or bodies of legal decisions reached over centuries of study, are susceptible to error and should be tested against the original scriptures.

Wali Allah was interested in restoring the Muslim political leadership of India as well as the spiritual glory of pure Islamic worship and practice. In regard to the former, he wrote letters to powerful Muslim rulers inviting them to wage jihad and restore Muslim political dominance in Delhi and in India.⁷⁰ But it was his attention to religious revival and theology which had the greatest impact on Indian history. Wali Allah elevated and reaffirmed the centrality of the study of hadith to the pursuit of religious knowledge in Islam. After his education in the Hejaz under the famous hadith scholar Shaykh Abu Tahir Muhammad b. Ibrahim al-Kurani al-Kurdi (d.1733), he began to emphasise the Muwatta of Malik as the earliest and most important source of ancient hadith knowledge⁷¹ – a position that was unusual in Delhi where the six authoritative collections of Sunni hadith, and especially al-Bukhari and Muslim, had been preeminent.

Wali Allah also endeavoured to bring unity to the Muslims of India by asserting that it was acceptable to follow any one of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence when attempting to reach a decision about doctrine or law. Towards the same end he also attempted to

⁷⁰ Brown, *Rethinking tradition*, 23.

⁷¹ Brown, *Rethinking tradition*, 23.

reconcile competing philosophies of Sufi Islam (*wahdat al-wujud* / “unity of existence” and *wahdat al-shuhud* / “unity of vision”), and to bring monistic theories about God prevalent in Sufism into harmony with the orthodox conceptions regarding God’s transcendence.⁷² But in spite of his encouragement towards unity, Wali Allah had a generally sceptical view of the medieval schools of law and insisted that any question about a point of doctrine should ultimately be brought under the scrutiny of the original sources – especially the hadith. Like Ibn Taymiyya before him, he therefore rejected the practice of *taqlid*, or strict adherence to a school of Sunni jurisprudence, and encouraged the re-invigoration of the process of individual *ijtihad* – or personal effort to decide a point of doctrine.

Shah Wali Allah was born in the same decade that witnessed the death of the last powerful Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb, and the birth of another contemporary, Muhammad Ibn °Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) in Arabia. Though ibn al Wahhab and Wali Allah most probably had the same teachers when Wali Allah studied in the Hejaz,⁷³ there is no evidence that the two men, who espoused similar doctrinal positions, ever met or interacted. Importantly, Wali Allah revived the study of hadith at Delhi and instilled the ideals which have been mentioned earlier as the characteristic elements of South Asia’s reformist movements in a great number of disciples as well as his own sons. Many of his spiritual and biological heirs went on to found diverse movements of reform across the breadth of north India, as we discuss below.

A few of the subsequent offshoots of the Wali Allah school were militant in nature while others were quietist and pietistic. The Tariqa-i-Muhammadiyya⁷⁴ (mid-1800s) was a movement begun by Sayyid Ahmad Bareilwi (d. 1831), a disciple of one of the sons of Wali

⁷² ‘Islam in South Asia’, ER², 4650.

⁷³ Aziz Ahmad, *An Intellectual history*, 8; Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 23; Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 35-37.

⁷⁴ For further study on the Tariqa-i-Muhammadiyya, see Aziz Ahmad, *Studies*, 209-217; Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is his messenger*, 216-238; Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 52-63; Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 39-71.

Allah. The Tariqa-i-Muhammadiyya, also called the *Mujahidin* (or just the *Muhammadiyya* in Bengal), applied the purificationist ideas of Wali Allah to an activist and military campaign in an attempt to make India a true ‘Abode of Islam’. *Mujahidin* fighters preached against syncretistic (‘polytheistic’) elements that had entered Islamic practice from the Indian environment, while also waging a military struggle against the Sikhs and Hindus of northwest India, and later against the British colonial government.⁷⁵ A network of centres for the propagation of reformist Islam – a *jama‘a* or religio-political association – appeared in villages across north India and Bengal. Interestingly, the Muhammadiyya espoused a purified Sufism, rejecting what they considered to be unislamic excesses, but continuing to encourage the taking of *bay‘a* or allegiance to the various Sufi orders then prevalent in India. Sayyid Ahmad himself accepted thousands of *murids*, or spiritual disciples who took *baya’* to him personally as he made campaigns across north India and Bengal.

Toward the beginning of the 19th century Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi created a political and religious headquarters in Patna, Bihar, just to the northwest of Bengal, and from this centre began to affect the Bengal area in earnest in 1826. Concurrently with the Fara’idis (see below), the Muhammadiyya preached a purifying reformist agenda among Muslims of eastern Bengal. At the same time the group recruited many thousands of men and youths to join in the movement’s military campaigns against Sikhs in northwest India. Though the organizational structures of this movement faded after the 1860s, many individuals who were awakened to reformist principles through the preaching activities of the Tariqa-i-Muhammadiyya continued to patronise similar movements as they came into being, and especially the Ahl-i-Hadith. In Dhaka today, adherents of all types of purificationist groups, including the Ahl-i-Hadith, are collectively referred to as ‘*Muhammadiyya*’ or

⁷⁵ Aziz Ahmad, *An Intellectual history*, 9.

‘*Muhammadis*’ – a testimony to the lasting impact of this movement in the region.⁷⁶ When Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi led a military campaign in 1831 to create an Islamic state in the Punjab, he and many of his associates were killed by Sikh forces there at the battle of Balakot. Their leader’s death notwithstanding, sections of the Muhammadiyya continued to wage jihad against British interests in India for a few decades after the death of Sayyid Ahmad.⁷⁷

A non-violent though politically active and much more enduring reformist programme was begun at a madrasa founded in 1867 in the town of Deoband, about one hundred miles north of Delhi – the Dar ul-Ulum Madrasa. Also begun by ideological heirs of the Wali Allah school,⁷⁸ this movement was concerned with providing guidance to India’s Muslims at a time of challenges to the faith from secularism, Hindu society and loss of financial and political strength. In an attempt to combine orthodox Muslim belief with a sense of deep spirituality, the leaders of the movement took on the status of Sufi sheikhs and initiated disciples. Yet they were against most of the practices condemned by other reformist groups, including any form of worship at a Sufi shrine, the belief in the intercession of a *pir*, and elaborate birth and death rituals.⁷⁹ The Deoband seminary did not reject the Sunni *madhhabs*, as the Ahl-i-Hadith would soon do. Rather, they upheld the authority of all four Sunni schools of law, thereby taking a stand on the *unity* that they felt was most needed in India’s beleaguered Muslim community.

Dar ul-Ulum graduates and associates went on to found so many associated madrasas across north India that by the 100th anniversary of the Deoband movement, in 1967, there

⁷⁶ In Rajshahi the local population uses the locally dominant movement’s name, ‘Ahl-i-Hadith’ for this same general category of reformist groups, no matter what the name of the organizations.

⁷⁷ This was one of the groups identified as ‘Wahhabis’ by the British colonial administration. See Banu, *Islam in Bangladesh*, 38-40.

⁷⁸ The Dar ul-Ulum was founded by Muhammad Qasim Nanautawi (1833-1877) and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (1829-1905). See Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 75-137.

⁷⁹ ‘Islam in South Asia’, ER², 4652.

were claimed to be over 8,934 Deobandi madrasas in the subcontinent.⁸⁰ Among other achievements, the Deobandi scholars pioneered a shift in South Asian madrasa curricula away from an emphasis on philosophy, theology and the medieval Islamic schools of law to direct study of the Qur'an and hadith literature.⁸¹ Distinguished graduates of Deobandi madrasas have in turn created new organizations of global scope, such as the pietistic and quietist Tablighi Jama'at and the politically activist Jama'at 'ulama'-e-Hind. Because of the concurrent 19th century growth of Wahhabi activism in the Arabian peninsula and also due to its similarity to Indian Muslim reformism, the British administrators often identified the various purifying movements in India with 'Wahhabism', though this label was often resisted by the groups themselves.⁸²

In Dhaka and around Bangladesh today there are numerous madrasas directly and indirectly claiming to have a connection to the seminary at Deoband. What is perhaps less obvious than these visible buildings and training centres is the steady return of thousands of well-trained and motivated reformist graduates from the leading seminaries in north India, beginning in the 1870s and continuing until now. Barbara Metcalf's carefully researched figures from her field work at Dar-ul-Ulum seminary in Deoband reveal the disproportionately large number of Deobandi seminary graduates that hailed from Bengal. Reportedly, between 1867 and 1967 there were fully as many students from the distant province of Bengal who graduated from Dar-ul-Ulum seminary as from the centrally located United Provinces of north India, where the seminary itself was located. Fully one third of the

⁸⁰ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic revival*, 136.

⁸¹ See Francis Robinson, 'Islamic reform and modernities', 259-281.

⁸² The Shah Wali Allah movement, the *Tariqa-i-Muhammadiya*, and the Deobandis, all of whom were inspirational to Bangladesh's Ahl-i-Hadith, were characterised as 'Wahhabist' by the British colonial power in the 19th century, though each of these groups was at pains to demonstrate that their founders had not been influenced by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab or his followers. See Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 39; Aziz Ahmad, *Studies*, 209-210; and Aziz Ahmad, *An intellectual history*, 9-11; Barbara Metcalf (*Islamic Revival*, 278) writes that the Ahl-i-Hadith historically have denied association with the Wahhabis on the grounds that the Wahhabis are adherents of the Hanbali school of *fiqh*, whereas the Ahl-i-Hadith are *la-madhhab* (having no school of *fiqh*), and more importantly, because they did not want to be implicated in the disruptive activities of the Wahhabis.

students at the nearby sister seminary at Saharanpur were from Bengal as well.⁸³ The fact that these graduates have been returning to Bengal for more than 125 years to join other movements and begin their own organizations locally has contributed to the reformist atmosphere of the region.

Another important reformist programme, the Fara'idi movement of eastern Bengal, was begun around 1820 by Haji Shariatullah after he returned from studying for twenty years in Mecca under notable Wahhabi figures. A local of Faridpur, located between Dhaka and Rajshahi, he was succeeded by his son Muhsin, commonly known as Dudu Miyan, who shaped the movement in a more socially activist direction. Dudu Miyan, also educated in Mecca, organised local peasants to resist the exploitative Hindu *zamindars* (land-owners) and British agents who reportedly forced them to grow indigo for export rather than rice and other staples, and that at unfair prices.⁸⁴

The main religious objectives of the Fara'idis were in line with the reforms described already, especially the desire to return to the pristine first age of Islamic piety and practice, a focus on the Qur'an and hadith alone as a guide to faith, and a desire to purify local Islamic practice of any 'un-Islamic' accretions. Their name is based on the plural of the Arabic *fard*, or obligatory duties, and the leaders of this movement worked directly with local Bengal Muslims to instill the basic ordinances of Islamic worship – daily prayer, giving alms, fasting in Ramadan and attempting the Hajj journey – things which were barely practised by the masses of Muslims at the time. Although this movement also lost organizational leadership towards the middle of the 19th century, the thousands of individuals whose lives were shaped

⁸³ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 110-11; 135-36.

⁸⁴ For a discussion of the *Fara'idis* in Bengal, see Muin-ud-din Ahmad Khan, *A History of the Fara'idi movement in Bengal* (Karachi, 1965); U.A.Z. Razia Akhter Banu, *Islam in Bangladesh*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992, 35-38; Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 39-71; Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 68-80; William Roff, 'Islamic movements', 34.

by it applied their energies to other reformist movements in later decades, specifically the Ahl-i-Hadith.⁸⁵

2.5 The Ahl-i-Hadith

In the context of Rajshahi City in contemporary Bangladesh, the ‘Hanafi traditionalists’ comprise the majority of the Muslim population and represent the collective desire to continue in the traditions which have been relatively stable for centuries. The categorical opposition movement to the traditionalists is known locally by both its members and non-members as the ‘Ahl-i-Hadith’.⁸⁶ This is a purifying movement in the line of Indian Islamic reform which we have described above, but with certain additional doctrinal and ritual distinctives. In fact, the Ahl-i-Hadith movement of Bangladesh is made up of a number of organizations, and traces its roots to a variety of strands of reformist Islam, most importantly to the legacy of Shah Wali Allah.

Ahl-i-Hadith, or partisans of the prophetic traditions, are a Sunni movement for the purification of Islam which began in India in the late 19th century. The basis of the movement is reform, or *islah*, which denotes a return to the original principles and practices of the earliest period of Islam, based on the Qur^oan and authoritative collections of hadith. Ahl-i-Hadith reformists emphasise the doctrine of *tawhid*, or the ‘unicity’ of God,⁸⁷ which is directly related to their activism against sufism and popular religious practices, like the worship centred around tomb-shrines of Muslim saints. Such activities are criticised for being

⁸⁵ Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 39-50.

⁸⁶ In Dhaka, the capital, this dichotomistic configuration is more often expressed as that between the ‘Hanafis’ and the ‘*Muhammadiyya*’ – an even broader gloss for reformists and their movements generally. The term itself, ‘*Muhammadiyya*’, is a remnant of the *Tariqa-i-Muhammadiyya* movement, which significantly impacted the Bengal region with reformist dogma and activism in the 19th century, discussed below. Additionally, the early Ahl-i-Hadith leadership in the 1920s and 1930s experimented for a few years with the self-identification ‘Muhammadi’ but later dropped this appellation as it was viewed as elevating their perceived commitment to the Prophet (and his sunna) above their commitment to God. (Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 272).

⁸⁷ ‘Unicity’ is a term used in public addresses by internationally recognised Salafi scholar Sheikh Yasir Kazi. From lecture with Sheikh Yasir Kazi, attended at Yale University during the ‘Summer Institute for Islam, Intercultural Relations and Leadership’, July, 2009.

the sin of *shirk*, or associating God with things other than God. The Ahl-i-Hadith developed Shah Wali Allah's preference for consulting the scriptures over unquestioning adherence to the Sunni schools of law into a foundational doctrine,⁸⁸ thus overturning many centuries of *madhhabi* Islamic scholarship, with its compendiums of legal decisions and commentaries. To solve legal and religious questions, Ahl-i-Hadith 'ulama' depend directly on the Qur'an and hadith, and, as their name suggests, give a pre-eminent place to the study of hadith in madrasa curricula under their control. Where the scriptural sources fail to give specific solutions, scholars may consult the consensus (*ijma'*) arrived at by the Companions of the Prophet only (*not* later scholars).⁸⁹ In all other unclear cases of practice and doctrine, individual *ijtihad* (independent interpretation from the sources) is to be exercised by any sufficiently trained 'alim or astute layman ('*ammi*).

While desiring to emphasise their respect for all the notable 'ulama' of all ages of Islam, Ahl-i-Hadith 'ulama' reject out of hand the practice of *taqlid* ('blind' adherence) to any of the four Sunni schools of law. In fact, the official position is that uncritical adherence to any of the four Sunni *madhhabs* or to any scholar whatsoever is an un-Islamic innovation (*bid'a*) and an aberration (*dalala*) which will incur God's wrath and damnation.⁹⁰ This position has led to criticism from the Hanafi majority resulting in the Ahl-i-Hadith being labelled '*ghayr muqallid*' (or those who do not observe *taqlid* to any Sunni school of law, i.e., 'non-conformists'). However, Ahl-i-Hadith 'ulama' have subsequently accepted this title with apparent satisfaction, and use it as a means to further elucidate their own position. In Bangladesh, the Arabic phrase '*la-madhab*' (originally an insult signifying 'without any

⁸⁸ Shah Wali Allah did espouse individual *ijtihad* from the original scriptures, a principle he gained from his study in the Hejaz, but was himself more latitudinarian than the later movements which tended to ossify around particular parts of his theology. The emphasis on *ijtihad* over *taqlid* in his writings is "not a dogmatic position...and was balanced both by acceptance of many rulings of the law schools that were consulted eclectically, and by a willingness to exercise analogy and reasoning in interpreting hadis." Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 277.

⁸⁹ Hafez Muhammad Ayub, আহলে হাদীসদের পরিচয় (*Ahl-i-Hadith identity*), 10. "Qiyas was to be used only if there was no explicit rule and the analogy was very precise." Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 271.

⁹⁰ Claudia Preckel, *Ahl-i-Hadith*, E13 (Brill Online. University of Edinburgh. 16 September 2009 <http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=ei3_COM-0107>)

religion', but literally, 'without a school of Sunni *shari'ah*') is similarly used by members and non-members alike to characterise the Ahl-i-Hadith.

History of modern Ahl-i-Hadith. The Tariqa-i-Muhammadiyah of the middle 19th century, led by Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi (1786-1831), had developed Shah Wali Allah's reformist principles into a programme for restoring Islamic leadership in India militarily. After the decisive British defeat of the uprisings in 1857, in which the Tariqa was a participant, a core of ideologues related to this movement switched from armed jihad and devoted their energies instead to quietist reform and the jihad of the pen (*jihad bi'l qalam*).⁹¹ The two most important founders of the Ahl-i-Hadith were Nazir Husayn Dihlawi (d. 1902) and Siddiq Hasan Khan (1832-1890). Both men studied hadith in Delhi under the tutelage of various sons and grandsons of Shah Wali Allah and consciously identified themselves as Wali Allah's spiritual heirs.⁹² Additionally, Siddiq Hasan Khan was deeply influenced by the writings of Yemeni scholar Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Shawkani (1760-1834), himself a radical proponent of anti-*taqlid* and pro-*ijtihad* ideas in the reformist milieu of the 19th century.

The early members of the Ahl-i-Hadith movement were characteristically drawn from highly educated and wealthy families of India. Though many experienced loss of property and economic hardship in the wake of the Indian Mutiny and the British response, a high percentage of Ahl-i-Hadith members in the late 19th century were either from noble *sayyid* families, the descendents of Mughal and Oudh *nawwabs* (rulers), or descendents of wealthy *zamindars* (land owners).⁹³ About a quarter of the persons found in an early biographical dictionary of Ahl-i-Hadith members were in high positions of government or princely

⁹¹ "The Ahl-i-Hadith may be viewed as a direct outgrowth and quietist manifestation of the *mujahidin*." Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 27.

⁹² All historical information about Ahl-i-Hadith is from Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, unless otherwise noted.

⁹³ Siddiq Hasan Khan (1832-1890) himself was a *nawwab* or ruler of the province of Bhopal, south of Delhi in modern Madhya Pradesh. He had married the widowed princess of the state of Bhopal amid much controversy, and used his position and resources to further the growing Ahl-i-Hadith movement. The princely court at Bhopal was a centre of early Ahl-i-Hadith activism and publications. See Saeedullah, *The life and works of Muhammad Siddiq Hasan Khan, Nawab of Bhopal* (Lahore, 1973).

service.⁹⁴ It is therefore not a coincidence that one of the foundational principles of the early Ahl-i-Hadith was its ‘Protestant’ emphasis on accessing the original documents of the faith for oneself – most importantly the hadith. Such educated persons would be able to engage in personal *ijtihad* – not only through reading and contemplating the sources in Arabic, Persian and Urdu, but also by participating in activism, polemical writing and intellectual debate in the campaign to purify and restore true religion.⁹⁵

Ahl-i-Hadith scholars confidently describe the history of their movement as an unbroken succession from the time of the Companions of the Prophet to the contemporary period. They identify their movement firstly with the *Ahl al-Hadith* (or *Ashab al-Hadith*) of the classical Islamic period. This group had opposed the *Ashab al-Ra’y*, the “party of the earliest region-based schools of law” who preferred to uphold *ijma’* (consensus, especially centred around the ‘living traditions’ of the Muslim community in a given geographical area) and personal opinion. The *Ashab al-Ra’y* generally held a lower view of hadith authority, especially if the reports in question differed with their conclusions.⁹⁶

The Ahl al-Hadith maintained that the hadith reports of the Prophet Muhammad were the only legitimate basis of sunna. As such, hadith reports in this system of thought were the actual written representation of the divine prophetic example, the Prophetic sunna. They themselves engaged in collecting and recording many of the hadith reports which were later published by al-Bukhari, Muslim and the other Sunni collectors. The approach of the *Ahl al-Hadith* was compelling because it offered a concrete and (theoretically) limited body of

⁹⁴ Abu Yahya Imam Khan Naushaharawi, *Tarajim-i ‘Ulama’-yi Hadis-i Hind* (Delhi, 1937), ctd. in Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 268.

⁹⁵ “Just what they expected the uneducated to do was not clear and initially not of central concern. Their focus was on the religious behaviour of the spiritual elite, who were called on to leave behind all intermediaries and guides other than that of the text itself.” Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 272. Francis Robinson referred to the group as “radical intellectual leaven, comprising many of the best educated and best born Muslims of the time, which worked amongst northern India’s learned men and which stressed in particular the responsibility of the individual for the Islamic standard of his life...” ‘Islamic Revival’, in *Islam and Muslim history in South Asia*, 257.

⁹⁶ Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 13; Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 277; J. Schacht, *Ahl al-Hadith*, EI², vol. I, 258.

received knowledge that could be mastered and applied without variation to legal and religious questions.⁹⁷

An example from the writing of Bangladeshi Ahl-i-Hadith scholar Hafez Muhammad Ayub (translation from Bangla mine) will serve to give the reader a sense of the confident genealogical assertions that are the common and well-worn narrative preached by Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’ in Bangladesh today. A longer quotation is given here for this purpose:

“Ahl-i-Hadith are those who directly follow the Qur’an and hadith. In order to understand what we mean by Ahl-i-Hadith, one must first grasp that by this term we are not indicating any *madhhab* nor sectarian group (*firkar/dol*). The venerated *Sahaba*, their Successors, the Successors of the Successors, and the founding imams of the four *madhhab* were all firmly established in the Ahl-i-Hadith path and doctrine. In the golden age of Islam the four *madhhab* did not exist – before the creation of the Hanafi, Shafi’i, Maliki and Hanbali *madhhab*. The Muslims of that period stood firmly upon the Qur’an and sunna, and that is why they were known as Ahl-i-Hadith.”

“For those whose ‘*madhhab*’ is the Qur’an and the sunna – these are the Ahl-i-Hadith. Certainly, the Ahl-i-Hadith can also be called ‘Muhammadi’ – because they are the disciples (*ummot*⁹⁸) of Muhammad (S.A.)... And since they are also known as those who establish themselves upon the sunna of Muhammad (S.A.), they are therefore also called Ahl-e Sunna’t wa’l Jama’at. In various books of hadith and works of *fiqh*, the Ahl-i-Hadith have also been termed Ahlu’l Hadith, Ashabu’l Hadith, and Ahl us-Sunna’t wa’l Jama’at. In Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, etc., they are known by the name Salafi; in Sudan, Sri Lanka, and other countries, they are called Ansar us-Sunna. In Indonesia they are the Jama’at Muhammadiyya, and in the Pak-Indian subcontinent they are known by Ahl-i-Hadith.”

“From the Prophet (S.A.), through to the *Sahaba*, to the Successors and the Successors of the Successors, the Umayyid *mujtahids* – they were all Ahl-i-Hadith. From that first time up to four hundred years later, Muslims were not known by any name other than Ahl-i-Hadith. After four hundred years, Muslims were divided into schisms and sects, and the four *madhhabs* were created. However, many did not succumb to these divisions but remained steadfast in the Ahl-i-Hadith doctrine. And since that time to the present day Ahl-i-Hadith has remained and will stand firm, *insha-allah*, until the day of resurrection.”⁹⁹

The modern founders of the Indian Ahl-i-Hadith movement, as we have seen earlier, were inspired by the works of Ibn Taymiyya and the profoundly scripturalist, puritan

⁹⁷ Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 14.

⁹⁸ উম্মত

⁹⁹ Hafez Muhammad Ayub, আহলে হাদীসদের পরিচয় (*Ahl-i-Hadith identity*), 8-9. The translation of this passage is mine.

doctrines which Ibn Taymiyya imbibed from the teachings of Ibn Hanbal.¹⁰⁰ Based upon the earlier Ahl al-Hadith of classical times, and the imagined or real medieval forerunners of their movement, the Ahl-i-Hadith of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were able to create a continuous tradition which stretched back through the ages, thereby providing themselves with a theoretically legitimate foundation for the exclusive and fundamentalist proclamation that they espoused.¹⁰¹

Ahl-i-Hadith '*ulama*' also view themselves as connected to the broader global currents of Islamic reform which are transforming Islamic fundamentalism today. As is apparent in the quotation from the Bangladeshi scholar above, adherents commonly self-describe as 'Salafis', a reference to *al-salaf al-salih*, or the righteous predecessors – the first generations of Muslims during the Prophet's time and shortly after. The web version of the monthly magazine At-Tahreek, published by the Ahl-i-Hadith Andolon Bangladesh (AHAB), proclaims itself to be on the "Salafi path."¹⁰² Ahl-i-Hadith are keen to build and maintain connections with the global Salafi currents emanating from the contemporary Middle East, including taking higher degrees from Medina University,¹⁰³ and studying the works of Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), a key theologian for Wahhabi and other Salafi groups alike. During the first two decades of the 20th century, Ahl-i-Hadith scholars were distinguished for translating into Urdu and publishing the works of Ibn Taymiyya, thereby renewing interest in

¹⁰⁰ "By this century... the Ahl-i Hadis had found or created a continuous tradition of their sect in India from the Mughal times on, embracing such well-known thinkers as °Abdu'l-Haqq Muhaddis, Shaikh Ahmad Sarhindi, Shah Waliyu'llah, and Mirza Mazhar Jan-i Janan." Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 277. The name Ahl-i-Hadith first appears in the writings of this movement in a work published by Sayyid Nair Husayn in 1864. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 272, n.11.

¹⁰¹ For an in-depth Ahl-i-Hadith analysis of the spiritual genealogy of the group, see (in Bengali) Muhammad Asadullah Al-Ghalib, আহলেহাদীছ আন্দোলনঃ উৎপত্তি ও ক্রমবিকাশ দক্ষিণ এশিয়ার প্রেক্ষিতসহ (*The Ahl-i-Hadith movement: origins and development, with special reference to the South Asia region*) (Rajshahi, Bangladesh: Hadees Foundation, 1996), 49-82.

¹⁰² See www.at-tahreek.com, accessed 16 September, 2009.

¹⁰³ In the middle 20th century, Ahl-i-Hadith scholars were also selected from (then united) Pakistan to serve as teachers at Medina University. Mariam Abou Zahab, 'Salafism in Pakistan: the Ahl-e Hadith movement', in *Global Salafism: Islam's new religious movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 130.

his works in the subcontinent.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, many of the Ahl-i-Hadith mosques and madrasas built in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan use the word ‘Salafi’ in their titles, further asserting their proximity to both the history of the movement and the global tendency represented by this term.

In addition to the Salafi association, Rajshahi locals themselves overtly associate the Ahl-i-Hadith with Arabian Wahhabism.¹⁰⁵ During an interview in the home of the *amir* of one of the two premier Ahl-i-Hadith organizations in Bangladesh, the *amir* stood and led me in his personal library to the complete works of Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab, which he proudly displayed there.¹⁰⁶ Ahl-i-Hadith scholars also study the works of 19th century Wahhabi scholar Muhammad ibn ʿAli al-Shawkani. Whereas many reformist sects in India and Bangladesh have tried to avoid this connection throughout the British period and since, due to its associations with extremism and possible political subversion, the Ahl-i-Hadith seem slightly less averse to this connection, at least in Rajshahi. The connection with Wahhabism is at any rate difficult to ignore, given that the court of Nawwab Siddiq Hasan Khan in Bhopal included resident Wahhabi scholars from the Arabian peninsula who helped to guide the movement in its formative period.¹⁰⁷

External ritual distinctives in relation to Hanafi majority. Today, Ahl-i-Hadith ʿulama³ are widely recognised in South Asia for their activism against all forms of *bidʿa*¹⁰⁸ and *shirk*. It follows that Ahl-i-Hadith ʿulama³ forbid *pir*-followership¹⁰⁹; making pilgrimages to *mazars* (tomb-shrines) or circling the tombs of dead *pirs* (*ziyara*) or prostrating there; participating in Shiʿi *Muharram* celebrations, including *taʿziya* processions;

¹⁰⁴ Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 30; Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 278.

¹⁰⁵ Interview: Abdullah Hossein. 15 January, 2008. Rajshahi.

¹⁰⁶ Interview: Dr. Alomgir Hossein. 18 December, 2007. Rajshahi.

¹⁰⁷ For example, Shaikh Husain ʿArab Yamani was one of the most influential immigrant scholars who assisted the Ahl-i-Hadith at the court of Bhopal. See Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 278.

¹⁰⁸ Hafez Muhammad Ayoob, আহলে হাদীসদের পরিচয় ও ইতিহাস এবং মাযহাব প্রসঙ্গ (Ahl-i-Hadith *identity and history, with reference to madhhabs*, Dhaka: Ahl-i-Hadith Research Center, 2000), 11-13.

¹⁰⁹ All Ahl-i-Hadith did not condemn all Sufi beliefs outright. For an explanation of the relation of Ahl-i-Hadith to the nuanced levels of Sufistic spirituality and *pir*-followership, refer to Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 274.

milad ceremonies and *khotom* recitations for the dead; and many other practices labelled ‘accretions’ from ‘Hinduism’ or other ‘un-Islamic’ sources. Ahl-i-Hadith have engaged in public debates and published polemical tracts against various groups in the subcontinent, notably the *Arya Samaji* Hindus, Christian missionaries, the Ahmadiyya sect, as well as Barelwis, Sufi orders and the Hanafi religious majority more generally.¹¹⁰

The doctrinal and ritual distinctives of Ahl-i-Hadith have brought the movement into opposition with the majority views of Hanafi Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. Specifically, the idea that one should not give allegiance (*taqlid*) to any system of medieval Islamic law is a direct affront to Hanafi sensibilities. In regard to observable ritual styles, the Ahl-i-Hadith have distinguished themselves from their Hanafi environment in a number of notable ways, and it is these outer behaviours which have often caused a more severe community backlash than the specific theological positions. Particularly in the five times daily salat prayer ritual, the Ahl-i-Hadith stress the need to raise the hands to the ears (*rafʿ al-yadayn*) before and after every *rakʿa* or section of salat prayers,¹¹¹ not just at the first *takbir* (declaration of “*Allahu Akbar*”).¹¹² A second external practice that differs with the Hanafi majority is the insistence by the Ahl-i-Hadith on the need for saying ‘Amin’ aloud (*amin bi-l-jahr*) during salat, as well as reciting Sura *Fatiha* out loud during salat, not just under one’s breath or silently with the imam. Additionally, Ahl-i-Hadith adherents are distinguished for crossing their arms higher against the chest (*zabr-i naf hath bandhna*) than Hanafis, who cross their arms over the navel. These outwardly observable practices were mentioned often by local informants of both groups as key differences between them.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Sh. Inayatullah, *Ahl-i-Hadith*, EI2, vol. I, 259. On the competitive proselytising Hindu and Muslim groups that targeted each other in early 20th century India, including the *Arya Samaji* movement, see Yoginder Sikand, ‘*Arya Shuddhi* and Muslim *Tabligh*: Muslim reactions to Arya Samaj proselytization (1923-1930)’, in *Religious conversion in India: modes, motivations and meanings*, ed. Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹¹¹ Ar. *rakʿa* / *rukūʿ*, the act of bending, bowing during prayer. In popular speech it is used to denote one section of salat prayer.

¹¹² Multiple interviews and attendance at Ahl-i-Hadith salat services, January, 2008, Rajshahi.

¹¹³ Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 274-275.

A third difference with the majority community is the Ahl-i-Hadith view on the minimum requirement to establish Friday *jumu'ca* prayers in any given locale. For Hanafis, there should be at least thirty individuals in attendance to hold Friday *jumu'ca* prayers, whereas Ahl-i-Hadith in the subcontinent maintain that a group of three or four believers may legitimately constitute a *jamaat* and therefore *jumu'ca* prayers should be held in every small village. Additionally, the Ahl-i-Hadith were notable for being the first reformist movement in the subcontinent to insist that the Friday *khutba* (sermon) be given in the local vernacular rather than in Arabic, so as to be understood by those in attendance.¹¹⁴

A further striking difference between Ahl-i-Hadith and the Hanafi majority in India is the former's practice of including women in mosque attendance, whereas Hanafis do not allow women's participation in mosque services, even during 'Id holidays. This aspect of Ahl-i-Hadith practice in the greater region, however, does not seem to have been included in the movement's reforms in the Rajshahi area yet.

Ahl-i-Hadith in Bangladesh. Though reliable estimates of Ahl-i-Hadith adherents are hard to come by, documented madrasas and mosques around India, Pakistan and Bangladesh that self-identify as Ahl-i-Hadith number in the thousands. One Ahl-i-Hadith scholar estimates over ten million adherents in Pakistan and more than ten million in India. Western Bangladesh and certain parts of the state of West Bengal, India (Murshidabad, Maldah, parts of Calcutta) are home to particularly heavy concentrations of Ahl-i-Hadith adherents. In Bangladesh there were claimed to be more than fifteen million Ahl-i-Hadith adherents, or ten percent of the total population.¹¹⁵ Ahl-i-Hadith are divided into two major

¹¹⁴ Claudia Preckel, *Ahl-i-Hadith, EI3* (Brill Online. University of Edinburgh. 16 September 2009 <http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=ei3_COM-0107>)

¹¹⁵ Muhammad Asadullah Al-Ghalib, আহলেহাদীছ আন্দোলন (*The Ahl-i-Hadith Movement*), see figures on pp. 369, 381, 387, 472.

organizations in northwest Bangladesh (see below) although smaller splinter groups continue to be formed as well.¹¹⁶

The modern Ahl-i-Hadith in Bangladesh was founded in 1947 at a conference held in Rangpur (north of Rajshahi) under the name Nikhil Bongo o Assam Jomi'ote Ahl-i-Hadith. Subsequent steering committees changed the name after Partition to Purbo-Pak Jomi'ote Ahl-i-Hadith (1953) and again after Bangladeshi independence in 1971, to the current name Bangladesh Jomi'ote Ahl-i-Hadith. The leaders who were instrumental in founding the Ahl-i-Hadith organization for Bengal in 1947 continued to appoint their own protégés to the leadership of the group down to the present time. In 1994, one of the prominent scholars in the movement, Asadullah al-Ghalib, broke away from Jomi'ot and began a new splinter Ahl-i-Hadith group in Rajshahi named Ahl-i-Hadith Andolon Bangladesh. Numerous large madrasas, offices, an active student wing (Jubo Shongho), and the published periodical *Al-Arafat* that the group maintains would all suggest that this new splinter group is well-resourced and well-connected.

2.6 Print proliferation in reformist movements

No study of reformist movements in the Indian subcontinent would be adequate without mentioning the powerful impact of the introduction of print technology and its use by the 'ulama' of the early 19th century. Robinson has noted the relatively late adoption of print technology in the Muslim world (four centuries after Christian Europe) and its possible connection to cultural values of orality and the master-student relationship in the transmission of religious knowledge.¹¹⁷ In fact, the reformist 'ulama' of India recognised the power and

¹¹⁶ Telephone interview with madrasa graduate in Rajshahi, 26 February, 2010.

¹¹⁷ Robinson suggests that Muslims were reluctant to print and distribute mass quantities of texts because of the medieval Islamic tradition of personally mastering a religious text at the hands of a scholar, who would then grant the student an *ijaza*, or permission to teach the text to other students. Mass production of texts would not only circumvent this process, but also adversely affect the authority of the religious scholars. In regard to the late adoption of the printing press in Muslim countries, Robinson writes, "The problem was that printing

necessity of printing large numbers of copies cheaply using the lithographic press much earlier than their Hindu neighbours or their Muslim coreligionists in the Middle East – in part due to the immanent challenges associated with a complete loss of state political power and the threats of Western secularism, education and anti-Muslim pressure.¹¹⁸

Reformist Muslims, primarily the Deoband ‘ulama’, the scholars of Farangi Mahall in Lucknow,¹¹⁹ and the early Ahl-i-Hadith leadership centred in Bhopal and Delhi,¹²⁰ were in the preeminent position in the early Indian use of print technology. Printing presses came first to Muslim centres in north India: Bareilly, Moradabad, Meerut, Agra and Delhi.¹²¹ Qur’ans in vernacular, the classic Sunni hadith collections, polemical reformist tracts, commentaries on the hadith, the writings of al-Ghazali and Ibn Khaldun, important collections of *fatawa*, and biographies of famous Muslims were all translated and disseminated, sparking a revolution in

attacked the very heart of Islamic systems of the transmission of knowledge; it attacked what was understood to make knowledge trustworthy, what gave it value and authority.” Francis Robinson, ‘Islam and the impact of print in South Asia’, in *Islam and Muslim history in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 69. On the other hand, Robinson explains that Indian reformists felt able to vigorously adopt the new technology because they fully intended to retain the old dependence on the ‘ulama’ for the transfer of book knowledge, even if the book was printed in a press: “The most powerful reason why the *ulema* felt able to adopt printing with such vigour was that it was not seen, at least initially, as involving any abandonment of the oral tradition of person to person transmission...No one was to read a book without the help of a scholar...” Robinson, ‘Islam and the impact of print’, 77.

¹¹⁸ “Where Muslim regimes still wielded power, but were threatened by the expansion of the West, such as Egypt, Iran and the Ottoman Empire, presses were started in the early nineteenth century but were not widely used until the second half of the century...Where Muslims were under some form of colonial rule...the response was much more rapid and much more urgent. Within two decades of the beginning of the century, the Muslims of Tsarist Russia had seventeen presses in operation. By the 1820s, Muslim reformist leaders in the Indian subcontinent were busily printing tracts. By the 1830s the first Muslim newspapers were being printed.” Robinson, ‘Islam and the impact of print’, 67.

¹¹⁹ This family of illustrious Islamic scholars based in Lucknow became influential in the era of Mughal patronage of religious scholars. They were not participants in popular reform efforts like the Deobandis and Ahl-i-Hadith, but played an important role in preserving a strong tradition of Hanafi Islamic scholarship in north India during the tumultuous 18th and 19th centuries. See Francis Robinson, ‘*Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic culture of South Asia* (London: C. Hurst, 2001).

¹²⁰ Siddiq Hasan Khan (d. 1890), one of the founders of the Indian Ahl-i-Hadith movement, and the *nawwab* of the princely state of Bhopal south of Delhi, was at the forefront of publishing, both of his own vast collection of writings on hadith, Qur’anic exegesis and polemical tracts, as well as the translation and printing of classical works of hadith. He both published and widely disseminated these works in India, and, through his own agents, in cities around the Muslim world. Important among the classic commentaries which he made available through printing was the classic commentary on al-Bukhari’s *Sahih* by Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-bari*, and *Nayl al-awtar* by Ahl-i-Hadith thinker al-Shawkani (d. 1839). See Muhammad Qasim Zaman, ‘Commentaries, print and patronage: hadith and the madrasas in modern South Asia’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 62 (1999), 60-81 (63).

¹²¹ Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya Dharm* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976, 19-20 (ctd. in Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 200).

the breadth of availability of these sources of knowledge.¹²² During this period reformists published works mainly in Urdu, reaching the upper classes of Indian Muslims, including the *ashraf* Muslims¹²³ of Bengal who claimed to be descended from the non-Bengali Turko-Afghan settlers who originated from the (now Urdu-speaking) regions of India and points further West.¹²⁴

Indian reformist scholars also published Islamic commentaries in Arabic, perhaps as a means to enhance their own religious authority at home through demonstrated mastery of the classical languages of Islam – even though the masses of Indian Muslims did not and do not understand Arabic¹²⁵ and the readership would have been limited to a miniscule percentage of Indian religious elites. But such works also allowed Indian ‘*ulama*’ to seek and in some cases gain a position of notoriety and participation in the broader trans-national Islamic ‘*ulama*’:

“Conscious of the need to demonstrate their own competence and authority, as well as the ‘authenticity’ of their understanding of the true faith, and, not least, to forge ties with religious scholars of the Near East, many of the more prominent scholars of the Ahl-i Hadith often wrote in the Arabic language.”¹²⁶ This type of scholarship, while not necessarily impacting on the religious life of the Muslim masses in India, held the potential for winning prestige at home and abroad, enjoying the intellectual exchanges and travel that resulted, and perhaps also of becoming the recipients of financial patronage and coveted teaching positions.

¹²² Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 198-205.

¹²³ For hundreds of years there had been a clear distinction between the *ashraf* (of the Prophet’s blood-line; in this case, foreign, noble) and the *atlaf* (*atraf* in Bengal; local, ignoble, non-Aryan). In 19th century Bengal large numbers of peasants began to take on Islamic names, with many thousands also claiming ‘*ashraf*’ descent, that is, descent from one of the noble invading Turko-Afghan settlers who had arrived in Bengal during the Sultanate and Mughal periods. Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 1-38.

¹²⁴ Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 200.

¹²⁵ “...it is striking that a large number of the ‘*ulama*’s major works were written not in Urdu but rather in the Arabic language at this time, even though most of the people in South Asia—even among the educated Muslims—were (and are) unable to understand this language.” Zaman, ‘Commentaries’, 60-81: 62.

¹²⁶ Zaman, ‘Commentaries’, 63.

Vernacular translations of religious texts into Urdu, and later in the 19th century, into Bengali, radically impacted thousands of Muslims who could read, and hundreds of thousands who could listen to others read in small local gatherings.¹²⁷ Religious knowledge was ‘democratised’ and the sense of personal responsibility for leading an Islamic life and influencing one’s own family and associates was for the first time widely diffused in reformist writings throughout Indian society.¹²⁸ Besides the newly expanded availability of the Qur’an and hadith collections, and the cross-currents of reformist discourse that now reached a broader public through polemical tracts (and the ensuing public debates)¹²⁹, what is most important for our present study is the appearance in the late 19th and early 20th centuries of a limited number of hadith manuals *cum* commentary which, due to their early appearance and the reputations of their authors, gained a deep and permanent position as quasi-authoritative guides to reformist family and community Islam – a position which has lasted until the present time.¹³⁰ The target audience for these religious manuals was the popular mass of Muslims in India whom ‘ulama’ wished to reach with basic Islamic reformism and their own particular sect’s vision of that reform.

In 20th century Bengal, these volumes were at first accessed by the upper classes and formed an important part of the growing body of available religious knowledge. They eventually made their way into madrasa curricula, local corner bookstalls and an increasing number of middle class and even lower-middle class homes. Given that Urdu functioned as the *lingua franca* for the *ashraf* class of Bengali Muslims throughout the 19th and early 20th

¹²⁷ See Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, 200-201.

¹²⁸ Francis Robinson, ‘Religious change and the self in Muslim South Asia since 1800’, in *Islam and Muslim history*, 115-116.

¹²⁹ Journals and newspapers began to be published in both Urdu and Bengali in the second half of the 19th century, and were harnessed by Muslim activists to counter Christian and Hindu ideas. ‘Nacihat Namas’ were short polemical tracts published by Islamic groups, and also played an important role in the religious discourse of this period. See Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh: religion, ethnicity, and language in an Islamic nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 71-74.

¹³⁰ Maimuna Huq has perceptively described this category as “compendia of Qur’anic commentary or exegesis, *hadith* such as the thirteenth-century *Riyad al-Salihin*, as well as Qur’anic commentaries and theological texts produced by authoritative traditional religious scholars, contemporary or recent.” Maimuna Huq, ‘Reading the Qur’an, 457-488.

centuries, and again as the language of national government, commerce and religious scholarship during the united Pakistan era, reformist texts in Urdu impacted centres of Islamic scholarship in Bengal just as they also did in northern India.¹³¹ After Bangladesh won independence in 1971 through a nationalist struggle that placed the Bengali language as a centrepiece of national identity, most of the important Urdu religious texts were translated and made available in Bengali, if they were not available already.¹³² As a result, almost all of Rajshahi's Muslims today have at the very least heard of *Bihishti Zewar*, *Fazai'l i-Amal* (also called *Tablighi Nisab*), the *Mishkat* and *Riyad al-Salihin* (see below). Many, if not most, middle class homes own and display copies of one or more of these works. Their influence is pervasive – a confluence of mostly hadith-based religious knowledge that permeates (and reflects) the local religious environment.

2.7 Authoritative texts in Rajshahi

In contemporary Bangladesh there is an ever increasing proliferation of medieval and modern religious works being produced or translated in both Arabic¹³³ and Bengali. This is carried out in the first instance by the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, a state-sponsored Sunni publisher. An interesting mix of both Salafi-leaning and non-reformed Hanafi works

¹³¹ However, the majority of Bengalis, especially the rural masses, never learned to use Urdu, but were confined to Bengali. The exponential increase in the translation and publication of Urdu and Arabic texts into Bengali since the 1950s has resulted in still greater proliferation of reformist knowledge in the Bangladesh environment.

¹³² Fieldwork conducted by Bangladesh scholar Phil Bushell during the 1980s makes clear that at that time, during the first years of Bangladeshi independence, Urdu was still the reading medium in the madrasas of Sylhet (northeast Bangladesh). As was noted in the Introduction to this thesis, this is no longer the case, as Bengali and Arabic have replaced Urdu as the primary language mediums. See Philip Anthony Bushell. 'Ritual Prayer', 21. On this topic also see, Shah Abdul Hannan, *Bayt al-Hikma* website, "The religious education of Muslim women in Bangladesh," n.d., <http://www.witnesspioneer.org/vil/Articles/education/ReligiousEducationMuslimwomen.htm> (Accessed on December 15, 2008).

¹³³ As Arabic teaching in Bangladeshi madrasas has improved in the last decade, the newest generations of madrasa graduates are more capable of accessing additional sources in Arabic than even those who graduated in the 1990s. However it is noteworthy that there are still many madrasas around Rajshahi town which do not teach anything but the memorization of the Qur'an, sura by sura (known as *Hafizi* Madrasas, because the graduates will be called '*Hafiz*' or one who has completely memorised the Qur'an). Students can read the Arabic script, but are *never taught its meaning*. They memorise one 'para' (one thirtieth of the Qur'an), and then recite this perfectly to the resident instructor, in order to advance to the next 'para'. Such students often cannot form simple Arabic sentences even after graduation. This information is from my ethnographic research among students and teachers inside various *Hafizi* madrasas in Rajshahi.

are published simultaneously. In addition to those printed by the Islamic Foundation, there is an ever widening number of reformist publications being undertaken by large madrasas and private religious universities funded by a variety of Bangladeshi and foreign bodies.¹³⁴ It is important to note, however, that these activities have in no way vanquished the vibrant undercurrent of Hanafi popular religion of the last few centuries in Bengal, and many popular books that actually sell on their own merit due to public demand in train stations and corner bookstalls are of the more traditional Hanafi variety.

Through many months of exposure to Rajshahi Muslims, through visits in their homes and discussions with local ‘ulama’, I was able to gain a qualitative understanding of the most trusted and widely preferred textual sources of religious knowledge. These preferred sources are in no way obscure when compared to the foundational Sunni texts used in the rest of the Muslim world. Turning to my particular case study for uncovering local Islamic discourses, I asked Rajshahi ‘ulama’ where a person who wants to read in Bengali medium¹³⁵ might turn to learn about the events of the *barzakh* period? Answers from ‘ulama’ to this question began with an acknowledgement that the hadith collections of al-Bukhari and Muslim are the root of all authoritative information on *al-barzakh*, and that a person should access these directly since they are easily available in Bengali. Beyond this, imams recommended consulting a number of thematically organised works of hadith we explore below.

The authoritative hadith literature. No one should underestimate the ability of the authoritative canon of Sunni hadith, the *sahih sitta*,¹³⁶ to inspire religious certainty in ‘ulama’

¹³⁴ Refer to Section 2.1 of this chapter for discussion of foreign funding of Islamic projects in Bangladesh.

¹³⁵ I was interested in Bengali sources alone because, as noted above, until the last few years in Rajshahi, average ‘ulama’ have not been skilled enough in Arabic to seriously pursue reading a book in that language, having sufficient skills to recite the text only (without significant ability to understand the meaning). Naturally, the common people have not exceeded the ‘ulama’ in this regard to any great extent. Of course exceptions have always existed, but I was interested in the majority of ‘ulama’ and their experience. In the first decade of the 21st century, just as more and more important commentaries and resources have been translated into Bengali, it seems that the level of madrasa Arabic training has also improved markedly.

¹³⁶ This terminology is currently used in Rajshahi. The ‘Six Sahihs’, or the ‘six authentic’ (literally, sound, healthy) hadith collections, sometimes also referred to as *al-kutub al-sitta* (the six books). These six authoritative collections of hadith literature which are considered authentic by a majority of Sunni scholars are

and the Muslim laity, past and present. It is one thing as an academic scholar of Islamic texts to understand that the *sahih sitta* came to be viewed over time as completely authoritative, second only to the Qur^ʿan.¹³⁷ It is quite another perspective to be an audio learner in a Sunni-majority region, whose religious leaders teach that the *sahih* hadith are “absolutely reliable” and “without error.”¹³⁸ Although the leaders of Islamic modernism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries certainly questioned or rejected the Islamic authenticity of the hadith literature,¹³⁹ this perspective was not encountered in my interactions with either Hanafi traditionalist ‘ulama’ or with the reformist Ahl-i-Hadith in Rajshahi.¹⁴⁰

Authoritative *hadith* therefore are used as proof-texts for solving questions of practice in the community, exactly as a verse from the Qur^ʿan is used. It is vital to understand this authority which the *sahih* hadith enjoy in Bangladesh. For all practical purposes, the *sahih*

the collections named after al-Bukhari (d. 870), Muslim (d. 875), Abu Da^ʿud (d. 889), al-Tirmidhi (d. 892), Ibn Maja (d. 887), and al-Nasa^ʿi (d. 915).

¹³⁷ Although there has been a small minority of Muslims who have contested the authority of the hadith tradition almost continuously from the third Islamic century until the present, the canonical Sunni hadith canon has held the position of “the second authoritative source for religious guidance for the vast majority of Muslims from at least the third/ninth century until now.” Aisha Y. Musa, *Hadith as scripture: discussions on the authority of prophetic traditions in Islam* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 80.

¹³⁸ “একশ পার্সেন্ট নির্ভরযোগ্য” and “নির্ভেজাল”. Interview with Ahl-i-Hadith madrasa principal. Interview: Muhammad Golam Rabbani. 14 December, 2007/multiple. Rajshahi. A Hanafi imam also affirmed, “হাদিস ঠিক আছে। হাদিসের মধ্যে ভুল নেই”। (The hadith are correct. There are no mistakes in the hadith.). Interview: Hafez Kari Muhammad Nurul Islam. 26 May, 2006 / 24 February, 2008. Rajshahi. During other field interviews in Bangladesh, and in dozens of personal interactions with scholars from Islamic contexts as diverse as Libya, Malaysia, Indonesia and Pakistan, I have asked Muslim community leaders about their personal level of confidence in the six Sunni canonical collections of hadith. Aside from Muslim academics working in Western universities, I have yet to meet an ‘*alim*’ who disagrees with the verdict of these imams and scholars in Rajshahi.

¹³⁹ The great Indian modernist Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) was one of the most influential voices of the 19th century to take this position. He eventually rejected the authenticity of nearly the entire corpus of hadith literature. (Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 32). Chiragh ‘Ali (d.1895) was a modernist interpreter of the Qur^ʿan and a colleague of Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d.1898). His most controversial modernist position was the fact that he considered the hadith corpus to be entirely fabricated and an unworthy basis for Islamic law. ‘Islam in South Asia’, ER², 4652.

¹⁴⁰ I was reminded of this pervasive confidence in the *sahih sitta* when I attended an outdoor multi-day reformist *waz mahfil* (preaching gathering) held at the Collegiate School by Shaheb Bazar, downtown Rajshahi in February, 2008, along with what appeared to be two thousand local Muslims. During sermons, speakers claimed that al-Bukhari and Muslim are indisputably accurate. Using an interactive preaching style with the audience, one ‘*alim*’ asked a crowd of two thousand if anyone present disputes that Muslim and al-Bukhari are ‘*sahih*’. and the crowd shouted, “No!”. The speaker again asked rhetorically, “Can anyone dispute the purity and divinity of al-Bukhari and Muslim?” The obvious answer, which the crowd shouted again, was “No!” The same preacher later called into question the Islam (faith) of any believer who would doubt the authenticity of any hadith from al-Bukhari or Muslim, asserting that to deny the authenticity of any al-Bukhari and Muslim hadith report is to place oneself outside of true Islam. Fieldnotes, *Antorjatik Islami Mohashommelon*, 18 February, 2008, Rajshahi.

hadith collections are completely authoritative and normative for life and doctrine for Sunnis living here. The fact that they are second to the Qur'an in authority is not important, since the *sahih* hadith have already passed the tests of authenticity to which they were subjected by the early *muhaddithun*. Ahl-i-Hadith activists regularly remind people of their position that the early *muhaddithun*, such as Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari (d. 870) and Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (d. 875) were much closer to the events and oral transmitters of the hadith reports, and their expertise in deciding which hadith were canonical could never be approximated by later scholars engaging in hadith criticism.

Popular compendia of hadith. Topically organised hadith works, some having medieval authorship and others from the modern period, draw from a wide array of relevant sources, grouping Qur'an, hadith and other teachings on a particular subject together under one heading. Of these works, a few volumes have gained a quasi-authoritative position in the region (*Table 2.1*), and are printed with the ornamental hard-back cover denoting a book of scripture.

1. *Bihishti Zewar*¹⁴¹ is found in many homes and bookshops around Bangladesh. It was written in Urdu by Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi (alternately, Thanwi/Thanvi, 1864-1943), a scholar of the *Dar-ul 'ulum* madrasa in Deoband, India, over a period of a decade near the beginning of the 20th century.¹⁴² The purpose of the book was to instruct middle- and upper-class Indian Muslim

¹⁴¹ Thanawi, Maulana Ashraf 'Ali. *Bihishti Zewar* (Heavenly Ornaments). Trans. Hazrat Maulana Samsul Haq. Dhaka: Emdadiyya Library, 2006 (orig. Bengali translation 1966). Also sometimes translated as *The Jewels of Paradise*.

¹⁴² A date of authorship is not in the work itself and does not appear in the commentaries. The twelve-volume Urdu *Bihishti Zewar* is available in bookshops in north India and Pakistan, just as the ten-part, three-volume Bengali translation is widely available in Bangladesh. English readers can find partial translations in Barbara D. Metcalf, *Perfecting women: Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar: a partial translation with commentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), and in Rahm Ali Hashmi, *Bahishti Zewar (Requisites of Islam)* (Delhi, 1973); See also www.JamiaAshrafia.org at http://www.jamiaashrafia.org/recite_quran3.php (Accessed on December 15, 2008) for an on-line version in English, as well as another English presentation of *Bihishti Zewar* at the website of Jamiatul Ulama Transvaal, http://www.jamiat.co.za/library/books/bzewar/bahishti_zewar.htm (Accessed on December 15, 2008).

women on how to live an Islamic life within their households, with attention to Islamic beliefs, external practices like prayer and ablutions, and inspirational material such as biographies of pious women and other stories intended to encourage faithfulness to Islamic principles. Other wide-ranging topics were included in an effort to make the book a sum total of religious knowledge necessary to run a pious Muslim household and provide instruction to children on Islamic life and practice. Sections on fasting, *zakat*, *hajj*, effective Qur'an recitation and *haram* and *halal* foods (and manners) were balanced with extensive teaching on marriage and family laws, etiquette and health matters, sewing, cooking, and even "Principles of Business and Pursuit of Wealth."

Although this work was often given to a woman at her wedding,¹⁴³ *Bihishti Zewar* quickly became a practical guide to Islamic life for women *and men*.¹⁴⁴ In former Bengal where madrasa education was conducted in Urdu until the late 20th century (when it shifted to Bengali),¹⁴⁵ *Bihishti Zewar* was an early favourite among the *ashraf* (aristocratic) classes who were able to participate in formal education. When the work became available in Bengali translation in 1966, its influence naturally spread to a wider section of the public, resulting in its current place of importance and its presence on bookshelves in many middle class homes

¹⁴³ Francis Robinson, *Islam, South Asia and the West* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 292; Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic revival*, 211.

¹⁴⁴ I have rarely heard allusion in the Bangladesh context to the fact that *Bihishti Zewar* was originally intended for women. It is very often recommended (by men) as a first source to answer common religious questions, and is conspicuous for being visible on the shelves of most middle-class homes in Rajshahi. As the translator of the Bengali text noted in his introduction in 1966, "বেহেশতী জেওর আসলে লেখা হয়ছিল শুধু স্ত্রীলোকদের জন্য; কিন্তু কিতাবখানা এত সর্বাঙ্গীন সুন্দর ও এত ব্যাপক হইয়াছে যে, পুরুষেরা এমন কি আলেমগণও এই কিতাবখানা হইতে অনেক কিছু শিখা পাইতেছেন।" ("*Bihishti Zewar* was actually written only for women. But the work was so complete in beauty and wide-ranging that men also, and even 'ulama', are learning great amounts from this book.>").

¹⁴⁵ Shah Abdul Hannan, *Bayt al-Hikma* website, "The religious education of Muslim women in Bangladesh," n.d., <http://www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Articles/education/ReligiousEducationMuslimwomen.htm> (Accessed on December 15, 2008).

in Muslim Bangladesh. By some reports, this book is printed more than any other Islamic book in the subcontinent except the Qur'an.¹⁴⁶

2. *Tablighi Nisab*, also known as *Faza'il 'Amal*, is a set of tracts begun in the 1930s by a revered hadith expert in the Deobandi tradition, Muhammad Zakariyya Kandhalvi (d. 1982). Now a book-sized collection of these tracts, it is the main textbook of the global Tablighi Jama'at movement – a 'non-denominational' and mostly apolitical Islamic renewal movement that focuses on reviving piety among Muslims.¹⁴⁷ Each section of this work uses hadith primarily to focus attention on the *merits* (or rewards, Ar. *fada'il*) of performing prayer, the merits of fasting, the merits of *hajj*, and even the merits of going on *tabligh* (preaching journeys). The first section, the *Hikayatu's-sahaba* (Lives of the Companions), is unique and also the most popular. It recounts from hadith sources stories of courage, suffering, piety and determination of the Companions of the Prophet, especially in the preaching of Islam among the Arabs.

¹⁴⁶Francis Robinson, 'Islamic reform and modernities', (263).

¹⁴⁷Barbara D. Metcalf, 'Meandering madrasas: education, itinerancy and the Tablighi Jama'at', in *The Transmission of knowledge in South Asia*, ed. Nigel Crook (London: SOAS, 1996), 53.

Table 2.1 – Authoritative hadith compendia

Title	Author	Nature and Scope
<i>Bihishti Zewar</i> (<i>Heavenly Ornaments/ The Jewels of Paradise</i>)	Asraf Ali Thanawi (1864-1943) – Written in the early 1900s. Thanawi was a scholar trained in the orthodox tradition of the Deobandi schools.	Popular among pious Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi reformist Muslims. Based on Qur ^ʿ an and canonical hadith, it is a topical advice manual, originally written to establish women as personal contributors to the project of creating self-consciously pious and obedient Muslim families and societies. This volume was often observed by the author on the shelves of middle-class homes in Bangladesh.
<i>Tablighi Nisab</i> (<i>Fazaʿil ʿAmal</i>)	Muhammad Zakariyya Kandhalvi (1898-1982), A revered hadith expert who taught at the Deobandi sister college at Saharanpur, 22 miles north of Deoband Town.	Begun in the 1930s as a series of tracts on the <i>merits (fadaʿil)</i> of performing Islamic duties. Now a compendium of tracts, this book is the primary guide for the global Tablighi Jamaʿat movement. Each section arranges hadith and teaching to emphasise the merits/ benefits/ heavenly rewards of regular prayer; fasting; reading and memorizing the Qur ^ʿ an; pious repetitions (<i>zikr</i>); <i>tabligh</i> (preaching) tours; etc. The hadith selected especially emphasise the rewards one gets from performing religious duties.
<i>Mishkat al-Masabih</i>	Wali al-Din Muhammad b. ʿAbdallah al-Khatib al-Tibrizi (d. 1340), a medieval hadith expert. [<i>improved edition of orig. Masabih as-Sunna by al-Baghawi (d. 1122)</i>].	Used in class 9 and 10 madrasa education by students and teachers in Rajshahi. It is a topical compendium of hadith compiled first in the 12 th century and was revised and improved in the 14 th century. Availability in Urdu and Bengali has made this an important (and easily accessible) source on the most popular and well-worn hadith reports from al-Bukhari, Muslim and the other authoritative Sunni collections.
<i>Riyad al-Salihin</i> (<i>Gardens of the Righteous</i>)	Muhyi al-Din Abu Zakariyyaʿ Yahya b. Sharaf al-Nawawi (1233-1278), a Syrian Shafiʿi scholar.	Very similar to the <i>Mishkat</i> and also written before modern times by a medieval scholar and translated into Urdu and Bengali. This work includes relevant Qur ^ʿ an verses at the start of each topical section, as if to underscore the connection between prophetic example and the Qur ^ʿ anic revelation. The names of the sources of each hadith (al-Bukhari, Abu Dawud) are included after each report.

3. The *Mishkat al-Masabih* is another topical compendium of hadith which depends on the primary Sunni canonical sources as well as other well-known ancient authorities. This work differs from the previous two in that its provenance is in the 12th century rather than in modern times. It was revised in 1336 by Wali ad-Din Muhammad b. ʿAbdallah al-Khatib al-Tibrizi, being an

improved version of an earlier work entitled *Masabih al-Sunna* by al-Baghawi (d. 1122). Arranged in chapters, much as al-Bukhari and Muslim, it begins with ‘faith’, and covers ‘prayers’, ‘ablutions’, ‘funerals’, ‘beliefs’ – having a similar structure to the canonical hadith collections. The work is divided into three major books, with smaller chapters in each book. Each chapter is divided into three parts: *sahih* reports, limited to hadith reports from al-Bukhari and Muslim alone; *hasan*, or ‘good’ reports, taken from the other major Sunni collectors, Abu Dawud, Tirmidhi, Nasa’i, the *Musnad* of Ahmad b. Hanbal and others; and a third section which was added by al-Tabrizi with additional hadith he found on each topic. He made additions to the collection totalling 1,515 reports, which were added to the 4,719 traditions contained in the original *Masabih*. Finally, al-Tabrizi added the name of the Companion or original source (just one name, not an entire *isnad*) to the end of each report, which had been omitted from the original work by al-Baghawi.¹⁴⁸

Due to its availability first in Urdu and then in Bengali, it has become an important part of madrasa education in Bangladesh and also is viewed as an accessible source for religious knowledge for the reading public. Students at the Aliganj madrasa in Rajshahi focus on this work during class 9 and class 10 of their studies.¹⁴⁹ ‘Ulama’ I visited in mosques recommended that I access this work for information on *al-barzakh*, and indeed the *Mishkat* does repeat almost all of the well-known hadith from the *sahih sitta* on this topic. The *Mishkat* is also considered to be easier to use because it omits long *isnads*, or the chains of narration belonging to an authoritative hadith tradition. A senior

¹⁴⁸ See Introduction, i-xix, to Wali ad-Din Muhammad b. ‘Abdallah al-Khatib al-Tibrizi, *Mishkat Al-Masabih* (Trans. by James Robson / Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf publisher, 1960).

¹⁴⁹ Interview: Sheik Muhammad Kamruzzaman. 9 February 2008. Rajshahi.

Ahl-i-Hadith *‘alim* in Rajshahi says, “You can get the ‘gist’ of all *al-kutub al-sitta* from the *Mishkat*.”¹⁵⁰

4. *Riyad al-Salihin*, popular throughout South Asian Islam, is yet another compendium of the most important, well-known and useful hadith traditions from the authoritative Sunni sources. Like the *Mishkat*, it is not from the modern period but was put together by a 13th century Syrian Shafi‘i scholar Muhyi al-Din Abu Zakariyya⁹ Yahya b. Sharaf al-Nawawi (1233-1278).¹⁵¹ In the *Riyad*, ‘Imam Nawawi’ organised each topical section with relevant verses from the Qur’an first, followed by pertinent hadith reports, and he mainly limited his selection of hadith to al-Bukhari and Muslim, but also drew from the Abu Dawud, Tirmidhi, the Muwatta of Malik and a few other authoritative sources of hadith.

Other topical books provide a similar end product as the famous works mentioned above, but claim to do so using a ‘scientific’ research-oriented approach. In place of an appeal to the piety of a religious figure, these works plainly assert the purpose of the editors to produce an updated and well-researched summary of Islamic knowledge in an easily accessible format on a topical basis. *Bisshoybhittik Hadis*¹⁵² (Topical Hadith) is one such work which was recommended to me on more than one occasion. The *Diniyat*,¹⁵³ published and periodically updated by the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, is another standard volume used by local mosque imams, and organised around traditional headings of *fiqh*.

¹⁵⁰ Interview: Dr. Alomgir Hossein. 4 January, 2008. Rajshahi.

¹⁵¹ C.E. Bosworth calls the *Riyad* “one of the most typical and widely known collections of this type.” From his foreword to the English translation by Muhammad Zafrulla Khan (London: Curzon, 1975). Khan opines that the reason al-Nawawi compiled the *Riyad* was because the “enormous collection of tradition, though freely available in Arabic, could not be easily mastered even by devout scholars, more particularly as a large number of commentaries on the *sahih sitta* began to be compiled and were circulated. The need thus arose of briefer compilations designed to serve limited purposes.” From the Introduction to his translation of the *Riyad*, x.

¹⁵² Mufti Ajam Allama Fayjullah, *Bisshoybhittik Hadis* (Dhaka: Al-Echhak Prokashoni, 2005).

¹⁵³ Editing Committee, *Diniyat*. (The book on *fiqh*) (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Editorial Board, 2004).

In this chapter we began by introducing the reader to Rajshahi City and some relevant notes about its place in the Islamic history of Bengal and South Asia. Then we examined the genealogies, major figures and theological features of 18th to 20th-century Islamic reform in India generally. The culmination of these historical threads in the Rajshahi environment of today is the contemporary Ahl-i-Hadith movement, whose representative organizations and doctrinal positions were highlighted. Additionally, we noted that the printing press was harnessed by Muslims at a very early point in modern Indian reformism, and we briefly surveyed noteworthy works of Islamic pietistic reform which especially served to bring these ideals to the masses of India's Muslims – and impacted on the Bengal environment particularly.

Having provided the necessary historical context to the contemporary religious milieu of northwest Bangladesh, the following pages take the reader to Rajshahi to listen in and watch as Rajshahi ‘ulama’ and family members deal with the loss of a loved one in the rich context of living beliefs about what is happening to the deceased in *al-barzakh*. In Chapters Three and Four the community activities which are performed to help the deceased in *al-barzakh* are investigated in detail – an investigation informed by direct field observation of mosque imams and local families who are performing the actual work of burial rituals and the subsequent ceremonies. Community rituals are in cases clearly prescribed in authoritative texts, while in other cases they are hotly disputed points of doctrine and practice between Hanafis and Ahl-i-Hadith adherents – and sometimes these two categories seem to overlap and collide.

Chapter 3 – Death Above Ground - community rituals during *al-barzakh*

“I am commanded to implore pardon for the dead in the cemetery!”

-The Prophet Muhammad in *Ibn Ishaq*

In this chapter the reader will be familiarised with the major death-related community activities and ceremonies common in Rajshahi, Bangladesh. The title of this chapter, *Death Above Ground*, is meant to indicate all the community activities which are visible to the participants, and to exclude those events taking place in the spiritual realm of *al-barzakh*, which are invisible to the participants, though just as vividly part of their view of reality. Although such a separation of visible and invisible events may seem artificial to local believers, and the two categories do seep into one another in this chapter and the next, some method of organizing such a large amount of material was necessary. A focused discussion of the underlying beliefs about the invisible world and the events believed to be taking place for the deceased in the grave will therefore be taken up in the next chapter, *Death Below Ground*.

Understanding contemporary death practices in Rajshahi is essential to the discussion in subsequent chapters of how the community assists those already dead, intergroup disagreements about assisting the dead, and how such practices are related to authoritative texts by local Muslims. Beyond these pressing reasons for including such a chapter is the author's suspicion that an eye-witness account of a provincial Bangladeshi religious discourse, including commentary in Bengali by local religious authorities, is a somewhat rare and valuable thing in itself.

Many of the death-related activities in Rajshahi are commonly practised right across the Muslim world, being stipulated in Islamic law and specifically prescribed in authoritative hadith. Other ceremonies practised in Rajshahi are unique to the region, and this will be noted where appropriate. In both cases, readers unfamiliar with this special branch of knowledge will benefit from a brief overview of these death-related activities. The following major activities and ceremonies related to a death in the community will be examined:

- Preparation of soul before death
- Death, *gosol*, and preparation of body
- *Khotom*: preparation of soul by community

- *Bokshano*: transferring merit to the account of the deceased
- *Janaza namaz*: the funeral prayer
- Burial
- *Milads*: continuing to benefit the dead
- *Ziarod kora*: regular visitation of graves
- Expressing grief

3.1 Preparation of the soul before death

There is an awareness among pious Muslims in Rajshahi that one should live a transparent and devout life before God, instead of hoping for a ‘quick fix’ of repentance and forgiveness a short while before death. The locally popular *Bihishti Zewar* book of Muslim practice states, “at the time of death, when [a person] is breathing his last and he sees the angels of death, neither repentance nor his accepting Islam will be acceptable.”¹

Nevertheless, if a person has a foreseeable and approaching end in sight, relatives and friends will help the person to prepare spiritually for eternity. Among these preparations are placing the body in the religiously appropriate position for death, helping the dying person pronounce the auspicious last words, or the ‘*kalema*’,² and reciting the prescribed section of the Qur’an in order to reduce the pain of death for the loved one.

When it is known that a person is about to die, if it is not uncomfortable, he or she will be laid with the right side towards Mecca and the face tilted in the direction of Mecca. This position is locally called *kiblamukhi*,³ where *kibla* is taken from the Arabic for the direction of prayer, and *mukhi* is taken from the Bengali for ‘facing’. In a particularly pious example of preparing Islamically for death, an oral tradition reported by Ibn Sa’d relates that Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad, sensing that her death was imminent, purified her body ritually by bathing herself, and then lay down facing Mecca to await her own end.⁴

¹Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi, *Bihishti Zewar*, English translation accessed at <http://www.islamsa.org.za/library/books/bzewar/part1/beliefs.htm#eli> on November 12, 2008.

²কালেমা. This is the Bengali pronunciation of the Arabic *kalima*, the spoken word, utterance. Rajshahi Muslims use this word interchangeably with *shahada*, the Islamic confession of faith (see next page).

³কিব্রামুখী

⁴Ibn Sa’d, *Al-tabaqat al-kubra*, ed. E. Sachau (Leiden, 1904-1940), 8:17-18. Qtd. in Halevi, 1.

Kalema. Muslims in Bangladesh, both the Hanafi majority and the Ahl-i-Hadith groups, believe that the *kalema* should be the last words a person speaks before dying. The *kalema* consists of the words, “[I bear witness that] there is no god but God; [I bear witness that] Muhammad is the messenger of God,” and is pronounced in Arabic by the Bangladeshis.⁵ Hadith traditions which assure believers that they will gain entrance to *jannat* if they succeed in pronouncing the *kalema* as their last utterance are well known and commonly repeated.⁶ Maulana Habibur Rahman was just one of several senior imams at various mosques in Rajshahi to confirm this point:

In the hadith it is mentioned that if anyone’s last words are ‘*la ilaha ila Allah*’ then Allah will forgive him. Another hadith has it that if a baby’s first sentence is ‘*la ilaha ila Allah*’ and at death if his last words are ‘*la ilaha ila Allah*’, then even if this person were to live on the earth a thousand years, God would not bring up nor ask about any of his shortcomings.⁷

Talqin. Many individuals when approaching death may not be mentally alert enough to remember and execute this religious task, and so for those who need help, the family and friends provide a reminder.⁸ The process of reminding the dying to repeat the *kalema* is referred to as *talqin kora*, a Bengali verb based on the Arabic word *talqin* for instruction or dictation. To this end family members and neighbours are encouraged to ‘*talqin*’ the dying person, or to repeat the *kalema* into the ear of the dying repeatedly, in hope that this will

⁵ Each of the ritual recitations in this chapter, can be viewed as ‘words against death’ as suggested by Douglas J. Davies. The recitation of the *kalema* to the dying is only the first of numerous ‘words against death’ which the local community performs in the forty days of after death. This ritual recitation, followed by the many *khotoms* and *bokshano* (see below) are a prime way that the community seeks victory over death and to ensure the survival of its own members after death. Douglas Davies, *Death, ritual and belief: the rhetoric of funerary rites* (2nd Ed.) (New York: Continuum, 2002), 1-23.

⁶ Sahih Muslim, *Kitab al-jana’iz*, number 1998: “Abū Huraira reported Allah’s Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: Exhort to recite “There is no god but Allah” to those of you who are dying.”; *Diniyat* (The book on *Fiqh*), published by the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, pp. 199-202 contains detailed instructions in Bengali for encouraging the dying in the recitation of the *kalema*.

⁷ “হাদিসে উল্লেখ আছেঃ শেষ কথা যদি কারোর, ‘লা ইলাহা ইল্লাহ’ এই কথা হয়, তাহলে আল্লাহ তাকে ক্ষমা করে দিবেন। আর একটা হাদিসে আছে, জন্মের সময় যে শিশুর প্রথম বাক্যে ‘লা ইলাহা ইল্লাহ’ - ইস্তিকালের সময় যদি এই ব্যক্তির শেষ কথা ‘লা ইলাহা ইল্লাহ’ হয়, সে পৃথিবীতে হাজারও বছর বেঁচে থাকলেও, তাকে কোন অপরাধের বাপারে আল্লাহপাক জিজ্ঞাসা করবে না”। Interview: Maulana Habibur Rahman. 13 December 2007. Rajshahi.

⁸ According to one informant, a dying person (Bengali, মুমূর্ষু ব্যক্তি), in addition to being coached in saying the *kalema*, may also be advised to repent of his or her sins in the last minutes of life.

encourage the dying to say it too. However, commanding the dying to say the *kalema* is strictly forbidden, as it could lead the confused and weak person to react bitterly and say something disrespectful or blasphemous.⁹ Maulana Habibur Rahman clarifies this:

“In the case of a person who cannot say the *kalema* of their own efforts, it is *mostahab* [advisable] and a duty of Muslims to perform the *talqin* near them. The meaning of ‘*talqin*’ is to slowly and sweetly recite at the time of dying, causing another person to recite also: *la ilaha ila Allah, Muhammadur (sic.) rasul Allah*. Perhaps through listening, the sick person will be able to catch the phrase and recite it, and it can then be hoped that God will forgive him.”¹⁰

After saying the *kalema*, if a dying person again speaks of other matters, he or she will try to repeat the formula again, to be sure it is spoken last of all.¹¹ According to a training manual for imams published by the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, the primary government controlled religious publisher, “it is a good sign if the dying person shows sweat on the forehead, or water from the eyes or nose runs at the moment of death. But if the person’s last breath can be breathed while vigorously reciting the *kalema*, that is the very best.”¹²

Easing the pain of death with *Ya Sin*. Many of the last actions and words of the Prophet are recalled and taught for various purposes by Rajshahi Muslims, but one of the most significant sayings is reported to have been spoken at the very moment of his death. As he leaned on the bosom of his wife Aisha, the Prophet reportedly said (in Rajshahi oral lore), “*Mrityur jontrona prochondo koshtokor!*” which is to say, “The pain of the moment of death

⁹ “কিন্তু জোর করে না - জবরদস্তি করা যাবে না। চাপ সৃষ্টি করা যাবে না”। (But do not pressure [the dying] – one should not create pressure) Interview: Motiur Hossain and Kari Aatur Rahman Khan. Interview: 14 December 2007. Rajshahi; Interview: Maulana Muhammad Rezaul Karim. 6 February, 2008. Rajshahi. Similar instructions are found in *Bihishti Zewar*, 209 and other locally popular hadith compendia.

¹⁰ এ ছাড়া, মুসলমানদের করণীয় আছে, ব্যক্তি যদি সরাসরি নিজে-নিজেই কালেমা পড়তে না পারে, তার কাছে ‘তালকিন’ করা মোস্তাহাব। তালকিন-এর অর্থ হল, ইস্তেকালের সময় শুন্দর আওয়াজে ধীরে ধীরে পড়া। অন্য লোক পড়বেঃ ‘লা ইলাহা ইল্লাল্লাহ, মুহাম্মাদুর রাসুল উল্লাহ’। এতে রোগি ব্যক্তি, সে সহজে যদি তার মুখ থেকে শুনেও আয়ত্ত্ব করতে পারে, তবে আশা করা যায় আল্লাহ তাকে ক্ষমা করে দিবে”। Interview: Maulana Habibur Rahman. 13 December 2007. Rajshahi.

¹¹ In one of the earliest instances of Islamic material history, a tombstone of a Muslim girl who died in Egypt in 691 AD, only 59 years after the death of Muhammad, recorded an instance of this tradition from a very early period. Her tombstone inscription noted that ‘Abbasa bint Jurayj died while reciting the confession of faith: “She died on Monday, with fourteen days having passed of Dhu al-Qa’da, of the year Seventy One, while confessing [*wa-hiya tashhadu*] there is no god but Allah, alone, having no partner, and that Muhammad is his slave and messenger.” See Halevi, *Muhammad’s Grave*, 20.

¹² Editing Committee, *Diniyat*, 201.

is excruciating!”¹³ At this point, according to tradition, the Prophet asked her to recite sura *Ya Sin* from the Qur’an to sooth his pain.¹⁴

The idea that the moment of death is excruciatingly painful is widely affirmed by Rajshahi Muslims of both groups. This notion is supported by the above mentioned hadith tradition, as well as sura 6:94 of the Qur’an, which describes how the angel of death comes to the dying to withdraw the soul from the body: “And if you could but see when the wrongdoers are in the *overwhelming pangs of death* while the angels extend their hands, saying, “Discharge your souls!”” (italics added). Medieval hadith commentators elaborate this process, which usually includes a reluctant soul being drawn painfully through the fingernails and toenails of the individual, or through a sword piercing the heart.

For the above reasons, many Muslims in the Rajshahi area believe *both* that the pain of the moment of (everyone’s) death is excruciating, and that the reciting or hearing of sura *Ya Sin* will certainly lessen that pain and ease the transition into death.¹⁵ It is also held by most that the body of the departed remains susceptible to that same pain and remains tender to the touch even after it has expired. This is cited as an important reason for handling the dead body with extreme care and making all the movements from one place to another as smoothly as possible. This also means that sura *Ya Sin* can continue to be recited after the person has actually died, to great benefit (though not in the immediate presence of the body until after the ablution and washing are completed).

¹³ “মৃত্যুর যন্ত্রণা প্রচণ্ড কষ্টকর।” This oral account of ‘a hadith’ may be taken from al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 59, no. 730, which contains the following account of Muhammad’s last moments: “He started dipping his hand in the water and rubbing his face with it, he said, “None has the right to be worshipped except Allah. Death has its agonies.” He then lifted his hands (towards the sky) and started saying, “With the highest companion,” till he expired and his hand dropped down.” A hadith compendium that is locally popular, *Bihishti Zewar*, reaffirms this teaching (“মৃত্যুর সময় রোগীর বড়ই কষ্ট হয়”) and expressly recommends the recital of *Ya Sin* next to the dying person to ease his or her pain. See Maulana Ashraf ‘Ali Thanawi, *Bihishti Zewar*, 209.

¹⁴ This hadith is found in al-Nasa’i, and Ibn Majah, according to the Sunni Path website, at http://qa.sunnipath.com/issue_view.asp?HD=7&ID=4370&CATE=105, accessed on January 11, 2010. I could not locate this report in al-Bukhari or Muslim.

¹⁵ Interview: Imam of Tikapara Masjid. Rajshahi, May 17, 2006. Interview: Muhammad Obaidul Hakim. 17 May, 2006. Rajshahi; Interview: Lotifa Sharmin. 3 January, 2008. Rajshahi.

Reciting sura *Ya Sin* on behalf of the dead also carries spiritual benefit. A Rajshahi imam says that reciting *Ya Sin* one time to a dying or dead person brings the same amount of *so'ab* (merit) to their account as reciting the entire Qur'an ten times.¹⁶ An Ahl-i-Hadith imam and madrasa principal affirms that this ordinance is from the authoritative hadith, though without specifying exactly where: "In the hadith it says, 'Recite sura *Ya Sin* to your dead'. His soul will come out easily, the pain of death will be made easy, and will become bearable."¹⁷

3.2 Death, *gosol*, and preparation of body

Whether the person dies unexpectedly and suddenly, or whether the person has been approaching death for some time, as soon as the life leaves the body, a flurry of community activity begins and continues unabated until the completion of the burial later that day. It is an urgent matter to see that the body is buried within one day of death, or the following day if the person dies during the night. Not only is this practice stipulated in Islamic law and the laws of Bangladesh, it is also a matter of expediency in a warm sub-tropical climate.

Washing the corpse, providing a burial shroud, giving a funerary prayer, and completing an Islamic burial are all stipulated as community obligations in Hanafi Islamic law.¹⁸ The technical term for community obligation, *fard kifaya*, requires that some members of the community perform these acts in order to absolve the entire Muslim community from the guilt of neglecting to do them. Beyond being legally stipulated obligations, having a proper ritual washing, as well as a funeral prayer and Islamic burial, are considered to be urgently important for the success of the soul as the deceased faces the 'trial in the grave' and

¹⁶ Interview: Hafez Kari Muhammad Nurul Islam. 26 May, 2006 / 24 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

¹⁷ "হাদিসে আছে, 'তোমরা তোমাদের মৃত্যুর পাশে সুরা ইয়াসীন তেলাওয়াত কর, সহজে জান বেরিয়ে যায়, মৃত্যুর কষ্ট সহজ হয়, এবং সহনীয় পর্যায়ে আসে'। Interview: Maulana Muhammad Rezaul Karim. 6 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

¹⁸ Editing Committee, *Diniyat*, 199-221; See also Th. W. Juynboll, *Fard*, EI², vol. II, 790; A. S. Tritton, *Djanāza*, EI², vol. II, 441. See Halevi, 168, for the jurist al-Shafi'i's role in assigning these funerary functions to the category of *fard kifaya*.

the events of the *barzakh*. The cleaning of the body with ritually purified water, the wrapping of the body in unsewn white cloth, and other important acts performed during burial emphasise that there is a connection between a properly prepared body and what happens next.¹⁹ Most people in Rajshahi would be terrified at the thought of not having a proper Muslim *gosol* (bathing of the corpse) and *janaza* prayer service offered for themselves or one of their relatives.²⁰

Rajshahi ‘ulama’ stated that immediately upon an individual’s death, those present should close the eyes, bind the jaw shut, and tie the ankles together with pieces of cloth. Most likely the dying person was already placed with their right side facing Mecca (west-wards) and their face turned in that direction before death. The body is placed on a hard surface, such as the floor on a mat, any pillow is removed and tight clothing is loosened. These steps are taken so that the body can stiffen in the proper position. During these activities the relatives attempt to keep the body positioned so that the right side is toward Mecca.²¹ Once these steps are taken, the entire body is covered with a large *chador* (blanket/sheet) until those who will perform the *gosol* are ready.

*Gosol*²² is the Bengali word for bath, and is taken from the Arabic word for ‘washing’, *ghusl*. The bathing of the deceased community member is ritually complex and must be performed according to strict religious prescriptions. As mentioned above, it is a communal obligation, a *fard kifaya*. Technically, if one or a few members of the community

¹⁹ The Qur’an provides little if any guidance on how to handle dead bodies, how to carry out the washing of the corpse, the funeral procession or other tasks related to a death in the community. Jurists relied on hadith instead for guidance in these practical matters.

²⁰ Jitka Kotalova, a scholar with experience in Bangladesh, also noted that a proper *gosol* (bathing), *kafon* (shroud) and *janaza* prayer are considered to be the minimum requirements for having prospects of success at the trial in the grave and at the final judgment. Jitka Kotalova, *Belonging to Others: Cultural Construction of Womenhood in a Village in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1996), 91-94.

²¹ Lane mentions that there was some difference of opinion in Egypt as to whether the head of the body was to be ‘pointed’ toward Mecca, or the right side was to be facing Mecca, with various groups adhering to both practices. (Edward William Lane, *An account of the manners and customs of the modern Egyptians written in Egypt during the years 1833-1835* (London: East-West Publications, 1978) [orig. 1836].) In Bangladesh, it is the right side which is toward the *qibla*, and the face should be turned that direction as well.

²² গসল

satisfies the obligation, all is well. But if no member of the community fulfils the obligation, then all the members of the community incur substantial guilt.

As soon as a family member dies, women begin heating water in the cooking area of the home for the *gosol* as well as for washing of clothes and bedding which the deceased had used. Leaves of the *boroi* tree²³ are thrown into the boiling water for this purpose. The women of the house will later be responsible for thoroughly cleaning the room where the dead person stayed, and in the case of the village for smearing the mud walls and floors with a fresh coat of cow dung (a cleaning agent in India and Bangladesh). Due to a three-day prescribed period of mourning, the women in the house will not be expected to cook for three days. Neighbours normally bring enough food at each meal for the bereaved family.

Small wads of cotton are dipped in perfume (*ator*²⁴) and placed in the nostrils and ears of the deceased to prevent water from entering, and to counter either real or perceived odours. Relatives and friends may spit throughout the day, as this is a common reflex reaction in Bangladesh for bad odours.²⁵

Most local mosques have a wooden funeral bier (*khatia*²⁶ / *khatla*) for carrying the body from the house to the graveyard. Some mosques have a second bier with lower sides, about four inches tall, used for washing the body at the house prior to the journey to the graveyard. If such a bier exists, it will be brought to the house for the *gosol*. Otherwise, the

²³ This is the *ziziphus mauritiana*, a tree native to India, sometimes known in the West as the Chinese *jujube* tree. This custom is probably a substitute for the Arabian practice of using the leaves of the lote tree in the corpse washing process. The hadith reports that even Muhammad commanded the dead to be washed in water that had been heated with the leaves of the lote (*sidr*) tree: "Umm 'Atiyya reported: The Apostle of Allah (may peace be upon him) came to us when we were bathing his daughter, and he told us: Wash her with water and (with the leaves of) the lote tree, three or five times, or more than that if you think fit, and put camphor or something like camphor in the last washing; then inform me when you have finished. So when we had finished, we informed him, and he gave to us his (own) under-garment saying: "Put it next her body."'" *Sahih Muslim, KJ*, 2041.

²⁴ আতর

²⁵ Kotalova reported that villagers spit profusely during funerals as a way of ridding the pollution of the dead body from themselves. I found no informant in the Rajshahi area who identified with that sentiment. Rather, all informants, when asked, seemed to shrug their shoulders and say, "It's a bad odour."

²⁶ খাঁটিয়া

gosol is performed on a mat or slightly elevated place where water will not collect. A bamboo partition or cloth is hung as a curtain to preserve the privacy of the *gosol*.

Shari^ca^o law dictates that the nearest dependent of the deceased should perform the *gosol*.²⁷ If such a person is not able to perform the *gosol*, then a “God-fearing and holy person”²⁸ should fulfil the obligation. A man may perform another man’s *gosol*, and a woman should always perform another woman’s *gosol*. A wife can perform her husband’s *gosol*, but not the other way around. A man is not allowed to touch his dead wife’s skin, except through a cloth barrier. A woman during her period cannot perform anyone’s *gosol*, but any pre-pubescent boy or girl may perform anyone’s *gosol*, even across sexes.²⁹

A man is covered from the belly button to the knees, while a woman’s whole body is covered with a loose cloth, and then the clothing underneath is all removed except for this cover. Cotton has already been placed in the nose and ears. Incense is lit and placed near or on the bier being used for washing. The head is washed thoroughly with soap and warm water. Next, the body is placed on its left side and the whole body is washed from head to feet, and water is poured over the body three times. Then the same procedure is done with the body on its right side.

In the next step, special attention is given to making sure that all the body orifices are cleansed and any uncleanness removed by pressing lightly on the abdomen. Then, the body is once again thoroughly washed on both sides three times with water mixed with *korpur*³⁰ for a strong cleansing and scenting agent. Lastly, the body is dried with a towel or dry cloth. Sunni law contains directions for various contingencies, such as death in battle, still-births,

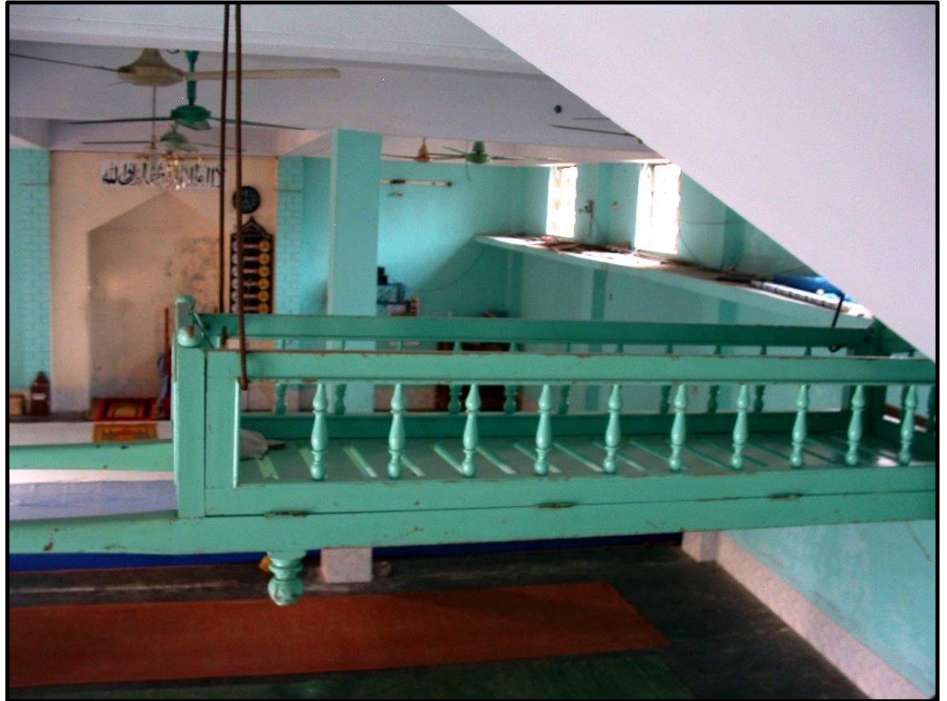
²⁷ Editing Committee, *Diniyat*, 201-202.

²⁸ দীনদার পরহিযগার লোক

²⁹ Most of this account of the *gosol* in Bangladesh is common knowledge to local men and women, and therefore I have heard most of these directions recounted to me on numerous occasions. I have verified this process during interviews with no fewer than five imams in Rajshahi, and also found most helpful the Bengali manual for imams, *Diniyat*, mentioned previously. This volume has been published under two separate Bengali names, *Diniyat* (দীনীয়াত), and *Islamiyat* (ইসলামীয়াত), and is updated every few years. It is written in Bengali and contains many more details than I have here provided.

³⁰ কর্পূর, i.e., camphor.

criminals, heretics and partial bodies recovered.³¹ These contingencies are beyond the scope of this study of urban death practices in Rajshahi.



3. The *khatia* is stored in a hanging position near the ceiling of this Rajshahi neighborhood mosque. It is taken down for the procession from the home of the deceased to the cemetery.

After the *gosol* is complete and the body is dried, rose-scented water, perfume and camphor are sprinkled on the body or shrouded body.³² In some regions, black '*kajol*' lines are drawn under the eyes. It is against the *Shari'a* regulations to either comb the hair or cut fingernails or hair. The body is now covered in a burial shroud and placed in the middle of the courtyard or in a room of the house, on the floor, with the right side toward Mecca. Between the moment of death and the time the *gosol* is completed, it is forbidden to recite the Qur'an or *dowas* near the body as it is ritually unclean. However, after the body has been washed and wrapped, the family and neighbours, or hired madrasa students, may once again come and sit in a circle around the body to recite (*khotom*) passages in Arabic for merit.

³¹ Editing Committee, *Diniyat*, 208-209.

³² “কপূর, আতর, গোলাপ পানি ছিটিয়ে দে; চক্ষে লাগান শুর্মা (আব্বাহ রাসুলের সুনাত)” Interview: Hafez Maulana Abdul Aziz. 7 December, 2007. Rajshahi.

The *kafon*³³ (Ar. *kafan*), or burial shrouds, are also carefully specified in Sunni religious law, although there is significant variation in the hadith accounts of the proper shroud. A thorough analysis of all the hadith and law opinions about which type of *kafon* is desirable, as well as the various accounts of which type of *kafon* the Prophet and his companions preferred, is beyond the purpose of this study. It is sufficient to note that providing the burial clothes for the deceased is another communal obligation – if it is not provided, the entire community would incur substantial guilt. For men in Bangladesh, it is required to have three pieces of cloth, usually white and unsewn. For women it is required to have five pieces of cloth for extra covering. It is advised by one local imam that using especially expensive cloth is a wasteful thing, and Allah prefers that people should not waste money on high-quality cloth for burial.³⁴

3.3 *Khotom*: Preparation of the soul by the community

At the same time that the *gosol* and *kafon* work are going on, a great amount of spiritual activity is begun by the community to assist the departed soul as it enters the *barzakh*, or the period between death and resurrection. The first and most important invisible event the soul encounters is the ‘trial of the grave’, or the *°adhab al qabr*. In this trial, two angels make the soul sit up in its grave and ask it three religious questions. The soul’s performance in the face of these questions prefigures its future judgment at God’s throne and its destiny in the Hereafter. We will return to a discussion of the events the soul experiences in the invisible realm in the next chapter.

Family members are sent out to inform relatives and neighbours near and far throughout the day and the community continues to arrive to help in all the proceedings.

³³ কাফন

³⁴ Various interviews, Rajshahi, December, 2007. See Abu Bakr’s statement about the kind of shroud he chose for himself: “A living person has more right to wear new clothes than a dead one.” Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, KJ, no. 469.

Phone calls are made on mobile phones or at local shops that allow people to make a call for a small charge. If daughters and sisters have been married off to distant villages or districts, they will be contacted as well. In villages, the nearest mosque (or several mosques) will announce from its loudspeaker the name and father's name of the deceased, his or her address, the time of the *janaza* prayer service and burial, and will make a plea for all to attend. This sequential announcement is also made via bicycle rickshaw in the city of Rajshahi, and throughout Bangladeshi towns and cities. Called '*mike-ing*' in local parlance, it refers to a young man sitting on a bicycle rickshaw (rented by the hour), who travels slowly throughout nearby neighbourhoods in the city announcing the same message with a small public address system, complete with car battery, speaker and microphone. In this way the family hopes to encourage as many as possible to attend the funeral and make supplication for the soul of the dead.

While the person was alive, he or she was urged to recite Allah's name or the *kalema* as preparation to enter the next world. But after he or she passes on, the community assumes an active role in spiritual preparation of the deceased. Male and female family members, neighbours, and for families of some means, a team of students from a nearby madrasa, begin to arrive soon after death to recite suras from the Qur'an and *dowas*,³⁵ or memorised prayers of supplication, repentance and blessing on the Prophet and his family. These recitals which are performed in a circle seated around the deceased (after he or she has been washed and wrapped in the *kafon*), are referred to collectively as *khotom*. Their purpose is to build up *so'ab* in the account of the deceased to help him or her face the trial of the grave, and to make the balance of his or her good works "heavy" in the scales of judgment.³⁶

³⁵ দোয়া / দু'আ. These are prayers and blessings which are prescribed in the authoritative hadith literature and by Islamic scholars. Importance is attached to knowing and reciting the 'correct form' of *dowas*, and *ozifa* books are available in the market with *dowas* for all types of occasions. *Dowa* is taken from the Arabic *du'a* (appeal, prayer, invocation to God on behalf of one's self or another).

³⁶ This is a common idiomatic phrase in Muslim circles globally, including Bangladesh, and is based on the Islamic concept of *mizan*, or the scales used to weigh one's good and bad deeds in the Hereafter. About the



4. *Khotom* ceremony. The woman (centre) uses an *ozifa* book to recite suras and *dowas* auspicious numbers of times to collect *so'ab* for the soul of her shrouded father. Others use *rehels* (bookstands) to hold Qur^ʿans, as 8-10 people attempt to finish an entire Qur^ʿan *khotom*. The young man (foreground) periodically stops the group to remind them to *bokshano* (transfer) the merit to the account of the dead.

Khotom. The Bengali word *khotom* is derived from the Arabic *khatma* (or *khitma*) which is a technical term for the recitation of the entire Qur^ʿan from start to finish.³⁷ In

Judgment Day, the Qur^ʿan says, “Then as for one whose scales are heavy [with good deeds], He will be in a pleasant life. But as for one whose scales are light, His refuge will be an abyss. And what can make you know what that is? It is a Fire, intensely hot.” Qur^ʿan 101:6-11; see also 21:47; 99:78.

³⁷ See Fr. Buhl, *Khatma*, EI², vol. IV, 1112. Although this provenance of the term *khotom* is well-attested, some scholars the author has spoken with believe *khotom* is related to the Arabic *khatam*, which most often carries the meaning ‘last’, and can also be translated ‘seal’, as in *khatam al-nabiyyin*, the seal (last) of the prophets (Qur^ʿan

Bengali popular usage, *khotom* refers specifically to the process of making recitations of the *kalema*, the entire Qur'an, various special suras of the Qur'an, and other *dowas*, and then passing this merit on to the account of the deceased through a specific prayer of transfer, called *bokshano* (discussed below). In general, the practice of *khotom* is widespread across the Muslim world, if contested inside Muslim communities, and has been a key feature of spirituality since nearly the beginning of Islam.³⁸

Soon after a community member dies in Rajshahi, between five and fifteen people, whether family, neighbours or madrasa students, begin reciting *khotom*. Importantly, recitations must not be made in the immediate vicinity of the corpse until after it has been washed and shrouded. Until that time, the reciters can recite elsewhere, such as a nearby room or outside. Later on, after the *gosol* and *kafon* are complete, the group may sit in a circle in an inner room or on mats in the courtyard, surrounding the shrouded corpse. In front of most of the reciters is placed a wooden *rehel*³⁹ (stand for a holy book). Perhaps half of the *rehels* contain a Qur'an (extra Qur'ans borrowed from neighbours), and the other half contain a book of common *dowas* and suras for such occasions.

33:40). In this sense, *khotom* could be expressing in Bengali the idea of 'to complete' a set of recitations. The word *khatam* is used in just such a manner in its Pakistani Urdu cognate. See also, *khatma* in Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1955 [orig. 1865]), part II, 702. Significantly, while working on this dissertation at Yale University's libraries in 2008, I was surprised to learn from a student leader of the Yale Muslim Students' Association (MSA) that the word *khatma* is in common usage among Yale's Muslim students to refer to a complete recitation of the Qur'an which is one of the goals during the month of Ramadan. Interview: Sept. 6, 2008, New Haven, Connecticut.

³⁸ The account of the death of Muhammad in the earliest extant biography mentions that the men of Medina came to his home to pray before his body the day after his death. "Then the men entered in throngs to pray for him. When they had completed their devotions the women came in..." Ibn Ishaq, *The life of Muhammad*. Ed. By Michael Edwardes (London: The Folio Society, 1964), 177. Strict Salafi teaching often totally prohibits the reciting of special prayers and suras in front of a corpse. See Hafez Mahmudul Hasan ইবাদতের নামে (*Ibadoter Popular Heresies*), 42. These prohibitions notwithstanding, the practice is widespread throughout time and various regions. For instances of reciting auspicious numbers of suras and *kalemas* for the dead in Egypt, see Bill A. Musk, 'Popular Islam: an investigation into the phenomenology and ethnotheological bases of popular Islamic belief and practice' (Ph.D. Thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 1984), 67-68, 100; and also Richard Critchfield, *Shahhat, an Egyptian* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1978), 71-74; also in Egypt, Edward William Lane, *An account*, 527; in Iran, see, Bess Allan Donaldson, *The wild rue: a study of Muhammadan magic and folklore in Iran* (London: Luzac & Co., 1938), 74-75; among South Indian Shi'a, see Diane D'Souza, 'Devotional practices among Shia women in South India', in *Lived Islam in South Asia: adaptation, accommodation & conflict*, ed. Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld (Delhi: Social Science Press, 2004), 187-206. For the use of the *mevlut* poem to generate merit at funerals in Turkey, see Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is his messenger* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 152.

³⁹ রেহেল

Three types of recitations are conspicuous during *khotom*: the *kalema*, the Qur'an and special suras and *dowas* which have certain numbers of auspicious repetitions. The *kalema* is commonly repeated 125,000 times at the time of death in Bangladesh. Though strict Ahl-i-Hadith 'ulama' reject this number as a baseless local superstition,⁴⁰ it is nevertheless believed and taught by dozens of local imams, mosque board members and Hanafi madrasa teachers (see discussion further below).⁴¹ Those who endeavour to repeat the *kalema* 125,000 times do so with the aid of *tosbi*⁴² (prayer beads on a string) or with seeds on the ground, which they move as they count. Several friends or neighbours divide the *kalemas* into manageable sections and each do their part until the full 125,000 are complete.⁴³ The *so'ab* (merit) from this auspicious number of *kalemas* is then transferred to the deceased.

The Qur'an is also recited during *khotom*. The Qur'an contains 114 suras or separate revelations, each with a given name. However, the Qur'an is also divided into thirty *paras*,⁴⁴ sections that are based on more or less equal length, for ease of recitation. Family members or madrasa students take as many *paras* as they can individually handle and recite the Qur'an out loud with the others performing *khotom* of the *kalemas*. A "thirty-para Qur'an", as a complete Qur'an recitation is called in Rajshahi, can take a couple of hours. Most families consider one complete Qur'an *khotom* essential, and some families will perform two Qur'an *khotom* or more. The ubiquitous humming sound coming from the room where a *khotom* session is in progress alerts any passers-by to the purpose of the gathering.

Certain suras of the Qur'an are auspicious in their own right, and are recited auspicious numbers of times for turbo-charged merit accrual. Saying sura *Ya Sin* just one

⁴⁰ Interview: Maulana Habibur Rahman. 13 December 2007. Rajshahi; Interview: Muhammad Shofiqur Islam. 13 December 2007. Rajshahi.

⁴¹ Though 125,000 times is the normal number mentioned by people in Rajshahi, one imam said that 70,000 *kalemas* is equal to one 'course' and the appropriate amount to say for *khotom*. Interview: Hafez Maulana Abdul Aziz. 9 January, 2008. Rajshahi.

⁴² তসবি

⁴³ Dividing up lengthy *khotom* recitations into manageable parts among members of a group is commonly expressed by the Bengali, "ভাগ ভাগ করে নেয়".

⁴⁴ পাৰা

time during *khotom* is equal to reciting the entire Qur'an ten times.⁴⁵ And the prescribed number of times for an especially auspicious collection of *so'ab* during *khotom* is to say sura *Ya Sin* forty-one times (or alternately, forty times or seventy-one times). Sura *Ikhlas* is most effective when recited in multiples of eleven, whereas sura *fatiha* should be spoken seven times in a row, and the merit transferred. The *dorud shorif*, a prayer of blessing on the Prophet and his descendents, should be recited eleven times in a row for maximum benefit.⁴⁶ Prayer leaders will often remind those assembled to do *khotom* of the specific numbers of repetitions which are most auspicious. Some imams and practitioners even take time to reckon the amount of *so'ab* being accumulated through mathematical calculations.⁴⁷

3.4 *Bokshano*: Transferring merit to the account of the deceased

It is not enough just to recite auspicious passages to collect *so'ab* – the merit one has collected must be transferred to the account of the person being helped. At a *khotom* session in front of the corpse and before the *janaza* prayers, a senior person involved in the recitations may pause occasionally, gather the attention of family members and neighbours, and remind them to transfer (*bokshano*⁴⁸) the merit. This is done with a simple prayer, “O Allah, please take the *so'ab* from these forty-one recitations of *Ya Sin* and apply it to Uncle Karim's account.” However, the final *bokshano* is performed later, during the third *takbir* of the *janaza namaz* itself, when spontaneous *dowas* and petitions for the dead are also allowed.

⁴⁵ This is a common saying among Hanafis in Rajshahi. Suggesting the widespread nature of this belief in Bangladesh, this notion is attacked specifically by the principal of the International Islamic University, a Salafi institution in Chittagong, in the book *Ibadoter name procholito bida'at shomuho* (Popular heresies done in the name of worship), 42.

⁴⁶ Various interviews. January, 2008. Rajshahi. Booklets of the most auspicious suras of the Qur'an (and other prayers), their correct pronunciation, and the auspicious times of use and numbers of recitations, are easily available in local shops. These are referred to locally as *ozifa* books (অজিফা বই).

⁴⁷ Salafi leaders strenuously object to such practices, though most Ahl-i-Hadith 'ulama' affirm the notion of performing meritorious acts and transferring the merit to others.

⁴⁸ *Bokshano*, and its other form, *bokshie deowa*, are derived from the Persian *bakhsh* (بخش), portion, share, division; and its related verbal form *bakhshesh kardan* (بخشش کردن), to bestow gifts. In Bangladesh, this verb is always used to refer to transferring *so'ab* to the *amol-nama* (আমল-নামা / record of deeds) of another, and in almost every case, to the account of someone already dead.

At that time, the imam or prayer leader usually makes a sweeping prayer, mentioning all the various recitations and good works and gifts to the poor that have been done on behalf of the deceased and asks God to apply these to the person's account, to help him in his trial in the grave, and to give him a good outcome at his judgment. This *bokshano* is sometimes repeated one more time at the group prayer that may be held after the body is buried and the grave is filled in with dirt by the mourners. A formal *bokshano* is also an essential part of every *milad* service, or subsequent prayer ceremony for the dead, discussed below.

The transfer of merit from the living to the account of the dead is by no means a practice confined to the subcontinent. Lane gives a detailed eye-witness account of a *khotom* ceremony for the dead in Egypt, in which numerous religious practitioners chant the *shahada* three thousand times, followed by various numbers of repetitions of other *dowas* in the presence of the corpse. "This done, one of them asks his companions, "Have ye transferred the merit of what ye have recited to the soul of the deceased?" They reply, "We have transferred it,""⁴⁹ Hurgronje, who had himself circumcised, reportedly converted to Islam and then went and lived in Mecca to do ethnographic research at the end of the 19th century, mentioned the same practice of recitations followed by an overt transfer of the merit to the account of the deceased as an important post-burial ceremony which was repeated several times by friends and relatives after a death.⁵⁰ The Muslim Gayos of highland Aceh commonly hold the funeral *kenduri* feast, during which reciters generate merit and pass it along to the spirits of the deceased. Bowen reports being present when sixty men came on the day of a friend's death and recited the Qur'an together until midnight. The Indonesians

⁴⁹ Lane, *An account*, 527.

⁵⁰ "After coffee a piece of the Qur'an (one thirtieth of the whole) is handed to each of the friends in a small thin volume...Reading aloud then goes on for about two hours; then on a signal given the books are given up, and someone of the house starts a prayer consisting of such formulae as are always used to close a reading of the whole Qur'an...Peculiar to this prayer is a petition for forgiveness of any faults that may have been committed in reading out the Qur'an, and also the supplication that God may put to the credit of the dead the reward of the same reading. That the dead one may get the credit for it is the object of all such good works as this reading. The second and third evenings are similarly spent in reciting..." Snouck Hurgronje, *Mekka in the latter part of the 19th century* (Tr. by J.H. Monahan, Leiden: Brill, 1931).

explained to Bowen, “Each word of the Qur’an that we recited contained merit. God received the merit and lightened the deceased’s suffering accordingly.” Another relative of the deceased prayed many *dowas* for the forgiveness of the dead, saying, “The prayers are like depositing money in a bank... God repays them by sending enjoyment to her spirit.”⁵¹

An influential imam and Hanafi madrasa teacher in Rajshahi uses a colourful comparison to help his students and parishioners understand the transfer of merit. The company GrameenPhone has been responsible for the creation of a pre-pay mobile phone service which has become a household name in Bangladesh. Nearly every town, hamlet and neighbourhood in Bangladesh has multiple little shops with a sign out on the street that says ‘Flexi-Load’, advertising the pre-pay credit system. Using Flexi-Load, a person can walk into any phone shop in the whole country, give them a phone number (one’s own number or the number of a friend), and pay between ten and 5000 taka to put credit on the mobile phone. The store operator makes a quick entry using his or her specially enabled mobile phone, and the credit is transferred immediately. Additionally, GrameenPhone has made it possible for a friend to transfer his or her own credit to the mobile phone of someone else directly. Maulana Karim explains the concept of *bokshano* using this mundane example:

This is a ‘Flexi-Load’ system for the deceased in the grave. I often relate in the mosque how modern science has made it easier to understand complex truths, and has made it easier to understand the afterlife. That’s because, when we give ten taka to the clerk at the Flexi-Load shop, he takes the phone number in question and nothing else. I go home, and the shop clerk just punches in the correct numbers, and the credit just suddenly arrives at my house! It can be *anyone*’s number! It’s the same with this issue – when we make recitations, it is as if we have ‘Flexi-Loaded’ credit to the dead in their grave. “Oh Allah, I have recited such-and-such suras so many times, I have ‘flexied’ the credit, please place the credit in their *amol-nama*.” Finished! God will send the merit! This example is usually a big help to my teaching!”⁵²

⁵¹ Bowen, *Muslims through discourse*, 230; 259-260

⁵² “এটা মায়িতের কবরে ফ্লেক্সী-লোডের সিস্টেম। আমি অনেক সময় মসজিদে বলে থাকি যে, বিজ্ঞান আমাদের কড়া বিদ্যা সহজ করে দিয়েছে, এমন পরকালকে সহজ করে দিয়েছে। সেটা হল, আমরা যখন ১০ টাকা ফ্লেক্সি অফিসে দিয়ে আসি, ফ্লেক্সি-ওয়ালার আমার নম্বর নিলো, আর কিছুই নিলো না। আমি বাড়িতে চলে আসলাম, ওখানে টিপে দিলো, আমার এখানে হুবহু চলে আসল। যার নম্বর! তো, ঠিক এখানেও তাই, আমরা যখন তেলাওয়াত করেছি বা পড়েছি, এটা কবরে মায়িতের নামে ফ্লেক্সি করে দিলামঃ ‘আল্লাহ, আমি এই এই পড়েছি, আমি ফ্লেক্সি করলাম, তার আমল-নামাতে তুমি পৌঁছিয়ে দাও। বাস! আল্লাহ পৌঁছিয়ে দিবে। এই উদাহরণ সাধারণত আমাকে ‘সেভ’ করে থাকে”। Interview: Maulana Muhammad Rezaul Karim. 6 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

While the strictest of Ahl-i-Hadith leaders in Bangladesh deny the practice of transferring merit to the deceased, stressing that it is only what one ‘sends ahead’ of oneself which will accrue to one’s merit after death,⁵³ a surprising number of Ahl-i-Hadith imams in Rajshahi approve of *khotom* and *bokshano* on behalf of the deceased. Those Ahl-i-Hadith leaders who approve of these practices, such as Muhammad Shofiqur Islam, associate imam at Hetimkha Masjid, an Ahl-i-Hadith centre in Rajshahi, stress that the recitations must be spontaneous to be legitimate (not in exchange for money or other benefits). Such ‘ulama’ also tend to discount traditions about auspicious numbers of repetitions, such as seven, eleven, or 125,000 times.⁵⁴

When Salafis themselves do not agree on the legitimacy of various kinds of merit accrual, it should not be surprising if lay Muslims the world over are confused on the issue. While performing an internet search in 2008, the author found plenty of Muslims at blog sites (in English) on the internet asking Islamic leaders if it was ‘ok’ or not to attend invitations to go to ‘*khatam*’ sessions to recite sura *Ya Sin* for deceased friends. Bloggers were concerned to avoid committing *bid‘a* unwittingly, and were seeking honest answers. An internet search for ‘*khatam*’ or ‘*khatm*’ should produce current examples of this phenomenon.

Despite the desire of the strictest Salafis in Rajshahi to uproot the practice of *khotom*, it is still alive and well in most neighbourhoods. Several informants told me that *khotom* is still practised by the vast majority of the households in their respective suburbs. One imam who is a friend and the head of a Hafizi madrasa (Hanafi) near my home in Rajshahi made this point clear: “As far as I know, in all the surrounding area, in every home after the *gosol*

⁵³ Hafez Mahmudul Hasan teaches that it is *bid‘a* to recite the Qur’an or sura *Ya Sin* in front of a dead body. *Ibadoter Name*, 42. Ahl-i-Hadith adherents commonly mention that ‘in the hadith it says’ that when a person dies, all their works (*amol*) come to an end. Various ‘ulama’ may qualify this point with the actual qualifying information contained in the hadith report (found in *Sahih Muslim, KJ, 4077*), i.e., there are three exceptions which ‘keep on giving’ after death: a pious child who prays for a parent’s soul; works of knowledge (‘*ilm*’) which continue to benefit society, such as books written; and other charity for the cause of humanity of Islam which continues to bless people, such as a hospital or college. This popular hadith report and others are analyzed in Chapter Five.

⁵⁴ Interview: Muhammad Shofiqur Islam. 13 December 2007. Rajshahi.

is complete, there is a *khotom* recitation. We took madrasa students to *your* home too, when Rumi's uncle died. They performed the *khotom* then.”⁵⁵

3.5 *Janaza Namaz: The funeral prayer*

The Procession. The last journey of the deceased occurs when family and neighbours bear the corpse on the *khatia* to the place where final prayers will be said. As might be expected, to help carry the bier to the graveyard is one of many meritorious acts that a friend or relative of the deceased can do as the funerary activities are proceeding.

According to a tradition narrated by Abu Huraira, the Prophet said: “ [A believer] who accompanies the funeral procession of a Muslim out of sincere faith and hoping to attain Allah's reward and remains with it till the funeral prayer is offered and the burial ceremonies are over, he will return with a reward of two *qirats*. Each *qirat* is like the size of the [Mount] Uhud. He who offers the funeral prayer only and returns before the burial, will return with the reward of one *qirat* only.”⁵⁶ Remaining until all the burial work and prayers are finished may have been stressed in hadith literature due to practical considerations – it takes quite a long time, up to four hours of standing, to see the burial procedures to completion. For those who are not close kin, it can be very tempting to get out of the heat and find a cool place to relax.

The prayer service, called *salat al-janaza* in Arabic, and *janaza namaz* in Bangladesh, is usually held when the procession arrives at the courtyard of a mosque near the graveyard,

⁵⁵ “আমার জানার মত, এই সব আশে-পাশে, গোসলের পরে প্রত্যেকেরই বাসায় খতম হয়। আপনার বাসাতেও রুমির খালু মারা যাওয়ার সময় ছাত্র নিয়ে গিয়েছে, ওরা খতম দিয়েছে”। Interview: Hafez Maulana Abdul Aziz. 9 January, 2008. Rajshahi, Bangladesh. (min. 24). Though I have seen *khotom* being performed many times, I missed this occasion when I was on a trip to Dhaka. The director of madrasa studies had taken seven boys to my house to perform Qur'an recitations for several hours due to the sudden death of my landlord's brother by heart attack. One entire Qur'an *khotom* was completed on his behalf.

⁵⁶ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, KJ, no. 45. Local Rajshahi 'ulama' commonly share this hadith report almost word for word (though without a citation). However, the exact meaning of the word *qirat* was not even understood by Muhammad's companions and he was reportedly questioned on this subject after he made these statements. See Muslim, *Sahih*, bk. 4, nos. 2062, 2063, 2064, 2065, 2066, 2067

or as happens most often, at the *idgah* grounds⁵⁷ adjacent to the graveyard. It should be in an open space and is not normally conducted inside a mosque, but may be held there in inclement weather. The *janaza* prayers are another instance of *fard kifaya*, community obligation.⁵⁸

In some Muslim countries women may attend the *janaza* service, and even accompany the bier in the procession towards the graveyard.⁵⁹ In Bangladesh this is uniformly not the case, as women stay at home after the body is washed, shrouded and carried away. According to several authoritative hadith, women were not to accompany the bier to the cemetery.⁶⁰ Though they are prohibited from observing the burial itself, they may go to the cemeteries at other times to pray for their dead, and participate in *milad* prayer services for the deceased which take place in the home during the month following the loss of a loved one.

If it is granted that the *janaza* prayers are essential to the soul's well-being in what follows death, another extremely beneficial provision is to have a large number of Muslims present to pray at the *janaza*. One tradition of the Prophet records him saying that "If any Muslim dies and forty men who associate nothing with Allah stand over his prayer, Allah will accept them as intercessors for him."⁶¹ It is believed by local Hanafis in Rajshahi that the numbers attending a *janaza* service can directly impact on a soul's success in arriving at *jannat*, a topic treated in some detail in Chapter Five.

How many people came to someone's *janaza namaz* is a salient topic of conversation at tea stalls in Rajshahi, and almost automatic credence is given to the relationship between

⁵⁷ ঐদগাহ; this is a large open field surrounded by a brick wall which is adjacent to a cemetery. It is the grounds where men come by the thousands to say 'Id prayers in rows on 'Id-ul-Adha and 'Id-ul-Fitr. The remainder of the days of the year it is used by boys and young men to play football (soccer) and cricket.

⁵⁸ Editing Committee, *Diniyat*, 214.

⁵⁹ Lane reported observing groups of women, from a dozen to twenty, accompanying the bier procession in Egypt "crying and shrieking." See Lane, *An account*, 516.

⁶⁰ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 6, no. 310. Women in Rajshahi do not accompany the bier or go to the cemeteries for the *salat-ul-janaza*.

⁶¹ Muslim, *Sahih*, bk. 4, no. 2072.

the numbers of people and the soul's probability of success. A large group may also be seen to reflect the generous or religious character of the deceased, whereas a small number of mourners may signify someone who did not enjoy Allah's or the community's blessing.

The Structure of the Janaza Service. The Prophet and his Companions always offered the funeral prayers in congregation. It is Sunni tradition to form at least three rows of Muslims behind the imam, even if the rows are not very long.⁶² The imam and the congregation all stand facing west, the direction of the *qibla*, with the deceased in front of all. The deceased lies with his or her right side toward Mecca and the imam stands behind the head of the male corpse, or behind the middle of the female.

Like the five times a day *namaz* prayer service, the *janaza* service is highly structured. Nevertheless, there are wide variations in the *janaza* service from country to country. The local Hanafi tradition is more or less consistent across Bangladesh, with a few differences between Hanafis and Ahl-i-Hadith, such as whether to fold the arms across the chest or belly, whether or not to raise the hands up to the ears at every *takbir* or only the first one, and whether to pronounce the congregational 'Amin' out loud or silently.

Before the beginning of a *janaza* service for the dead, the imam asks if the deceased has outstanding debts. People speak up and mention debts, if there are any, and then the survivors publicly promise to pay back the debts, or else those who are owed publicly forgive the debts. Without this formality being satisfactorily settled, a *janaza* service cannot proceed.⁶³

The *janaza* service is neatly structured around four *takbir* – that is, four pronouncements of *Allahu Akbar* (Allah is Most Great). Following each *takbir* are prescribed memorised prayers and *dowas* to be completed, which we discuss below. The *janaza* must be

⁶² The *Diniyat* (210) even gives instructions for dividing a group of six congregants into three rows: an imam in front of all, three persons in the first row, two in the middle, and one in the back row.

⁶³ Numerous authoritative hadith relate how the Prophet was personally unwilling to lead a person's *janaza* prayer who had died in debt, until that debt was settled by a survivor or paid from the estate of the deceased. See al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 37, no. 488 and no. 495.

conducted while the congregants are standing in an odd number of rows – and there is no bowing or prostration as in the normal salat.

The service begins with a silent but prescribed *niyot*⁶⁴ (Ar. *niya*, intention) said silently by each congregant. The *Diniyat* manual for imams mentions an Arabic formula for the *niyot* pertaining to the *janaza* service, which in English is: “In God’s name I am performing the prayers for *janaza* according to the rule using four ‘*takbir*’, being led in prayer by such and such imam.”⁶⁵

The imam speaks the first *takbir*, the congregants repeat it, raising their hands until the tips of the thumbs just touch the earlobes, and then folding their hands across the chest or stomach.⁶⁶ Most book sources and informants alike prescribe praying the Arabic ‘*sana*’ blessing at this point, which is translated: “Glory be to you, O Allah, and all praises are due unto you, and blessed is your name and high is your majesty and none is worthy of worship but you.”⁶⁷ Some commentators allow other *dowas* to be prayed at this time, but the ‘*sana*’ is the norm in Rajshahi. After the ‘*sana*’, the *fatiha*, or the first sura of the Qur’an is spoken out loud by the congregants. There is some difference of opinion on this point, and some leaders deny the inclusion of *fatiha* in the *janaza* service. Others counter by asserting that without including the *fatiha* in the *janaza* service, the whole service is invalid.⁶⁸

Next, leaving the hands bound at the navel or chest, the congregation says the *takbir* a second time: *Allahu Akbar*. Immediately the normal *dorud* blessing upon the prophet and his family is said either individually and softly by each person, or by the imam with ‘*amins*’ from the congregants. There are many *dorud* prayers calling on God to bless the Prophet

⁶⁴ নিয়ত

⁶⁵ Editing Committee, *Diniyat*, 211. Author’s translation.

⁶⁶ Ahl-i-Hadith fold their arms across their middle chest, while Hanafis fold their right hand over the left near the belly button. Ahl-i-Hadith believe it is vain to wear long pants down to the floor, so the *pajamas* under their dress usually come to the middle or upper ankle. These and many other clues can provide an observer with much information about a social situation in Bangladesh.

⁶⁷ Translation by M. Abdul Karim Saqib, *A guide to prayer in Islam*, p. 57.

⁶⁸ See M. Abdul Karim Saqib, *A guide to prayer in Islam*, p. 58; Editing Committee, *Diniyat*, 211.

Muhammad and his family, but the one most often pronounced during the usual salat is also recommended by most sources for the *janaza*:

*O Allah! Let your grace come down upon Muhammad and his descendents, just as you did upon Abraham and his descendents. You are absolutely worthy of praise and you are the possessor of the highest honour. O Allah! You brought great glory (barakat) to Muhammad and his descendents. You are absolutely worthy of praise and you are the possessor of the highest honour.*⁶⁹

The third *takbir* is pronounced with the hands still at the chest or navel: “*Allahu Akbar!*” The third *takbir* signals the time to begin praying *dowas*, or prayers of supplication. These prayers centre on forgiveness for the community’s sins, for those already buried in the graveyard, and for the person who has just died. Hadith collections contain a good variety of these *dowas* which can be recited. Emphasis is placed upon knowing the recommended prayers, as they are believed to ‘work’ better than spontaneous prayers. However, spontaneous prayers for the deceased from the hearts of the mourners are allowed after the third *takbir*.

Many local Muslims would prefer that the imam leading the *janaza* service should recite authoritative *dowas* handed down through authoritative hadith, and they themselves give the ‘*amin*’ at all the appropriate pauses. This too is meritorious and accrues merit as if the individuals themselves were reciting.

Two popular *dowas*, with authoritative *isnads* from the Prophet Muhammad, are given here in English:

“O Allah, forgive our people who are still alive and who have passed away, forgive those who are present here and those who are absent, forgive our young and our elderly, forgive our males and females. O Allah, the one whom you wish to keep alive from among us make him live according to Islam, and anyone whom you wish to die from among us, let him die in belief and faith. O Allah, do not deprive us from his reward and do not put us in *fitna* (hardship or any type of trial) after his death.”⁷⁰

“O Allah, forgive him, have mercy on him, pardon him, grant him security, provide him a nice place and spacious lodgings, wash him with water, snow, and ice, purify

⁶⁹ Author’s translation of *doruds* as recited during salat in Rajshahi religious services.

⁷⁰ This *dowa* is found in Abu Dawud, Tirmizi and Ibn Majah hadith collections (ctd. in Saqib, *A guide*, 59). A better translation for *fitna* would be ‘strife’, rather than that provided in this quotation.

him from his sins as a white garment is cleansed from dirt, replace his present abode with a better one, replace his present family with a better one, replace his present partner with a better one, make him enter paradise and save him from the trials of the grave and the punishment of hell.”⁷¹

Several such *dowas* can be strung together back-to-back during the ‘third *takbir*’, or just one may be said to technically fulfil the rule of the prayer. Typically, imams either give the congregants ample time during this *takbir*, or they themselves recite lengthy and multiple *dowas*, allowing the community to respond with ‘*amins*’.

Finally, the fourth *takbir* is spoken after the imam: "*Allahu akbar!*" Then, with arms still folded, each person gives the ‘*Al-salamu ‘alaykum*’ (‘Peace be unto you’) to the angels sitting on the right and left shoulders. Then the arms are released to the sides and the *janaza* prayers are officially completed. The congregation moves immediately from just outside the graveyard to the grave site and begins the burial routine.⁷²

3.6 Burial

While all the day's activities have been going on at the home of the bereaved family, a few friends of the family, usually volunteers, spend several hours at the graveyard digging the grave, splitting bamboo, and registering the family member's death with the ‘care-taker,’ a government official who usually spends every afternoon at the graveyard. This public servant accepts twenty taka to fill out a form with the dead person's information, so that the death may be recorded at the city corporation building.

⁷¹ From *Sahih Muslim*; cited by Saqib, *A guide*, 59-60.

⁷² Some Hanafis give opportunity after the fourth *takbir* and the ending of the *janaza* service for reciting more *dowas* or spontaneous prayers. Ahl-i-Hadith resist this practice strenuously, mentioning that there is no such precedent in any of the *sahih* hadith.

The grave itself is meant to be a 'room', and has nearly sufficient space to sit up. It is the same shape as a rectangular coffin, but has more room vertically. The rule for depth is 2 1/2 forearm-lengths⁷³, or about 3 1/2 feet. More depth is required for women, but how much extra depth is not specified. After four or five men dig the grave to the appropriate depth, they smooth out the interior with wet mud, making it perfectly smooth like a cement wall. The upper one foot of the grave is cut larger than the interior, so that lengths of split bamboo can be placed perpendicular to the grave as a ceiling reinforcement. Over this is placed straw (in the village) or a straw or bamboo mat (*chatai*⁷⁴) in the city.



5. Rajshahi grave. Friends and neighbors take their time to dig a perfect 'room' for the dead community member to rest in until the Day of Judgment. The sides of the grave are smoothed with mud to resemble plaster walls.

⁷³ আড়াই হাত

⁷⁴ চটাই

In the graveyard crowded with graves and bamboo barrier walls everywhere, two or three relatives may hang back with lips fervently moving to say more *kalemas* or other blessings for the accrual of merit, while those carrying the bier try to position it alongside the open grave. Three men stand in the bottom of the grave, and the bier is lowered to the ground beside it. One side of the bier opens on a hinge and the body is carefully lifted out and placed in the bottom. If the dead is a woman, then a large sheet (*chador*⁷⁵) is held up over the bier and the open grave even as the three men inside try to lower the body. This regulation is meant to prevent anyone from accidentally seeing a woman's form in an unseemly time or manner. If the dead person is a man, then this difficulty is absent, as it is quite difficult to hold the sheet aloft while working in such a tight space.

Once the body is lowered, strong bamboo shafts are placed in both directions across the grave, and this ceiling is covered with a thatched mat or with hay, to prevent the dirt from falling onto the corpse. Then the congregation stands around the grave as the imam prays a few prayers in Arabic and Bengali. Mourners join in and pray prayers of intercession for the deceased. At this time, the imam asks God to formally accept all of the ritual prayers and Qur'an and *kalema* recitations which were offered during the day and *transfer* (*bokshano*) them to the account of the dead. Although the imam is usually considered the best person to execute this function, it can actually be performed by any lay person who is accruing meritorious acts on behalf of the dead. These graveside prayers are condemned by some Ahl-i-Hadith, but openly prescribed in the Islamic Foundation *Book on Fiqh*.⁷⁶

The imam then reminds the congregants of how to do the last ritual, and re-teaches them how to say three phrases in Arabic. Then, each man takes a fist of dirt from the pile of

⁷⁵ চাদর

⁷⁶ The *Diniyat* (219) blatantly encourages this ritual as follows: "It is *mostahab* (recommended) to remain by the graveside a few moments after burial to intercede for the deceased by reciting either *dowas* or Qur'an suras or verses, and then to transfer the merit of such recitations to the dead person." ("দাফন করার পর কিছুক্ষন কবরের পার্শ্বে অপেক্ষা করিয়া এবং মৃত্যু ব্যক্তির জন্য মাগফিরাতের জন্য দোয়া করিয়া কিংবা দরুদ শরিফের সুরা বা কিছু আয়াত তেলগাত করিয়া ইহার সয়াব মৃত্যু ব্যক্তির জন্য বস্ত্রিয়ে দেওয়া মুস্তাহাব"।).

dirt which was recently dug and throws it onto the bamboo mat three times, quoting the Qur^{an} in Arabic,

*From it [earth] We created you,
And into it will We return you,
And out of it will We bring you a second time.*⁷⁷

Volunteers who dug the grave a few hours earlier finish the piling of the dirt onto the grave and gently tap it down, leaving an elevated mound. Congregants go to wash their feet and hands (since they had to remove their shoes to leave the path and approach a grave), and then return to say prayers at a distance of forty paces, standing on a pathway of the graveyard. All the men hold up their hands in *dowa* fashion and beseech Allah to forgive and accept the deceased, as it is believed that they are being interrogated by the angels Munkar and Nakir at that very moment and receiving confirmation of their eternal destiny.⁷⁸

Post-burial *talqin*. Earlier the *talqin* was discussed as the time right before death when loved ones whisper the *kalema* repeatedly to the dying in hopes that by their repetitions, the dying will speak the *kalema* too. But a *talqin* after death is also practised by some Muslims in Rajshahi.⁷⁹ This occurs when mourners who have just buried the dead then call out to the dead and remind him or her of the three answers to the three religious questions to be asked by the angels Munkar and Nakir: Who is your Lord? What is your religion? Who is this man? (indicating the Prophet Muhammad).⁸⁰

Though this practice is vigorously opposed by many Ahl-i-Hadith leaders, field research in Rajshahi uncovered several senior Ahl-i-Hadith imams and ‘ulama’ who, while

⁷⁷ Q20:55.

⁷⁸ The congregational *dowas* after the burial is finished are strenuously objected to by some Ahl-i-Hadith in Rajshahi. Two ‘ulama’ who complained that this practice is widespread considered it to be “meaningless, simply a ‘fashion’, just an accepted practice, but there is no [scriptural] proof.” “অনর্থক, একটা রেওয়াজ মাত্র, প্রচলিত একটা নিয়ম মাত্র, এটার কোন প্রমাণ নাই”। Interview: Maulana Habibur Rahman. 13 December 2007. Rajshahi.

⁷⁹ *Bihishti Zewar* recommends this practice, and provides instructions for this graveside rite. Maulana Ashraf ‘Ali Thanawi, *Bihishti Zewar*, 225.

⁸⁰ Hurgonje reported this ritual as a normal part of Muslim burial in Mecca in the late 1800s. Hurgonje, *Mekka in the later part of the 19th century*, 161.

opposing other *bid'ati* practices, continue to affirm the post-death *talqin*. It was a truly incongruous moment during several field interviews at these mosques and madrasas.⁸¹

Grave markers. Hanafi Muslims and others throughout Bangladesh typically put up a little bamboo fence around a grave, and renew it from time to time if it decays. A small percentage of people build rectangular brick and cement walls around the grave as a more permanent marker, though this practice is clearly opposed by authoritative hadith.⁸² Devout Ahl-i-Hadith in Rajshahi believe that it is forbidden to have *any* markers at the grave whatsoever.⁸³ For this reason there is a graveyard behind the local university for Muslims who wish to observe this rule, where no markers are allowed. There the only sign of graves is the undulating surface of the ground.

3.7 *Milads*: Continuing to benefit the dead

The role of the community in preparing the soul of the departed for eternity does not end after the funeral proceedings have been completed. *Milads*, or services for the dead, continue to be held on the second, third, and fourth days (three days after the day of death), seventh day, twentieth day, fortieth day, the one-year anniversary of death, and at other times as well. Though contested by many Ahl-i-Hadith for being un-Islamic innovations (*bida'*), most family and friends of the departed continue to accrue *so'ab* for the spiritual success of the deceased at such services. This section will describe *milads* as they are currently practised in Rajshahi and discuss the ongoing religious debate about their validity.

⁸¹ Imams of three different Ahl-i-Hadith mosques in Rajshahi asserted that the post-burial *dowas* are *bida'*. In the self-same interviews they spontaneously volunteered the practice of the post-burial *talqin* as something they perform at burials and teach others to do. Multiple interviews. January-February, 2008. Rajshahi.

⁸² Authoritative hadith connect Muhammad's aversion to putting up grave indicators with his fear that his community would mimic Christian communities in erecting places of worship dedicated to holy people who had died. The Islamic jurist Abu Hanifa (d.767) clearly indicated that this practice was reprehensible. Abu Yusuf, *Kitab al-athar* (Beirut, n.d.), 84, no. 420; ctd. in Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 266, fn. 64.

⁸³ The Prophet Muhammad reportedly proscribed the practice of building permanent structures of any kind over graves. See Muslim, *Sahih*, bk. 4, nos. 2116 and 2118. Bihishti Zewar classifies building anything at all over a grave as *haram*. (Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi, *Bihishti Zewar*, 225-226).

Milad comes from the Arabic *mawlid*, which refers to the time and place of a person's birth, or similarly to a celebration of a person's birth. The Arabic term comes to mind most readily in the Bangladeshi context in reference to the annual *mawlid al-nabi*, or the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday on the 12th day of the Arabic month *Rabi' al-awwal*.⁸⁴ However, in the subcontinent, the vernacular form *milad* has come to refer to any of several different prayer services held on special occasions, such as the dedication of a new house or business, but especially, the various prayer services which are held after a person's death. Because none of these '*milads*' is directly taught by Islamic texts, there is considerable variation from place to place as to the time and manner of conducting death-related *milads*.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ The celebration of the *mawlid al-nabi* was one of the widespread popular celebrations throughout the Indian subcontinent which reformists tried to do away with in the 18th and 19th centuries, as we saw earlier in Chapter Two. One middle-aged informant in Rajshahi reported that his extended family, his uncles and his parents all used to celebrate this holiday every year, but that his family discontinued the practice in the early 1990s. The same person indicated that Rajshahi residents in general also stopped observing the *mawlid* during the same period. Interview: Muhammad Obaidul Hakim. 17 May, 2006. Rajshahi.

⁸⁵ The *milad* service (under various names) has been and continues to be a feature of community life right across the Muslim world, in spite of at least two centuries of Salafist/reformist efforts to eradicate it. The features of combining a spiritually enhanced meal with numerous recitations and the transfer of merit to the account of the deceased makes this one of the most recognizable forms of Islamic traditional practice around the world. Noting the presence of this ritual complex in Mecca, Hurgronje wrote: "For some days after the death, ceremonies are performed the purely religious character of which excludes any profane noise. These ceremonies have nothing to do with mourning, and their main purpose is to send after the beloved dead some pious work so as to make more tolerable to him the trial of the tomb and the coming of the last day. It has already been mentioned that to increase the credit in Heaven of dead relatives recitations are performed, of the Qur'an especially." Hurgronje also discusses the presence of food that is distributed at these '*molids*'. These recitation gatherings happened, according to Hurgronje, on the 1st through the 7th nights after a death, and on the 20th, 40th, 100th, and one-year anniversary (*Mekka in the latter part of the 19th century*, 161-164). Egyptian Muslims in the 1830s reportedly also held a similar ceremony (called '*Sebhah*') to that in contemporary Bangladesh (Lane, *An Account*, 525-527). Marion Holmes Katz describes nearly identical ritual services in contemporary Yemen, which originated from the celebration of the annual *mawlid al-nabi*, but which have been popularly applied to any important occasion, including death. ('Women's mawlid performances in Sanaa and the construction of "popular Islam,"' *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 40(2008), 467-484). A ceremony called '*fatiha*' can be found across the Near East and South Asia, which emphasises recitals (of Sura *fatiha* and other Qur'anic sections) to benefit the dead. (Woodward, *The Slametan*, 79; Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 63). Gayo Muslims in the highlands of Aceh (Indonesia) practice similar mortuary recitations, called *tahlil*, to send merit to the dead. (Bowen, *Muslims through discourse*, 18). Iranian Shi'is make recitations over the grave of the dead for three days following a death to lighten the torment of the grave, sometimes hiring 41 madrasa students to help with the effort. Young priests are fed at the house of mourning to accrue extra merit for the deceased (Bess Allen Donaldson, *The wild rue*, 74). Woodward claims that the South Asian (and Indonesian) *kenduri* ceremony, which includes sacralised food, recitations for the dead, and the transfer of merit, is "the most common ritual" outside of the salat prayer in all of south Indian Islam (Woodward, *The Slametan*, 65; G. A. Herklots and Ja'far Sharif, *Islam in India*; or, *Qānūn-i-Islām: the customs of the Musalmāns of India; comprising a full and exact account of their various rites and ceremonies from the moment of birth to the hour of death*. (London: n.p., 1921), 104-108). These services are not only geographically widespread, but also are pervasive throughout the centuries of Islamic history, and must date from a very early period. Examination of some of the earliest Islamic material culture in existence led historian Halevi to remark that, "This ceremony of seeking God's forgiveness

The constants which seem to be universal in Bangladeshi death-related *milads* are the recitation of meritorious suras and *dowas* where the *so'ab* is explicitly transferred to the account of the dead, and the feeding of food to guests and the poor in the name of the deceased, with the explicit transfer of the *so'ab* to the deceased's account. Maulana Karim, a Hanafi imam and madrasa teacher in Rajshahi admits that there is no logical reason for such death-related services to be called '*milad*', a term which refers rather to birth. He surmises that since the *dorud shorif*, a prayer for the welfare of the Prophet Muhammad and his family, is an indispensable rite at both the *mawlid al-nabi* and at death-related ceremonies, people just began to refer to both types of service as *milad*. Maulana Karim would like to emphasise an additional purpose of death *milads* – the spiritual benefit that the mourners and attendees can derive:

“Actually this is a prayer service. Now that the dead has left us, what learning can we derive from this experience? And, what can we do for *him*? This is the topic of discussion there. We pray for the forgiveness (*magfirat*⁸⁶) of his soul, ask God to forgive his sins, and we beg, intercede and pray for God to let him into Paradise (*behesht*⁸⁷). And we transfer the credit of all the extra supererogatory (*nofol*⁸⁸) worship we have done.”⁸⁹

In Rajshahi, the most common *milads* are held on the third day after the day of death and the fortieth day. The third-day celebration is variously referred to as the 'third-day *milad*' or the 'fourth-day *milad*', depending on if the person is counting the day of the death or not. The fourth-day *milad* and the fortieth-day *milad* are sometimes called colloquially *chehlam* or *chehelam*,⁹⁰ derived from the Persian for 'forty'. Either celebration may also be called

for the sins of another individual was perhaps one of the central aspects of Muslim piety during the first century of Islam.” (Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 27).

⁸⁶ মাগফিরাত

⁸⁷ বেহেষ্ট

⁸⁸ নফল

⁸⁹ “আসলে এটা একটা দোয়া অনুষ্ঠান। মায়িত চলে যাওয়ার কারণে আমরা কী শিক্ষা নিতে পারি আর ওনার জন্য আমরা কী করতে পারি? এটা আলোচ্য বিষয় শেখানো। ওনার জন্য আমরা রুহের মাগফিরাত, আল্লাহর কাছে গুনাহর মাফ চাইব, আল্লাহর কাছে তাকে বেহেষ্টে দেওয়ার জন্য আমরা আবেদন করব, সুপারিশ করব, দোয়া করব। আর নিযেদের যে সমস্ত নফল এবাদত করেছি, এগুলো ফ্লেক্সি করে দিব”। Interview: Maulana Muhammad Rezaul Karim. 6 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

⁹⁰ ছেহলাম/ছেহেলাম

colloquially *qul-khani*,⁹¹ where *qul* is Bengali for family, lineage or race, and *khani* is shortened from *khawani*, for feeding. Thus, the term denotes a feeding of one's local society. The fortieth-day celebration is also commonly called the *chollisha*,⁹² from the Bengali word for 'forty'.

Though it is rare, some neighbourhoods in Rajshahi practice a *bishe khawano*⁹³ ('twentieth feeding'), a similar *milad* on the twentieth day after death. In other parts of Bangladesh, the seventh-day *milad* is practised as well. The *batshorik milad* (one-year *milad*) or *mrityu barshiki*⁹⁴ (death anniversary) are also widely practised in Rajshahi and across the country. For Ahl-i-Hadith who object to holding *milads* on these special days, which they see as derived from local Hindu practices, any days *but* these days will do. The Ahl-i-Hadith still tend to believe in collecting and transferring merit on behalf of the dead at such ceremonies. However, the strictest Salafis consider all such activities as *bida*.⁹⁵

Milad description. *Milads* are generally held either at the home of the deceased (on the roof), or inside a mosque. As people are arriving, invited imams may take turns giving sermons on death, the trial of the grave, the angels Munkar and Nakir or other topics, using a microphone. The actual *milad* is a religious service which usually has the following elements in this order:

1. The opening Qur'an sura recital in Arabic by leader.
2. The recital (singing) of the *dorud shorif* by congregation.
3. The *ka'em*.⁹⁶ The congregation may stand in recognition of Muhammad's spirit arriving at the singing of the *dorud*. An empty chair may be present in the room for the Prophet's presence.

⁹¹ কুলখানি

⁹² চাল্লিশা or চল্লিশা. This term also appears as *challisha* in literature on South Asian Islam.

⁹³ বিসে খাওয়ানো

⁹⁴ বাৎসরিক মিলাদ / মৃত্যুবার্ষিকী

⁹⁵ Salafi writer Hafez Mahmudul Hasan considers holding fourth-day and fortieth-day *milads* to be an impious innovation. See ইবাদতের নামে (*Popular Heresies*), 36.

⁹⁶ কায়েম; From Arabic *qa'im* (standing). Yemeni Muslims also stand at the entrance of Muhammad's spirit into the *milad* service. Common people were "really on the lookout to catch a glimpse of the Prophet" during the *milad*. Marion Holmes Katz, 'Women's mawlid performances in Sanaa and the construction of "popular Islam"', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 40(2008), 467-484.

4. The recital by all of sura *fateha* and other suras and *dowas* auspicious numbers of times as instructed by the imam.
5. A sweeping prayer by the imam to *bokshie de* (transfer) the *so'ab* from all the prayers collected at the *milad* to the account of the deceased.
6. A final spontaneous *dowa* by the imam with congregational 'Amins' for forgiveness for all 'our dead and alive' Muslim family and friends. This *dowa* can be very emotional and there can be many tears all around.

The moment the final '*amin*' is pronounced, a small bag or box of food is distributed to each participant and they are hastily shoved out of the door, if it is in a home. The bare minimum feeding at either a mosque or a home is a small bag containing two *gilepi*, sweets which look like pretzels in shape.

Wealthy families normally provide a full meal of rice and meat in Bengali style, with *biryani* being the popular dish in the city of Rajshahi. Wealthy families open their *milads* to poor people and beggars as well as all their friends and neighbours. The family may seat guests after the prayer service and feed them right there, or, as is becoming common in the towns and cities, they may cater a restaurant to provide hot boxed lunches, and hand them to each guest as they leave after the prayer service.

As with the *janaza* prayer service at the time of burial, much emphasis is given to how many people come to the *milad* service, since more people praying increases the amount of merit accrued by the deceased. In this sense, the poor and beggars who are invited are doing a service to the family and the deceased. At the same time, a free meal of meat and rice can attract so many people to a house that food distribution is often chaotic.

The feeding of the guests is a spiritual act and is thought to directly affect the soul of the departed in two ways. First, the more one feeds the guests, the more they will pray for the deceased, not just during the *milad*, but later at home as well. More food always means more prayer, which means more merit.

Second, the very act of inviting and feeding the poor, and the expense involved in killing one or more cows to provide meat for the occasion, is considered equal to giving

alms,⁹⁷ and this act of generosity is done in the name of the deceased person. Thus, more *so'ab* will accrue to their account, increasing the possibility of a favourable judgment.

Two elderly neighbours and lifetime residents of Rajshahi laughed as they related two not-so-heavenly reasons for having *milads* in Rajshahi. First, even though everyone knows that *milads* are not required by authoritative texts, nevertheless, local imams are the first to say to the newly bereaved family, “Have a *milad*!” Pretending concern for the soul of the departed, they know that relatives of the deceased will hand them gifts of cash during the *milad* itself. Relatives will do this to curry the favour of the local imam, expecting that he will be even more inclined to pray for the dead family member’s soul in his own time.

These informants also related how after the service, “talk in the neighbourhood revolves entirely around what was fed to guests at the *milad*.” Neighbours can be heard to say, “What!? Just one kind of sweets? Just two *gilepi*?!” If the family fed the neighbourhood well, remarks are more favourable: “Man, they fed people well! There were *lots* of prayers! Looks like he’ll make it to Paradise...”⁹⁸

Divergent views of *milads* in Rajshahi. As noted earlier, the *milad* for the dead is one of the most hotly contested issues between Hanafis and Ahl-i-Hadith in contemporary Bangladesh. Reformists seem generally perturbed by what they consider to be a widespread, if not pervasive heretical practice across the Bengal region. The following passage from one Salafist writer expresses this frustration with characteristic alacrity.

“*Milads* have become so important to society that most people maintain that in order to ensure success and blessing (*borkot*) for any new project or endeavour, one *must* hold a *milad* before commencing. Thus it is observed that everyone, from the common people all the way to the head of state, can be found celebrating *milads* with great fanfare and enthusiasm – for birthdays, death anniversaries, for weddings, the dedication of newly built homes and businesses. You will find that, at a minimum, once each year most people are organizing a *milad* either in hopes of receiving

⁹⁷ Often the word *korbani* (sacrifice) is used as a verb when discussing the killing a cow to feed guests for a *milad*, though no one equates this type of *korbani* with the *korbani* sacrifice of °*Id al-adha*.

⁹⁸ “কিরে?! এক রকম মিষ্টি? দুই জিলাপি?! / খুব খাওয়ালো। অনেক দোয়া-টোয়া হয়েছে। মনে হয় বেহেস্তে যাবে...”।

Interview: Mrs. Rowshan Sultana. 16 March, 2006. Rajshahi.

something or out of fear of avoiding something. Some people even do *manot*!⁹⁹ Even upon opening a new cinema – or an interest-taking bank! Video rental clubs!¹⁰⁰ Also at political rallies and cultural ceremonies – these *milads* are announced widely and people are encouraged to attend with great enthusiasm. Never mind whether or not the organisers observe five-times daily salat, or whether or not they even come to Friday *jumu'a* prayers...¹⁰¹

The quotation reveals just how widespread *milads* are perceived to be by this particular reformist scholar. Indeed, while this thesis focuses on *milads* used in funerary settings alone, the author has also been present at *milads* for other purposes, including a *milad* prayer service and public feeding to inaugurate a new toilet and bathroom ceramics store.

Surprisingly, during field interviews inside Ahl-i-Hadith mosques and madrasas in 2006-2008, Ahl-i-Hadith imams and madrasa principals claimed that the practice of *khotom* for the dead and *milads* for the dead had almost disappeared due to Ahl-i-Hadith efforts at reform. But such a claim could only be partially true at best. Besides attending *khotom* and *milads* myself, local Hanafi people of various types told me that “100%” and “97%” of the homes in their neighbourhoods still practised *khotom* and death *milads* as essential family rites.¹⁰² Hanafi imams concurred that they are called upon to supervise *khotom* and *milads* in “most” of the homes in these neighbourhoods.

Most Ahl-i-Hadith leaders interviewed in Rajshahi were fairly moderate and represented a good variety of opinion about the advisability of holding *khotom* and *milads*.

⁹⁹ *Manot* refers to vowing or giving an animal or other gift to a deity or saint in exchange for a fulfilled wish. The practice is associated with visiting Sufi tomb-shrines in hopes of receiving a boon, blessing, healing, etc.

¹⁰⁰ Video rental clubs, besides lending the normal fare of films from India and Hollywood, are also the conduits for the distribution of foreign (Western) produced pornographic videos.

¹⁰¹ “মীলাদ সমাজে এতই গুরুত্ব লাভ করেছে যে, অধিকাংশ মানুষ মনে করে কোন গুরুত্বপূর্ণ কাজ গুরু পূর্বে সাফল্য ও বরকতের আশায় অবশ্যই মীলাদ পড়াতে হবে। তাই তো দেখা যায় যে, সাধারণ মানুষ থেকে শুরু করে রাষ্ট্রপ্রধানদের পর্যন্ত তাদের জন্ম-মৃত্যু দিবসে, বিয়েতে, শবে বরাতে, বাড়ী ও দোকান উদ্বোধনে বৎসরে অন্তত এক বার হলেও কোন কিছু আশায় বা আশংকায় মীলাদের ব্যবস্থা করে। আবার কেউ মীলাদের মানতও করে। এমনকি সিনেমা হল – সুদী ব্যাংক ও ভিডিও ক্লাব উদ্বোধনে, রাষ্ট্রীয় ও সামাজিক অনুষ্ঠানে, দলীয় দিবসসহ প্রভৃতিতে খুবই শান শওকাতে এবং ব্যাপক প্রচার ও শরীক হবার আহ্বান করে মীলাদ পড়া হচ্ছে। যদিও উদ্যোক্তারা পাঁচ ওয়াস্ত সলাত আদায় করুক আর না-ই করুক, জুমুআর জামআ’তে শরীক হোক বা না-ই হোক...” Hafez Muhammad Ayoob, আহলে হাদীসদের পরিচয় ও ইতিহাস এবং মাযহাব প্রসঙ্গ (*Ahl-i-Hadith identity and history, with reference to madhhabs*), (Dhaka: Ahl-i-Hadith Research Center, 2000), 21.

¹⁰² Interview: Samsul Haque. 5 February, 2008. Rajshahi; Interview: Interview: Sheikh Sujan Miah. 10 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

Maulana Habibur Rahman, associate director of the Islamic Foundation in Rajshahi, stressed that it is un-Islamic to hold the *milad* on the fourth or fortieth days, since these are carry-overs from the local cultural environment. But he believes the principle of doing good works on behalf of the dead and sending the merit is very Islamic: “It is proper to feed the poor, destitute and helpless in order to send *so’ab* to the deceased. This can be done any time – but it is wrong to do this because it is a ‘special day’.”¹⁰³

Mufti Muhammad Shofiqur Islam of the Hetimkha Boro Masjid, an Ahl-i-Hadith mosque complex, was not as in favour of emphasizing *milads* as he was of the immediate practice of *khotom*: “When does the deceased actually need *so’ab* the most? Is it not for the trial of the grave, immediately after we’ve buried him? Yet we pray for him three days later! His judgment has already been handed down to him!”¹⁰⁴

In general, the Hanafi and Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’ were united in believing that it is wrong and spiritually dangerous to feed the rich at *milads*. The poor should be targeted instead, so that the feeding will generate *so’ab*. Feeding one’s rich friends in such cases is even warned against as a source of God’s wrath.¹⁰⁵

One issue of extreme importance to Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’ regarding *milads* is the tradition of *ka’em*, or standing in honour of the Prophet Muhammad’s entrance into the *milad* itself. One Salafi university principal complains bitterly about that special moment during *milads* in Bangladesh when everyone stands out of respect for the Prophet’s entrance. “It is even true that in some areas an empty chair is placed in the room so that the Messenger can come and sit.”¹⁰⁶ Some Hanafi imams have begun to discourage this practice as a sinful

¹⁰³ গরিব-মিসকিন যারা, অসহায়-দুস্থ, তাদেরকে খানা খাওয়ানো যায়, মূর্দার সওয়াব পৌঁছানোর নিয়তে। যখন ইচ্ছা তখন – এজন্য দিন-তারিখ ঠিক করা ঠিক না”। Interview: Maulana Habibur Rahman. 13 December 2007. Rajshahi. Other Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’ tended to agree with this sentiment.

¹⁰⁴ “এই সয়াব-টা কখন দরকার? আমরা তিন দিন পরে করি। আমি যখন তাকে দাফন করে আসলাম, তখন তো তার সয়াবের প্রয়োজন। অথচ, আমরা আয়োজন করে আনুষ্ঠান করে তিন দিনের মাথায় করতেছি। এই তিন দিনের মধ্যে তার রায় হয়ে যাবে।”। Interview: Muhammad Shofiqur Islam. 13 December 2007. Rajshahi.

¹⁰⁵ Various field interviews, Rajshahi, January, 2008.

¹⁰⁶ Hasan, *Ibatoter name*, 30-31.

innovation, but in many other *milads* where I attended it is still practised. A special greeting to the Prophet is also sung at this moment, which begins: “*Ya nabi, salam ‘alayka, Ya rasul, salam ‘alayka...*”¹⁰⁷

The fortieth-day *milad* (*chollisha*) does hold special significance which the other *milads* do not hold, as it is intended to bring to a close the community's services for the soul of the departed. Outwardly, it is almost identical to the other *milads*, which have been described earlier. Although it is difficult to trace the origins of the notion, there is a wide belief throughout the Rajshahi area and most of Bangladesh, that the soul of the dead comes back to the house it lived in on the fortieth day. During an interview with a respected board chairman of one local Hanafi mosque I asked if this idea is really Islamic or from local animistic or Hindu sources, and he answered with candid honesty, "I don't know if that comes from Islam or another source."¹⁰⁸ Well-trained Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’ would definitely choose the latter option.

Food is not only fed to the guests at a *chollisha milad*, but a portion is left out for the departed soul to eat as well. A local Hanafi imam related that, "The spirit comes back to the place where it lived on occasion. So that is why we give something to the spirit on the third and fortieth days. Plus, the prayers that we say for that departed soul will accrue to its merit."¹⁰⁹ In Bangladeshi village culture, fear of the ghosts of departed souls still exists and used to be pervasive. Some families, even in cities, still fear that if the departed soul is not satisfied and made happy when it returns on the fortieth day, it may cause problems or torment the living.

¹⁰⁷ In this case, the ‘*Ya nabi*’ is indicative of the worshippers’ belief that Muhammad’s spirit has literally arrived - a sentiment which is vigorously challenged by Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’.

¹⁰⁸ Interview: Interview: Muhammad Enayet Ali. 16 March, 2006. Rajshahi.

¹⁰⁹ Interview: Hafez Kari Muhammad Nurul Islam. 26 May, 2006 / 24 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

The *mrityu barshiki* (death anniversary) or *batshorik milad* (one-year *milad*) are titles given by Hanafis to the one-year *milad*, which is extremely similar to the *milads* already described. Such *milads* are very popular and every day local and national newspapers contain announcements of such events for various persons. Moderate Ahl-i-Hadith adherents who seem to have an aversion to performing any *milads* on 'special days' also hold these annual *milads*, but avoid the actual one-year anniversary. Some Ahl-i-Hadith leaders related that they have transferred these ongoing annual *milads* to the month of Ramadan, and changed the name to *majlis*¹¹⁰ (Ar. gathering). But the recitations, the killing of a cow, and the feeding of the poor to accrue merit and transfer it to the dead family member, are all the same. *Majlis* are indeed substituted for *milads* in areas where the Ahl-i-Hadith are strong in numbers, and many families hold such an event every year in honour of a deceased father or mother.¹¹¹

6. Notices of *milads* for the deceased appear daily in most newspapers. *Qurankhani* – Quran refers to recitations to be performed for the deceased, and *khani* is a Bengali cognate for *feeding* the poor who attend, which accrues *so'ab* for the departed soul. Daily Star, 9 February, 2008.

¹¹⁰ মাজলিস। Interview: Muhammad Sayeedur Rahman Khan.

Interviewed by Author. Digital recording. 31 December, 2007. Rajshahi.

¹¹¹ One such family in Rajshahi holds a *milad* for their departed father every year in his original village. They kill five cows and twelve goats to feed the poor of their area. They serve expensive *pullao* rice and insist on not inviting their own relations and the wealthy neighbours, but only the poor. Another man, a university teacher, goes to his village every Ramadan and organises a *majlis* for his departed Ahl-i-Hadith father.

Death anniversary



Today is the 8th death anniversary of Md Abdur Rashid, says a press release.

He was one of the members of the constitution formulation committee, former member of the parliament and one of the organisers of the Liberation War.

He was also one of the close associates of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

On the occasion, Qurankhwani and milad mahfil will be held after Asr prayers at his residence (Nayana Neer, House-36, Road-1, Block-1, Banani) in the city.

Relatives, political associates and admirers have been requested to attend the milad mahfil and pray for salvation of the departed soul.

Begum Hamida Haq



Today is the 11th death anniversary of Begum Hamida Haq, a freedom fighter and wife of Rafiqul Huq D a d u b h a i, chief sub-editor

of the daily Jugantor and a child welfare activist, says a press release.

On the occasion, Qurankhwani and milad mahfil will be held at her Shantinagar residence in the city and at Rangpur town.

Nahidul Haque Khan (Titu)



Today is the 11th death anniversary of Nahidul Haque Khan (Titu), says a press release.

Titu was shot dead by miscreants during non-cooperation movement in 1996 while he was a student of Rajshahi University.

On the occasion, a milad mahfil will be held after Asr prayers at his residence (574, Uttar Shahjahanpur) in the city.

Relatives, friends and admirers are requested to attend the milad mahfil and pray for salvation of the departed soul.

3.8 *Ziarod kora*: Regular visitation of graves

Though it is an important and widespread death-related activity, *ziarod kora*¹¹² (Ar. *ziyara*), or the weekly visiting of graves on Thursday night or Friday, is not a highly contested traditional practice.¹¹³ The precedent set by Muhammad and the earliest Companions of visiting graves to pray for deceased friends and family members is well attested,¹¹⁴ and this practice is a fixture in Bangladeshi Muslim society. Generally, children who remember and take of their time to go frequently to say prayers at the graves of their parents are considered to be faithful, loving and responsible, whereas neglecting to visit the cemetery to pray for one's parents is often associated with shirking one's duty or with a lack of affection for one's parents. Incidentally, this regular *ziarod kora* is distinct from another rite, that of visiting the tombs of Sufi saints and circling these tombs in search of blessing. This practice, also called *ziarod kora*, is strongly condemned in the Ahl-i-Hadith literature and in local discourse, with most urban moderate Hanafi 'ulama' also agreeing that it is not authentically Islamic.

3.9 Expressing grief

Though wailing for the dead is not directly mentioned in the Qur'an, it was an issue that greatly exercised the earliest Islamic communities of Arabia and Mesopotamia, as is evidenced by the inordinate number of hadith traditions addressing this topic. The main concern of the early Islamic community seems to have been the creation of a break with pre-Islamic Arabian 'jahiliyya'¹¹⁵ culture, which included professional female mourners who

¹¹² জিয়ারত করা

¹¹³ Both *Bihishti Zewar* (Thanawi, 226) and the *Diniyat* (221) encourage this practice as an effective means for helping deceased loved ones. Detailed instructions are included in these manuals for how to make one's weekly visit to the graves as fruitful as possible.

¹¹⁴ Ibn Ishaq reports Muhammad visiting the graves to pray for the deceased, along with this exclamation to his freed slave, "I am commanded to implore pardon for the dead in the cemetery!" Ibn Ishaq, *The life of Muhammad*, Ed. By Michael Edwardes (London: The Folio Society, 1964), 170.

¹¹⁵ The period of ignorance in regard to God's laws before the advent of Islam. "In the new Islamic order, traditional acts of mourning such as crying out loudly, throwing dust on one's head, and tearing one's hair appeared abhorrent and were proscribed." Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 119.

attended funerals and wailed to display anguish at a community member's death. The purpose of this break with the past was the creation of a new, specifically Islamic, pattern of responding to the tragedy of death, which was one of several useful ways to bolster a new Islamic identity during the formative stages of the movement. This new style of dealing with death called for at least an outward show of stoic patience and community order.

One particular anecdote included in Ibn Ishaq's biography of Muhammad recounts the day he came to a final decision to ban loud, stylised weeping in the old Arabian tradition. His own Companions had ordered some of their female relatives to go to weep for the Prophet's uncle Hamza, who had fallen in battle. Muhammad listened for a while, then rebuked them and sent them home. "On that day the apostle prohibited wailing and lamentation."¹¹⁶

Indicative of the difficulty of changing this custom so quickly, Muhammad's own wife 'A'isha is described in the very same biography as participating in pre-Islamic mourning rituals with other women at the death of Muhammad: "The apostle died on my breast, despite my foolishness and youth. I placed his head on a cushion, and then I rose and began to strike my face and beat my breast with the other women."¹¹⁷

Wailing and demonstrating loudly at the tragedy of death seemed to early Islamic leaders to be an expression of complaint against God's will. If, after all, God knew the day and hour of every person's death, then human beings should be restrained and even submissive in light of such knowledge. Stoic patience became such an ideal in the developing Islamic religious milieu that examples of pious individuals exhibiting this quality were included in the authoritative hadith record.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 111.

¹¹⁷ Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 174.

¹¹⁸ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 76, Number 432: Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "Allah says, 'I have nothing to give but Paradise as a reward to my believer slave, who, if I cause his dear friend (or relative) to die, remains patient (and hopes for Allah's Reward).'" Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, KJ, Number 340: Narrated Anas: The Prophet said, "A Muslim whose three children die before the age of puberty will be granted Paradise by Allah due to his mercy for them."

Proceeding from the injunction to bear the loss of loved ones patiently, the leadership of the *umma* logically began to proscribe excessive or chaotic displays of emotion – proscriptions typically aimed at women. In the hadith literature, the Prophet reportedly declared women who wept excessively as outside the community of Islam; he cursed those who wailed and compared wailing to blasphemy; if the wailer died without repenting of these un-Islamic crimes, she would be resurrected wearing “a coat of mail made of tar or an armour either infected with scabies or set ablaze with fire.”¹¹⁹

Perhaps even more well-known than these direct threats to mourners was a threat that impacted on the welfare of the deceased. In a famously debated hadith, Muslims were warned that “The dead is punished in the grave because of wailing on it.”¹²⁰ Given other seemingly contradictory statements reportedly from Muhammad, such as “no bearer of a burden will bear another’s burden,” the meaning of this hadith report became a source of internal contestation even among Muhammad’s own wives and Companions.¹²¹ But inevitably, a section of Muslim scholars upheld the notion that the wailing of the living can negatively impact on the dead.

As noted earlier, Muslim communities in contemporary Rajshahi hold that the soul is still present just near the corpse after death – and can therefore possibly be disturbed by excessive displays of grief. Since a proper *gosol*, shrouding and numerous recitations are needed at the time of death, loud weeping by self-centred relatives must be avoided as it could distract the workers and even distract the soul. After all, the soul is presumed to be composing itself for the upcoming interrogation by the fearsome angels Munkar and Nakir several minutes after burial is complete (see Chapter Four). “By shifting the focus onto the

¹¹⁹ Al-Tirmidhi, *al-Jami‘*, KJ, no. 999; al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, KJ, 35, 38; Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad*, nos. 11622, 8914, 8754, and 22966-22967. Ctd., Halevi, *Muhammad’s Grave*, 119-120.

¹²⁰ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, KJ, 2016.

¹²¹ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, KJ, 2026. See Muslim, *Sahih*, KJ, 2027, 2022, for this early Islamic debate contained right in the canonical hadith record.

dead, one can understand the absence, or postponement, of mourning as an effort to eliminate all that could retard the soul's departure."¹²²

As a result of these considerations, and also of the potential torture of the deceased for the weeping of the survivors, excessive weeping and crying at the time of preparing for burial and the funeral are restrained. Relatives may rebuke a family member who weeps loudly by saying, “*Kanna koro na!*”(Don't cry!), "*Shobol koro!*" (Be strong) or "*Dowa koro!*" (Pray! [instead]).¹²³

Hanafi law does prescribe a three-day mourning period for the death of a family member, and during these three days Rajshahi neighbours typically cook and bring meals to the home where the death has taken place, as cooking is not done during this period. Additionally, widows are prescribed a mourning period of four months and ten days, after which they should make themselves presentable and even put on perfume, suggesting that they are now eligible for remarriage.¹²⁴

It is true that Rajshahi's Muslims can and do weep and mourn the loss of a loved one, but only after the work of the day of burial has been completed. Rajshahi women often weep in a stylised, sing-song fashion, in which the deceased is praised, especially in the case of a widow weeping for her husband. It is perhaps comforting for local believers to recall that even the Prophet wept at the loss of his grandson and other friends, and that he distinguished between expressing the pain that is in one's heart, and engaging in the erratic displays of the *jahiliyya*.¹²⁵

¹²² Jitka Kotalova, *Belonging to Others: Cultural Construction of Womenhood in a Village in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1996), 98.

¹²³ “কান্না কোর না” / “সবল কর” / “দোয়া কর”।

¹²⁴ Editing Committee, *Diniyat*, 200-219; *Sahih Bukhari*, KJ, book 30, nos. 310, 1279-1282.

¹²⁵ "It is allowed by Islam to be sorrowful in heart and to weep softly for the deceased. But to wail, beat one's chest and tear one's clothing is *haram* (an abomination)." Editing Committee, *Diniyat*, 220, author's translation. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 23, no. 391: "Narrated °Abdullah bin °Umar : Sa'd bin °Ubada became sick and the Prophet along with °Abdur Rahman bin °Auf, Sad bin Abi Waqqas and °Abdullah bin Masud visited him to enquire about his health. When he came to him, he found him surrounded by his household and he asked, "Has he died?" They said, "No, O Allah's Apostle." The Prophet wept and when the people saw the weeping of Allah's Apostle (p.b.u.h) they all wept. He said, "Will you listen? Allah does not punish for shedding tears, nor

In examining the community activities that Rajshahi Muslims perform ‘Above Ground’ at the time of an individual’s death, what has been most notable for the purposes of this study are those rituals that are consciously performed in the hope of assisting the dead in *al-barzakh*. As we will see later, these are the very activities which cause divisions and debates among Hanafi and Ahl-i-Hadith adherents, and around which doctrinal positions are either contested or resolved within communities.

Khotom recitations, a proper *janaza* prayer service, and the conscious collection of *so’ab* for the deceased at various *milad* services, all notably display the collective effort to contribute to the individual’s prospects in the Hereafter. The post-burial *talqin*, or coaching of the deceased in the grave on how to respond to the angels’ interrogation, demonstrates the vibrant and active cosmological view of Rajshahi’s Muslims as to the ability of the living to cross the barrier of death and communicate with the departed. The fortieth-day *chollisha milad* service is a time when, in addition to collecting still more merit from additional recitations and sending it on to the deceased, many Rajshahi Muslims also bring to a close (at least temporarily) their funerary rituals, believing that the spirit of the deceased visits the home one last time on that occasion, and then takes its leave to settle more permanently into the waiting period of *al-barzakh*. In certain cases, such as excessive mourning for the dead, the community may proscribe activities which it believes will negatively impact the success of the deceased in the upcoming trial of the grave, as well as in the soul’s final judgment before God.

In Chapter Four, this study moves from looking at the observable funerary activities of Rajshahi Muslims to an analysis of the underlying cosmological system of belief on which

for the grief of the heart but he punishes or bestows His Mercy because of this." He pointed to his tongue and added, "The deceased is punished for the wailing of his relatives over him." ‘Umar used to beat with a stick and throw stones and put dust over the faces (of those who used to wail over the dead).”

these activities rest. Interviews with a cross-section of religious practitioners, as well as consultation with authoritative Islamic texts that are favoured by local 'ulama', provide guidance as we attempt to create a sense of the composite cosmological framework that enables Rajshahi Muslims to believe they can assist their loved ones in the grave.

Table 3.1 – Spectrum of local attitudes: *khotom*, *milad*, *bokshano*

	extreme Salafi position	moderate Salafi position	“reformed” Hanafi position	popular Hanafi position
<i>Khotom</i>	Reciting in front of a dead body is <i>bid^ca</i> . Only what a person ‘sends ahead’ of themselves through good works in life will accrue to their heavenly account. Beyond these is the famous hadith which mentions three exceptions which ‘keep on giving’: a religious child who prays for dead parents; a <i>satka-e-jaria</i> or gift that keeps benefiting others (hospital, mosque); and a legacy of ‘ <i>ilm</i> , or pious wisdom conferred through teaching or writing.	<i>Khotom</i> is effective but should be spontaneous, unpaid.	<i>Khotom</i> is effective and a normal part of helping departed loved ones.	Every good Muslim family will hold <i>khotom</i> for their dead. Society would speak poorly of me and question my character if I did not care enough to hold <i>khotom</i> . Paying madrasa students to increase the amount of merit generated is acceptable. Recitations and the generated merit can in many cases be linked with a reduction of suffering in the grave and automatic passage into Paradise.
4 th and 40 th day <i>milads</i>	These are <i>bida^c</i> and a carry-over from animistic religions and/or Hindu civilization.	These <i>milads</i> are good and effective, but the 4 th & 40 th days should be avoided, as these rules are innovations. Anyone who holds a <i>milad</i> on these days because he thinks they are a command commits sin. Avoid feeding rich friends and neighbours, as this will invoke wrath and not reward.	Imams can attend when invited to 4 th and 40 th day <i>milads</i> , but with the knowledge that a <i>milad</i> can be held on any day whatsoever. Imams should teach Muslims that the day does not matter in Islam. But <i>so’ab</i> generation on behalf of the dead is essential to success in the Hereafter.	No one has ever heard of not holding 4 th and 40 th day <i>milads</i> for the dead. These practices are universal and essential. Not holding these ceremonies is a sign of a self-centred person who does not love his or her parents.
<i>so’ab bokshano</i> (transfer of merit to deceased)	A person will have that which he or she ‘sends ahead’ of himself or herself in the form of good works performed while still alive.	Allowed, but must be unpaid, spontaneous, individual. Merit will transfer to dead. A <i>nek-kar shontan</i> (righteous offspring) is the most effective transmitter of <i>so’ab</i> to a parent.	<i>So’ab bokshano</i> is completely normal and expected in religion and is most relevant in reference to helping those already dead. Merit from any good work or recitation can be transferred to a dead person’s account by any individual just by asking God to do it.	<i>So’ab bokshano</i> is completely normal and expected in religion and is most relevant in reference to helping those already dead. Though others may also be able to do it, it is usually much more effective if an imam supervises and executes the transfer for collected merit to a dead person’s account.

Chapter 4 – Death Below Ground - *al-barzakh* in the local understanding

“The demands which more or less thoroughly worked out systems must exact of the original revelation can be very severe...”

Ragnar Eklund, VI

The previous chapter contained an account of contemporary death rituals and practices performed "above ground" by the majority of Sunnis in Bangladesh, with specific reference to the Rajshahi urban context. The present chapter will attempt to synthesise local beliefs about what occurs in the grave of the deceased with the authoritative texts used locally to support these beliefs.

The following pages are designed to give the reader a local practitioner's 'sense' of the sum of beliefs which Bangladeshi Sunnis living in the first quarter of the 21st century hold in relation to the period immediately following death. First, we pause to review the term *barzakh* in its historical context, its provenance in the Qur'an, and its current usage. Following this is a short study of the texts used by 'ulama' in Rajshahi to inform their own understanding and teaching about the ordering of the *barzakh* period.

After these introductory investigations, the second half of the chapter unpacks the events believed to be taking place in the invisible realm, as the body is being washed, transported, buried and prayed over "above ground" by the community. Local beliefs about these events are related to the authoritative texts on which they hinge. While no such limited study could take into account *every* local belief about the *barzakh* nor *every* event in the grave contained in the authoritative hadith or eschatological manuals, an effort has been made to piece together the most important and most consistently related aspects of the life of the grave by Rajshahi Muslims. These include:

- 1) Indications of consciousness in the grave
- 2) Removal of the soul from the body
- 3) The soul's journey to heaven and back to the body
- 4) The angel Ruman
- 5) Interrogation by Munkar and Nakir
- 6) The trial of the grave
- 7) The states of the grave

4.1 *Barzakh*

Barzakh is an Arabic term for barrier or partition. Halevi notes that the term “always had a mysterious ring in Arabic” due to its foreign origin and uncertain meaning.¹ Thus, it is probable that the enigmatic textual instances of *al-barzakh* in the Islamic scriptures as well as the impression left on the Prophet’s first Companions at the mention of this word invoked a sense of wonder and uncertainty.

Al-Barzakh is mentioned only three times in the Qur’an. The most notable instance is in 23:99-100, where dead sinners beg to be returned to the *dunya* (worldly life) to do good works which they neglected to perform. Verse 23:100 responds, “No! It is only a word he is saying; and behind them is a *barzakh* until the Day they are resurrected.”² In this Qur’anic instance, the *barzakh* is a barrier beyond which dead spirits reside, and which prevents the dead from ever returning to the life of the world. Having died, they have crossed the *barzakh* out of *al-dunya* into *al-akhira*, the Hereafter.

The only other instances of *al-barzakh* in the Qur’an (25:53, 55:20) refer to a different case, that of the land barrier which separates the salt waters and sweet waters of the earth.³ Moses reportedly makes a journey to this mysterious junction (*majma‘ al-bahrayn*) in the story contained in Surat al-Kahf (18:60).

Let us return momentarily to the first meaning given to *al-barzakh* in the Qur’an, that of an existential barrier preventing those already dead from ever returning to improve upon their poor records. Noting a substantial difference between the Qur’anic *barzakh* and the concept of *barzakh* in the hadith, Halevi has suggested that a ‘great leap’ in the Islamic

¹ Leor Halevi, *Muhammad’s Grave* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 203. Arthur Jeffery suggests that *al-barzakh* entered Arabic from the Persian *farsakh* or *parasang*, both measures of distance. See Arthur Jeffery, *The foreign vocabulary of the Qur’an* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938), 77.

² Unless otherwise noted, this thesis uses *The Qur’ān: Arabic text with corresponding English meanings* (Riyadh: Saḥeeḥ International/Abulqasim Publishing House, 1997).

³ See B. Carra de Vaux, *Barzakh* in EI², vol. I, 1071. R. Eklund gives a full account of the Islamic usages of the term *barzakh* in his *Life between death and resurrection according to Islam* (PhD Thesis, Uppsala, 1941). We await the forthcoming article on *barzakh* by Christian Lange in EI3.

understanding of *al-barzakh* took place as early as the first quarter of the eighth century. Using tombstone inscriptions and early extant Islamic sources as guides, Halevi draws a contrast between the Qurʾanic understanding of the *barzakh* and the post-Qurʾanic understanding of the same. He suggests that the *barzakh* shifted from being a boundary line between this world and the Hereafter, to representing the cemetery itself, where human beings were in a conscious holding period awaiting resurrection.⁴ As Halevi relates,

The deceased person, in the Qurʾānic understanding, was sharply divided in accordance with a dualistic macrocosmic model: its bones remained on earth while its soul dwelled beyond *al-barzakh*... There was no sense in trying to communicate with bones. By contrast, in the post-Qurʾānic system, the corpse and its spirit would dwell jointly, between death and the resurrection, in *al-barzakh*. In this context, *al-barzakh* referred to actual graves...⁵

An early exegete of the Qurʾan, Mujahid of Mecca (d. ca. 722), quoted al-Hasan of Basra (d.728) referring to the *barzakh* as “those graves that stand between you and the Hereafter” (*al-barzakh hiya hadhihi `l-qubur allati baynakum wa-bayna `l-akhira*).⁶ Early traditionists, including Abu Hanifa (d.767)⁷ and Ibn Qutayba (d. 889),⁸ made belief in the conscious punishment of the grave an essential doctrine, demonstrating that the conscious existence of the soul in the grave was a widespread tenet of Islamic belief. Such early historical examples serve as evidence that *al-barzakh* began to be associated with grave clusters and cemeteries very early in Islamic history.

⁴ Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 202-226.

⁵ Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 226.

⁶ Mujahid, *Tafsir*, vol. 2, 488 (Beirut, N.D.) See "Barzakh" in EQ.

⁷ Abu Hanifa condemned to the Fire those who dared “not to know” this dogma. See al-Maturidi, “*Sharh al-Fiqh al-Akbar*,” in *Al-Rasaʾil al-sabʿa fi al-ʿaqaʾid*, 3rd ed. (Hyderabad, 1980), 21; and Abu Hanifa (attrib.), “*Al-Fiqh al Absat*,” included in *Al-ʿAlim wa al-mutaʿallim*, ed. Muhammad Zahid al-Kawthari (Cairo, 1949), 52. Qtd. in Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 218, fn. 64.

⁸ Ibn Qutayba declared that if the hadith concerning Muhammad’s prayers for protection from the torment of the grave were to be considered doubtful, than none of “the reports about our Prophet” were reliable. Ibn Qutayba, *Taʾwil mukhtalif al-hadith* (Beirut, 1972), 144-146, 221-222. Qtd. in Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 218.

4.2 Ordering the events of the grave - sources

The chronological ordering of the events immediately following death, and indeed, of the period of the eschaton, raises a number of issues.⁹ In the first place, the Qur'an contains very little information that could be used to fashion such a chronology of events. Having received the revelation of the Qur'an, with its injunctions to eschew evil and produce good works to ensure entrance into the Garden, it is not at all illogical that members of the new community were curious to find out about issues on which the Qur'an is almost silent. What happens to loved ones after they die, but before the resurrection?

The great volume of specific information which has come down to the Muslim *umma* about the interregnum came not through the Qur'anic revelation, but rather through the more organic interaction of the Prophet with his Companions, resulting in the traditions (the *sunna*). These oral traditions of Muhammad's words, deeds and assent to various questions continued to develop in Arabia and elsewhere in the Muslim world throughout the first and second Islamic centuries,¹⁰ and were canonised over time as authoritative collections of hadith literature. But though the authoritative *kutub al-sitta*¹¹ contain hundreds of purported statements of the Prophet relating isolated anecdotes about the invisible events of the grave, of angels, of punishments and rewards, these classical Islamic collections do not provide any sort of neat ordering of events.

Happily, it is not up to the modern scholar to piece together the few enigmatic Qur'anic statements which shed light on the *barzakh* period with the hundreds of specific, yet unconnected hadith anecdotes about the invisible events of the soul in the afterlife. That

⁹ This section focuses on textual sources of information about the *barzakh*. However, the assembled narrative of the events of *al-barzakh* contained in this chapter was informed not only by authoritative Islamic texts, but also by listening to local religious figures describe their beliefs during lengthy interviews. In addition to this are sermons I heard at mosques, *milad* services, outdoor *waz mahfils*, etc. See the Introduction Chapter for a list of interview questions used and a thorough description of fieldwork methodology.

¹⁰ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (2nd Edition) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 43-67. Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 3-13.

¹¹ See p. 95, n. 136.

difficult task was undertaken by a number of medieval Muslim hadith experts whose works are key when it comes to the ordering of the events in the Islamic Hereafter. In Chapter Two we were introduced to several hadith manuals popularised in the Indian subcontinent, such as *Bihishti Zewar* and *Mishkat al-Masabih*, which cover the whole gamut of Islamic legal and religious topics. In what follows, we examine a few additional works referenced by Rajshahi ‘ulama’ for assessing the detailed chronology of events during *al-barzakh*.

Medieval eschatology manuals. Interviews with Ahl-i-Hadith and Hanafi informants in Rajshahi during the winter of 2007-2008 revealed a strikingly uniform pool of source materials for information about the afterlife. One of the questions asked during the initial round of interviews pertained directly to local sources of information on this topic: where should a person who wants to study in Bengali turn to learn about the events of the *barzakh* period?¹² Most answers from ‘ulama’ to this question began with an acknowledgement that the hadith collections of al-Bukhari and Muslim are the root of all authoritative information on *al-barzakh*, and that a person should access these directly since they are easily available. Beyond this, imams recommended consulting a number of topically organised works of hadith, introduced in Chapter Two.

But when it comes to discussing the specific ordering and details of the *barzakh*, Rajshahi ‘ulama’ tended to reference three additional works, two of which are attributed to Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Tusi al-Ghazali (d. 1111). The first work recommended was the fortieth and last section of al-Ghazali’s classic *Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din*, or the *Kitab dhikr al-mawt*

¹² See interview questions in the Introduction Chapter. The only distinction in textual language medium being made here is that I did not want to study in Arabic, but rather in Bengali (the possibility of reading Islamic texts in English was not raised by myself or my informants). My own limitation (to using Bengali, and a little bit of Arabic) mirrored in many ways the limitations of my informants. Until recently, most ‘ulama’ in Rajshahi have not been skilled enough in Arabic to seriously pursue reading a book in that language, having sufficient skills to recite the text only, without significant ability to understand the meaning. Naturally, the common people have not exceeded the ‘ulama’ in this regard to any great extent. Of course exceptions have always existed, but I was interested in the majority of ‘ulama’ and their experience. In the first decade of the 21st century, just as more and more important commentaries and resources have been translated into Bengali for broad dissemination, it seems that the quality of madrasa Arabic training has also improved markedly.

wa-ma ba'dahu.¹³ Secondly, scholars and imams suggested I access *Al-Durra al-fakhira*,¹⁴ also attributed to al-Ghazali. Indeed, in the text of the *Durra* the writer claims to be al-Ghazali reworking much of his earlier *Kitab dhikr al-mawt* into a fresh presentation.¹⁵

The third eschatological manual covering the 'life of the grave' recommended by 'ulama' was *Daqa'iq al-akhbar fi dhikr al-janna wa' l-nar* (*The minutiae of the accounts about remembering Paradise and the Fire*) by medieval scholar Imam 'Abd al-Rahim ibn Ahmad al-Qadi.¹⁶ A collection of hadith about the afterlife, this work has been translated into German,¹⁷ English,¹⁸ Bengali,¹⁹ and presumably other languages. In a curious example of the

¹³In this thesis I reference Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Kitab dhikr al-mawt wa-ma ba'dahu*. Tr. by T.J. Winter. (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1989).

¹⁴ Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira* (*The precious pearl: a translation from the Arabic*). Tr. by Jane I. Smith (Harvard University: Center for the Study of World Religions, 1979).

¹⁵ Conspicuous references to al-Ghazali's *Ihya'* indicate that the *Durra* was written after the *Ihya'*. Nineteenth and 20th century scholarship has been divided about whether or not the *Durra* came from al-Ghazali's pen. W. Montgomery Watt ("The authenticity of the words attributed to al-Ghazālī", JRAS, 1952) and M. Asin Palacios (*La Espiritualidad de Algazal*, Madrid, 1935) are not in favour of attributing the *Durra* to al-Ghazali, due to apparent inconsistencies with his thought and writing elsewhere. Hava Lazarus-Yafeh also agrees with the opinion that the *Durra* is not al-Ghazali's (*Studies in al-Ghazzali*, Jerusalem, 1975). On the other hand, Ignaz Goldziher (*Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*, Leiden, 1920), Margaret Smith (*Al-Ghazālī the Mystic*, London: Luzac, 1975), and Lucien Gautier (French translation of the *Durra*, *La Perle Precieuse de Ghazālī*, Universität Leipzig, 1877) hold the position that the *Durra* is indeed by al-Ghazali. (Partially ctd. from Jane Idleman Smith's introduction to her translation of the *Durra* in *The precious pearl: a translation from the Arabic* (Harvard University: Center for the Study of World Religions, 1979), 5-6.) Jane I. Smith believes that the *Durra* "reasonably may be seen as consonant with, if not an exact record of, al-Ghazālī's thoughts on questions of ethical responsibility and the afterlife." (*The precious pearl*, 6). It is beyond the purpose of this study to take up a renewed inquiry into the authorship of these works, especially since the focus here is to evaluate the contemporary discourse of local Muslims with texts they consider to be authentic and authoritative. To keep these notes clear and unencumbered, I have chosen to indicate the author of the *Durra* as al-Ghazali, following the scholars mentioned above who hold that position..

¹⁶ For comparison purposes, I located an Arabic copy of this work at the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University: 'Abd al-Rahim ibn Ahmad al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar fi dhikr al-janna wa-al-nar* (Beirut: Dar-ul-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1984). Neither the Arabic nor the English translation provide dates or biographical information on al-Qadi, and my inquiries with Arabic scholars on this subject did not produce any information either.

¹⁷ *Das Totenbuch des Islam. Das Feuer und der Garten - Die Lehren des Propheten Mohammed über das Leben nach dem Tode* (Bern: Scherz Verlag, n.d.). A nearly identical work in Arabic entitled *Kitab ahwal al-qiyama* is anonymous. It was also translated into German in 1892 as *Muhammedanische Eschatologie* (Leipzig, 1892) by M. Wolff.

¹⁸ Imam 'Abd ar-Rahim ibn Ahmad al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar fi dhikr al-janna wa' l-nar* (*The Islamic book of the dead*), Tr. by 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman (Norwich, Norfolk, UK: Diwan Press, 1977). This is the English translation, Hereafter cited as al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar* (Tr. by 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman). Along the way, I also cite the Bengali translation by Habibullah Khan (see next footnote) because his translation includes a certain amount of embellishment, and this religious knowledge is important as it informs the understanding of *al-barzakh* in Rajshahi.

¹⁹ I purchased three Bengali versions of this work, which are variously enhanced and freely combined with the works of other medieval Islamic writers: Maulana Muhammad Zaker Amin, *Mrityu o hashorer age-pore* (*The Before and After of Death*) (Dhaka: Shorshina Library, 2005) combines the writings of al-Ghazali with those of Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, though without telling the reader when he is switching between one author and the next;

lack of attention to citation and copyright sensibilities in the Bengali context, this text by al-Qadi was translated into Bengali and published under the name of al-Ghazali. Though the reasons for this anomaly are unclear, one scholar suggested that this may have been done to sell more copies of the volume, since most people have heard of al-Ghazali, whereas al-Qadi's name is relatively unknown.²⁰

In the following account of the salient features of the *barzakh* period, we begin, as Rajshahi Sunnis do, with relevant Qur^ānic passages and frequently used hadith quotations from the *sahih* works of al-Bukhari and Muslim. We provide depth to the discussion and bring a fuller picture of the local sense Rajshahi Muslims have of the *barzakh*, by referencing the eschatological manuals ascribed to Imam al-Ghazali, *Kitab dhikr al-mawt* and *Al-Durra al-fakhira*, as well as al-Qadi's *Daqa'iq al-akhbar*. Along the way, the narrative is rounded out with statements from Rajshahi 'ulama' and other local informants about what is believed to be going on in the 'life of the grave.'

4.3 Indications of consciousness in the grave

There are a number of prominent Qur^ānic and hadith passages that 'ulama' cite on the subject of conscious existence in the grave. Such passages are a starting point for recognizing Muslims' admission of human consciousness after death.²¹ As each new generation of children grow up in Rajshahi, they are assured by such authoritative passages that the

Maulana Abul Khayer Muhammad Siddiq, *Mriyur age o moroner pore (Before and After Death)* (Dhaka: Shyamla Book Depot, 1997) claims to be following "Al-Ghazali's" *Daqa'iq al-akhbar*, though he expands on the sections of al-Qadi's work greatly without differentiating between text and commentary. Abu Sayyid Muhammad Habibullah Khan (trans.), *Daqa'iq al-akhbar* (Dhaka: Shorshina Library, 1998) is the Bengali version being used in this thesis to discuss the impact of al-Qadi's work in the Bangladeshi context. This edition is the closest to the original text and is the least encumbered with new commentary. I cite this Bengali volume in the following pages as al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar* (trans. Habibullah Khan).

²⁰ Interview: Hazza Abu-Rabia. New Haven, Connecticut. 11 February, 2010.

²¹ It is certainly the case that in some parts of the world-wide Muslim *umma*, and in certain instances in history, there have been those who for various reasons rejected the concept of the life in the grave. The Mu^ʿtazila rejected it on the basis of rational arguments, and some groups of Shi^ʿa as well as most philosophers rejected the concept as incompatible with the soul's release from the body at death. See Smith and Haddad, *Islamic Understanding*, 47.

cosmological construct being affirmed by their families and leaders is without a doubt God's word.

As mentioned earlier, the Qur'an has scant information on the period between an individual's death and the resurrection, though it has much more to say about the actual eschaton and the states of the blessed in Paradise and the damned in the Fire. Perhaps the boldest Qur'anic passage about the life in between death and resurrection is in reference to martyrs:

“And never think of those who have been killed in the cause of Allah as dead. Rather, they are alive with their Lord, receiving provision, rejoicing in what Allah has bestowed upon them of His bounty, and they receive good tidings about those [to be martyred] after them who have not yet joined them – that there will be no fear concerning them, nor will they grieve.” (3:169-70)

Another Qur'anic passage, 2:154, gives similar assurances regarding “those who are killed in Allah's way,” but beyond these general assurances that the martyrs are alive in God's care, we are not given many details. In the verse above, the martyrs are “alive with their Lord,” suggesting that the case of the blessed martyrs would be exceptional to the case of the non-martyred dead, perhaps being transported directly to Paradise rather than waiting for the resurrection in some kind of life in the grave.

One of the few remaining verses in the Qur'an which makes mention of the period in the grave is 35:22, which states: “And not equal are the living and the dead. Indeed, Allah causes to hear whom He wills, but you cannot make hear those in the graves.” This verse seems indicative of the ‘Qur'anic understanding’ of *al-barzakh* highlighted by Halevi.²² It emphasises the dividing barrier of *al-barzakh* and underlines the inability of the dead to return and redress their offences, as well as the inability of the community of loved ones to aid the deceased. But not much information is given regarding the actual nature of the interregnum for the individual Muslim, whether righteous or unrighteous. Although this verse

²² Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 226.

seems to indicate that the living cannot make themselves heard by those in their graves, a large number of authoritative hadith seem to make clear that the opposite is the case, as we explore below.²³

A great number of well-known hadith are canonised in the *sahih* collections of al-Bukhari and Muslim which not only provide many details about the life in the grave, but also contradict the notion in 35:22 that the dead do not hear the living from their graves. For example, “Anas b. Malik reported that Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) said: When the dead body is placed in the grave, he listens to the sound of the shoes (as his friends and relatives return after burying him).”²⁴ Such well-known and authoritative hadith reports have fired the imaginations of local Rajshahi believers with a cosmological framework for understanding the life in the grave, in which conscious punishment (or reward) by the will of God is a foregone conclusion. A few other foundational *sahih* reports help to form this basis for belief, such as the following hadith, again found in Muslim's collection:

Anas b. Malik reported that Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) let the dead bodies of the unbelievers who fought in Badr (lie unburied) for three days. He then came to them and sat by their side and called them and said: O Abu Jahl b. Hisham, O Umayya b. Khalaf, O Utba b. Rab'ila, O Shaiba b. Rabi'a, have you not found what your Lord had promised with you to be correct? As for me, I have found the promises of my Lord to be (perfectly) correct. 'Umar listened to the words of Allah's Apostle (may peace be upon him) and said: Allah's Messenger, how do they listen and respond to you? They are dead and their bodies have decayed. Thereupon he (the Holy Prophet) said: By Him in Whose Hand is my life, what I am saying to them, even you cannot hear more distinctly than they, but they lack the power to reply. Then he commanded that they should be buried in the well of Badr.²⁵

There are numerous other indications available in the hadith which support the same or similar ideas of the survival of the spirits in the graves. For example, one authoritative hadith reports that the Prophet was walking by a cemetery and upon hearing dreadful voices

²³ In contrast to the Qur'anic verses highlighted in this section, which mention the conscious survival of souls after death directly, a number of inferences are commonly made from other Qur'anic passages (48:29; 6:93; 8:52) to support the conscious life of the grave. These verses are related to the punishment of the grave (*'adhab al-qabr*) and are discussed when we come to that section of the present chapter.

²⁴ Muslim, *Sahih*, KJ, no. 6863.

²⁵ Muslim, *Sahih*, KJ, no. 6869.

informed his disciples that "the Jews are being punished in their graves."²⁶ On another occasion the Prophet was walking with his companions near the graveyards of Medina when, upon hearing voices of people being tortured, explained that they were being tortured for spilling drops of urine on themselves and for spreading enmity between friends.²⁷

For al-Ghazali, such hadith texts establish "the survival of the spirits of the damned, and of their intelligence and knowledge,"²⁸ just as the earlier Qur'anic verse had done for the blessed martyrs who are in God's care immediately after they die. Similarly, for modern students of Islamic texts, illiterate oral learners attending sermons at funerals, and for the 'ulama' of Rajshahi, the reality of the conscious life in the grave is not in question at all. As Maulana Karim, a hadith expert at Al-Jamiyya al-Islamiyya Madrasa in Rajshahi affirms, "The dead person is now in a 'waiting room.' We call this world of the grave '*alome barzakh*'. We call it the 'world of the grave', the 'life of the grave'."²⁹

4.4 Removal of the soul from the body

The actual point of death is described as coinciding with the removal of the soul from the body. No matter if death comes after a lengthy sickness or comes suddenly in an accident or heart attack, the time of one's *ajal* (life term) is fixed in advance by the foreknowledge of Allah.³⁰ It is said that a leaf with the individual's name written on it falls from a certain tree

²⁶ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, KJ, no. 457.

²⁷ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 4, no. 215. In one clear example of ancient hadith reports affecting daily life in the 21st century, male bathroom stalls in Bangladesh often have tissue boxes near at hand and men often carry tissue paper in their pockets in order to meticulously avoid letting any drop of urine come into contact with their bodies or clothing after urinating.

²⁸ Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Kitab dhikr al-mawt wa-ma ba'dahu*. Tr. by T.J. Winter. (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1989), 126.

²⁹ "সে এখন 'ওয়েটিং রুম' হয়ে গাচ্ছে। এই কবরের জগৎটাকে আমরা 'আলমে বারযাখ' বলি... 'কবরের জগৎ'... 'কবরের জীবন'" | Interview: Maulana Muhammad Rezaul Karim. 6 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

³⁰ Qur'an 16:61: "And if Allah were to impose blame on the people for their wrongdoing, He would not have left upon it [i.e., the earth] any creature, but He defers them for a specified term. And when their term has come, they will not remain behind an hour, nor will they precede [it]." See also Qur'an 6:2 for another affirmation of the individual's *ajal* being fixed in advance by Allah.

near God's throne, around forty days before the time of death.³¹ Thus, °Izra°il, the angel of death, knows when to prepare to take the soul of that individual on the appointed day and hour. And although the Qur°an is not explicit about the identity of the angel of death, in the traditions it is °Izra°il himself who comes to each individual to demand the soul, or to pierce the individual with his sword, which draws the soul from the body, as discussed below.

A struggle for the soul of the *mu°min* (true believer) is often initiated by Satan (*Iblis*) close to the moment of death (when the dying person appears unconscious or dead) and just before the angel of death comes to remove the soul. Satan comes to the bedside of the *mu°min* with a glass of water, since "it is said that the harshest state of the dead is thirst and a burning liver."³² Unable to detect the real identity of the visitor, the *mu°min* asks for a drink. Satan tempts the *mu°min* with one of several ruses, requesting that the *mu°min* say, "No one formed the universe" or alternately imploring him to "Say that the Messenger, peace be upon him, lied" or to "Say that °Isa is the son of Allah."³³ If the dying is one of the wretched who are destined for the Fire, he will answer whatever is necessary to quench his thirst. "So he leaves the world a *kafir*."³⁴ If on the other hand, he is among those destined for happiness, he will refuse to answer these temptations and meditate on his salvation which is yet to come.

³¹ "আল্লাহ তাআ°লার আরশের নীচে একটি বৃহৎ বৃক্ষ রয়েছে। সে বৃক্ষে প্রাণীর সংখ্যানুপাতে পাতা রয়েছে। কারো মৃত্যুর চল্লিশ দিন পূর্বে তার নামাঙ্কিত পাতাটি হযরত আযরাঈল (আঃ)-এর বুকের উপর খসে পড়ে। তিনি তার সহযোগীদেরকে নির্দিষ্ট দিনে উক্ত ব্যক্তির প্রাণ সংহারের নির্দেশ দেন। মৃত্যুর চল্লিশ দিন পূর্বেই উক্ত ব্যক্তি নভোমন্ডলে মৃত হিসাবে ঘোষিত হয়।" ("Below the throne of God most High is a great tree. There are leaves on that tree according to the number of creatures. Forty days before a person's death, the leaf with his or her name on it falls from the tree to rest on the breast of Hazrat Azra°il. He commands his associates to take the soul of that particular person on the appointed day. In fact, forty days prior to death, a given person is declared 'dead' in the heavenly spheres.") Al-Qadi, *Daqa°iq al-akhbar* (trans. Habibullah Khan), 20.

³² Al-Qadi, *Daqa°iq al-akhbar* (Tr. by °A°isha °Abd al-Rahman). 39-40.

³³ The Bengali translator of *Daqa°iq al-akhbar* has embellished Satan's temptations somewhat colourfully: "শয়তান বলে – যদি তুমি বলতে পার আল্লাহর নবী-রাসূলগণ আসত্য, তারা যা কিছু প্রচার করেছিলেন তা সবই মিথ্যা, তবেই আমি তোমাকে পানি পান করতে পারি।" ("Satan says – If you can say that God's prophets and messengers are all untrue, that what they preached was all lies, then I may give you water to drink") and "শয়তান বলল- যদি একথা বলতে পার যে, ঈসা (আঃ) আল্লাহর পুত্র, তবেই আমি তোমাকে পানি পান করাব।" ("Satan says – If you just say this phrase – Isa is God's son – then I will give you water to drink") and "তুমি অন্তত বল 'লা ইলা-হা'" ("If you only say, *la ilaha...*"). See al-Qadi, *Daqa°iq al-akhbar* (trans. Habibullah Khan), 27-28.

³⁴ Al-Qadi, *Daqa°iq al-akhbar* (Tr. by °A°isha °Abd al-Rahman), 39.

At the time when the angel °Izra°il begins his attempt to extract the person's soul³⁵ from the body, the very members of the dead man's body block the attempt and speak up in his defence. °Izra°il first comes to the mouth to take the *ruh*, but the mouth miraculously speaks up: "O Messenger of Death! Advance no further! Because by me this slave engaged in Allah's *dhikr* continuously! Therefore your desire [for his soul] shall not be fulfilled!"³⁶ A hapless °Izra°il reports the situation to God, who advises him to "take it from another way."³⁷ °Izra°il returns to earth and tries removing the soul from the hand, but the hand itself replies that with it the *mu°min* was generous to the poor and valiant in battle during life: "There is no way for you. He did much *sadaqa* with me and touched the heads of orphans and wrote with the pen and struck the necks of *kafirun* with the sword."³⁸ The foot replies that he cannot take the soul because with the feet the *mu°min* walked to prayer, to °*ids*, and sessions of learning. The ear will not cooperate because through it the *mu°min* heard the *adhan*, the Qur°an and *dhikr*. The eyes reply in similar terms. Finally Allah writes his name on °Izra°il's palm as a sign to the soul of the *mu°min*, who seeing it, comes out of his body willingly.³⁹

In the Qur°an the word for that which remains after the individual is separated from his or her body is the *nafs*⁴⁰ (plural *anfus*), most often translated into English as 'soul'. However, later sources in the Hadith and theological manuals usually favour the Arabic *ruh* for that which survives the death process. *Ruh* is normally translated as 'spirit' in English. Al-

³⁵ The soul in medieval hadith manuals is conceptualised as a subtle physical substance held within the body. This topic is treated on the next page.

³⁶ "ওহে মৃত্যুদূত! আর আগায়ো না! কারণ আমাকে দিয়ে এ বান্দা প্রতিনিয়ত আল্লাহর যিকির করেছে। কাজেই তোমার বাসনা পূর্ণ হবে না," al-Qadi, *Daqa°iq al-akhbar* (trans. Habibullah Khan), 24. ("O messenger of death! Do not advance! With me this servant of God chanted *zikr* constantly. Therefore your desire will not be granted!")

³⁷ Al-Qadi, *Daqa°iq al-akhbar* (Tr. by °A°isha °Abd al-Rahman), 37.

³⁸ *ibid.*, 37.

³⁹ Al-Qadi, *Daqa°iq al-akhbar* (trans. Habibullah Khan), 24. Al-Ghazali, *Dhikr al-mawt*, 134, contains a very similar story about the parts of the body defending the deceased, who is already laid in his tomb, from the approach of the Angels of Chastisement. In this case, the members of the body use similar arguments to defend the *mu°min* from any punishment in the grave, rather than having one's soul removed from the body. This second instance of the limbs defending the deceased also occurs in al-Qadi, *Daqa°iq al-akhbar* (trans. Habibullah Khan), 47.

⁴⁰ See Qur°an 39:42, which relates that God keeps the *anfus* of those who die, whereas he returns the *anfus* to those who awake from daily sleep.

Ghazali and most classical writers mix these two terms interchangeably and do not attempt a separation of meanings for them. Although some ‘ulama’ have insisted on emphasizing a distinction in these terms, a majority of classical scholars and modern interpreters have rejected the need for doing so.⁴¹ For the purposes of this study it is most relevant to note that the medieval eschatological manuals, including the ones by al-Ghazali being analyzed here, place both the body and the soul in the grave during the period immediately following death (see below). Contemporary Bangladeshi ‘ulama’ in Bangladesh also support this cosmological position.

In Islamic thought, the *ruh* is a subtle physical substance. Al-Ghazali places the seat of the *ruh* in the interior of the heart organ. But during a person’s earthly life, the *ruh* extends physically from the heart through the veins and vessels to the furthest extremity of limb, skin and even the hairs of the head. It is the *ruh* inside the body which gives a human being the capacity for feeling pain,⁴² which is an important concept related to the pain felt in the death process itself, and that which is inflicted on the disembodied spirit after death. Al-Qadi goes so far as to state that the punishment of the grave is the final proof that the *ruh* is a physical substance, or how else could the angels inflict pain on it?⁴³

Although the Qur’an provides very little in the way of detail as to what happens at the moment of death, two similar verses provide important information from which to build an interpretation of the experience of the individual at death:

“And if you could but see when the angels take the souls of those who disbelieved...they are striking their faces and their backs and [saying], “Taste the punishment of the Burning Fire.”” [8:50]

⁴¹ “...many writers-theologians as well as traditionists have failed to distinguish between the terms *nafs* and *rūh*, soul and spirit, either interchanging them or using one to the exclusion of the other. This tendency also characterises much of contemporary analysis. The question of how to name and understand the nature of human personality is sufficiently complex that many contemporary writers assert outright that they are very reluctant to deal with it.” Smith and Haddad, *Islamic Understanding*, 18.

⁴² Al-Ghazali, *Dhikr al-mawt*, 37-38.

⁴³ Al-Qadi, *Daqa’iq al-akhbar* (tr. by ‘A’isha ‘Abd al-Rahman), 65.

“And if you could but see when the wrongdoers are in the overwhelming pangs of death while the angels extend their hands, [saying], “Discharge your souls! Today you will be awarded the punishment of [extreme] humiliations for what you used to say against Allah other than the truth and [that] you were, toward His verses, being arrogant.”” [6:93, second half]

While neither *‘Izra’*il nor the angel of death are mentioned anywhere in the Qur’an, it is often inferred from the verses above that in the Qur’anic revelation angels are involved in the process of removing the soul from the body, which is equivalent to the moment of death. Multitudes of traditions make it clear that the soul of the individual is reluctant to give itself up and be separated from the body, as noted previously. This struggle is happening both at the moment of death, and in the hour or so after the person has (seemingly) died, when the soul is being confronted. The angel, or angels, of death extend their hands, strike the dead on the face and the backside and say, “Discharge your souls!”

In some accounts, *‘Izra’*il is forced to plunge his sword, which has been dipped in the sea of death, into the heart of the dead person, the power of this sword acting as an agent to fully deaden the body and force the soul up and out. The angel is then described as holding the soul of the individual in his hand, which is the size of a bee, yet in the shape of a human (see below). It quivers in his hand like quicksilver. Let us examine two passages from al-Ghazali’s *Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din* in this regard:

And when his destiny approaches, that is, his earthly death, then the four angels descend to him: the angel who pulls the soul from his right foot, the angel who pulls it from the left foot, and the angel who pulls it from his right hand, and the angel who pulls it from his left hand. Some of the circumstances of the *Malakūti*⁴⁴ world may be unveiled to the dying person before he expires so that he sees those angels, not the way they actually appear in their own world, but according to the extent of his understanding. If his tongue is unhampered he may tell about their existence or the existence of others like him. Perhaps he talks to himself about what he saw, and one thinks that it is due to the workings of Satan on him. Then he is silent so that his

⁴⁴ The *‘alam al-malakut*, or the ‘world of sovereignty’, represents the invisible realm of spiritual realities, and includes the realm of human conscious thought life, the angels, and certain eschatological fixtures, such as the scales of judgment. This is contrasted in Al-Ghazali’s writings with the *‘alam al-mulk*, the world of royal power, or the visible world of sensual perceptions; and the *‘alam al-jabarut*, the world of archetypal images and the impressionable and imaginative aspects of the human soul. For a discussion of these terms in relation to medieval Muslim philosophy, see Tj. de Boer and L. Gardet, *‘Ālam*, EI², vol. I, 349.

tongue is tied, while they pull the soul from the tips of his fingers. The good soul slips out like the jetting of water from a water-skin, but the profligate's spirit [*ruh*] squeaks out like a skewer from wet wool.⁴⁵

Another passage from al-Ghazali provides additional information:

At this point, the conditions of the dead differ. Some of them are stabbed at that time by an angel with a poisoned sword dipped in a poison of fire. The soul flees, escaping in a stream, and when the angel takes it in his hand it shudders like quicksilver. It is only the size of a bee, but with human characteristics. Then the guardians of hell take it away... For some of the dead, the soul is pulled out slowly and gradually to the point where it is confined in the windpipe. But only a small part of it remains in the windpipe, connected to the heart, so at this time the angel pierces it with that sword already described. The soul does not finally separate from the heart until it has been pierced.⁴⁶

In Islamic thought death is a very painful process in general.⁴⁷ Firstly, the body does not lose its ability to feel at the moment of death – this power remains for some time afterward. As such, some traditions instruct the washers and those who wrap the body in the *kafan* to take extreme care that the water is not too hot or cold, and not to shake the body unnecessarily.⁴⁸ A second reason for the extreme care needed at this time is that the body has been made excessively tender by the rending of the soul from the body. The *ruh* is not just extracted from the heart – it must be pulled from every vein and passage, skin and hair of the

⁴⁵ Al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira*, 21-22.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁷ We already noted a key Qur^{anic} verse to this effect, 6:93, which mentions the "overwhelming pangs of death." Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 59, no. 730, contains a reference to one of the dying statements of the Prophet Muhammad, "Death has its agonies." In local Bangladeshi tradition, this has taken on a more ominous tone, as this statement of the Prophet is normally translated, "মৃত্যুর যন্ত্রণা প্রচণ্ড কষ্টকর!", that is to say, "The pain of death is excruciatingly difficult!" It is possible that this version of the belief finds its local provenance in the version of hadith given in the widely used *Bihishti Zewar*, the encyclopaedic manual popular among lay persons and ^{ulama}: "মৃত্যুর সময় রোগীর বড়ই কষ্ট হয়।" ("At the time of death, the sick person endures great pain."). See Maulana Ashraf ^{Ali} Thanawi, *Bihishti Zewar*, 209.

⁴⁸ "Then his *ruh* cries out when it sees him naked with a voice that all creatures except jinn and men will hear, saying: "O Ghasil! [washer] By Allah, I ask you to remove his clothes with gentleness! For I have just rested from the pull of the Angel of Death!" When the water strikes him, it shouts: "O Ghasil! By Allah, do not make your water hot or cold on him, for my body is burnt by the removal of the *ruh*." When they wash him, the *ruh* says: "By Allah, O Ghasil! Do not touch me with force, for my body is wounded by the departure of the *ruh*!" See al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar* (Tr. by ^Aisha ^{Abd} al-Rahman), 43-44.

body. One more section from al-Ghazali will do to underline the unfathomable pain that has been experienced by the recently dead:

“So do not ask concerning a frame from which every artery is being pulled: were one of them alone to be pulled his agony would be intense, so how must it be when the percipient spirit itself is being pulled, and not just from one artery, but from them all?...Then, one by one, his extremities begin to die. First his feet grow cold, and then his shins and thighs, each limb suffering agony after agony, and misery after misery, until his spirit reaches his throat. At this point he gazes out for the last time at the world and its people, and the gate of repentance is closed, and he is overwhelmed by sorrow and contrition.”⁴⁹

Perhaps only one other passage from the Qur’an provides any clear detail of this moment for the dying person. Qur’an 56:81-87 provides the scriptural basis for the idea that the soul does come up to the throat of the dying person before it is removed by the angel of death. However, as we already observed above, various traditions state that the angel of death takes souls using a variety of means, such as piercing the hearts of stubborn people (those whose souls do not want to come out) with his sword, or especially, of drawing the soul out through the extremities of the fingers and toes. Qur’an 56:81-87 is produced here:

Then is it to this statement that you are indifferent
And make [the thanks for] your provision that you deny (the Provider)?
Then why, when it [i.e. the soul at death] reaches the throat
And you are at that time looking on –
And We are nearer to him than you, but you do not see –
Then why do you not, if you are not to be recompensed,
Bring it back if you should be truthful?

If the moment of death is excruciatingly painful physically, it is also painful emotionally. First, the pain of separation from one’s family and friends (until the resurrection) and the leaving of all of one’s property, house and other good things is grievous to the spirit. But more importantly, the deceitful veil of life’s comforts, which prevented the

⁴⁹ Al-Ghazali, *Dhikr al-mawt*, 39.

person in life from focusing on the meditation of God, is violently removed through death, and the soul sees with cold clarity the truth of how it spent its time on earth following after temporal pleasures and ignoring the means of gaining eternal merit. Al-Ghazali is relentless in his emphasis of this theme throughout his *Ihya' ʿulum al-din*.⁵⁰

In Islamic tradition, the way a person dies can indeed prefigure the state of their soul before God. Al-Ghazali provides what is a well-known characterization of this prefiguring at the moment of death:

When you look at the dying person and his mouth waters, his lips contract, his face turns black and his eyes become bluish, then know that he is miserable. The reality of his wretchedness in the Hereafter has been unveiled to him. And when you see the dying person and his mouth is hollow as if he were laughing, his face beaming, his eyes cast down, then know that he has been told the good news of the joy that will come to him in the Hereafter; the reality of his blessedness has been revealed to him.⁵¹

A prefiguring of the future judgment of the quality of the individual's life is equally seen in the treatment he or she receives at the hands of ʿIzraʿil, and the ease or difficulty of the 'giving up' of one's soul to the angel. Indeed, even the appearance of the angel of death changes, depending on the nature of the person being confronted – for the blessed, his appearance is made as pleasant as possible, while for the damned, his appearance is horrendously frightful.⁵² The position taken by al-Ghazali, as noted previously, is that “the future sorrow or happiness of the dead man manifests itself immediately upon death without any delay whatsoever.”⁵³ Thus, the prefigured damned person struggles immensely to prevent

⁵⁰ See Al-Ghazali, *Dhikr al-mawt*, 7-19, 121-129.

⁵¹ Al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira*, 25.

⁵² Frightful descriptions of the appearance of ʿIzraʿil to the recently dead is a favourite topic of local imams in Rajshahi. The purpose of these and other fear-inspiring predictions seems clearly aimed at inspiring present obedience and conformity to Islam. Al-Qadi, *Daqaʿiq al-akhbar* (Tr. by ʿAʿisha ʿAbd al-Rahman), 29-32, for example, depicts the angel of death as having 70,000 feet and 4,000 wings, and having a body filled with eyes and tongues. He is so large that the whole earth is as a "table placed before a man so that he might eat what he likes of it," and if the waters of all the seas were poured upon his head, not a drop of water would fall on the earth. When God unveiled him and allowed the other angels to view him just once, the other angels fell down unconscious for one thousand years.

⁵³ Al-Ghazali, *Dhikr al-mawt*, 127.

his or her soul from separating from the body, whereas the prefigured righteous spirit passes out of its body with ease:

When the angel seizes the happy soul, two angels with beautiful faces, wearing lovely clothes and with sweet-smelling fragrance, take it and wrap it in silk taken from the silk of the Garden. The soul is the size of a bee, with human characteristics, and has not lost its intelligence or its knowledge acquired in this world. They ascend with it in the air...⁵⁴

Once the dead person is buried, there is an interrogation by two special angels, and then a regime of either punishment or peaceful waiting is determined for a specified period in the grave, which will be mentioned shortly. It is noteworthy that the outcome of the future Hour is prefigured in this waiting arrangement as well. A hadith from al-Bukhari makes this clear:

“Narrated °Abdullah bin °Umar : Allah's Apostle said, "When anyone of you dies, he is shown his place both in the morning and in the evening. If he is one of the people of Paradise; he is shown his place in it, and if he is from the people of the Hell-Fire; he is shown his place there-in. Then it is said to him, "This is your place till Allah resurrect you on the Day of Resurrection.”⁵⁵

As al-Ghazali soberly remarks, “It is not difficult to see what states of torment and bliss would arise merely from seeing one’s seat.”⁵⁶

4.5 The soul’s journey to the seven heavens and back to the body

Once the angel has extracted the soul from the body and has it in his hand, then commences what is a very brief but significant journey, according to the eschatological manuals. The angel Gabriel (Jibril), in the case of those who have "heavy"⁵⁷ good works, takes the soul, which has been wrapped in silks from Paradise,⁵⁸ up through each of the seven

⁵⁴ Al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira*, 25-26.

⁵⁵ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, KJ, no. 461.

⁵⁶ Al-Ghazali, *Dhikr al-mawt*, 127.

⁵⁷ In Bangladeshi conversation and religious literature the heavenly scales, the *mizan*, are never far from mind. See Qur’an 101:6-11; 21:47; 99:78.

⁵⁸ Al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira*, 25; Al-Qadi, *Daqa’iq al-akhbar* (Tr. by °A’isha °Abd al-Rahman), 52; Al-Qadi, *Daqa’iq al-akhbar* (trans. Habibullah Khan), 41.

heavens on a journey to meet with God. Taking the soul, he knocks at the gate of each of seven levels, and the gates are opened. The soul passes great numbers of souls from past and present generations along the way, which look like “swarms of locusts”⁵⁹ (due to being the size of bees). At every level the righteous person hears praises from the gatekeeper and other dwellers of Paradise for his good behaviour and keeping of prayer, fasting and *zakat* obligations during life. Finally, the soul approaches the pavilions of the Almighty, who interrogates the soul, pardons it, and sends it back to rest near its now dead body, with the promise of a good resurrection. The soul then hurries back and finds that they are only getting to the washing of the body, so it sits near the head and looks on. At some point, the soul attaches itself to the outside of the body, under the shroud and near the heart,⁶⁰ to await the next ordeal, that of the interrogation in the grave. From this vantage point, the soul is also able to speak out as it is taken in procession from the house to the grave site, either urging the bearers to hurry it on to its reward, or begging them to go slowly and delay the inevitable.⁶¹

Al-Ghazali narrates:

When the dead person has been wrapped in his winding-clothes, his soul becomes attached to the chest on the outside, howling and crying and saying, “Hurry with me to whatever mercy you are taking me, if indeed you know what it is!” And if it has been informed of its misfortune, it says, “Slowly, slowly to whatever punishment you are taking me, if in fact you know what it is!” For that reason the Messenger of God did not allow a funeral procession to pass without standing as it went by.⁶²

For the *kafirun* (blasphemers, unbelievers), a somewhat different and abortive journey happens at this time. Having been wrapped in a rancid and presumably scratchy “hair shirt,”⁶³ the soul is taken in the hand of “*Daqya‘il*,”⁶⁴ the repulsive angel in charge of the guardians of

⁵⁹ Al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira*, 26.

⁶⁰ Al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira*, 32: “Thus it has been related on the authority of more than one pious person that [the Prophet] ordered them to call out over the bier, “Where is *Fulān*?” Where is the spirit [*al-rūh*]?” And the shroud trembled spontaneously two or three times.”

⁶¹ The speaking which the soul does at this time is heard by all beings except humans, according to tradition. See al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, KJ, no. 402; no. 462; no. 400.

⁶² Al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira*, 32.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 29 (see also footnote 34, p. 95).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

hell, to attempt entry at the gate of the first sphere of Paradise. The keeper of the gate asks the angel, “Who is with you?” to which *Daqya‘il* responds by using the least beautiful and most ignominious names which the individual may have had on the earth. The response from the gate is, “You are not welcome!”⁶⁵

When the angel hears this, he is repulsed and flings the soul away from him, and the wind drops the soul in “a far distant place.”⁶⁶ This knowledge, says al-Ghazali, accords with the Qur’anic verse, “And he who associates [anything] with Allah – it is as though he had fallen from the sky and was snatched by the birds or the wind carried him down into a remote place.” (22:31b). And when the soul lands, the guardians of Hell come and take it to *Sijjin*, “a huge stone to which are brought immoral spirits.”⁶⁷ Nevertheless, this soul somehow makes it back to the side of its body with great dispatch, for it must be present for all of the horrible interrogations and punishments reserved for the unfortunate in the *‘adhab al-qabr*.

⁶⁵ Al-Qadi, *Daqa‘iq al-akhbar* (trans. Habibullah Khan), 42, contains an alternate narrative: “কাফেরের রুহ নিয়ে উর্ধ্বলোকে আরহণ করা মাত্রই আসমানের সকল দরজা বন্ধ হয়ে যায়। আর আল্লাহ তাআ‘আলার পক্ষ থেকে ঘোষণা করা হয়- “ওহে ফেরেশতাগণ! এ অবিশ্বাসীর আত্মাকে কবরের ভিতর পুঁতে রাখ।” (“When the spirit of the *kafer* is taken up to the heavens, immediately all the doors of Paradise slam shut. And it is announced by Allah-ta‘alla – O Angels! Bury the soul of this unbeliever in the grave!”).

⁶⁶ Al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira*, 30.

⁶⁷ Al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira*, 30. *Sijjin* is one of the “mysterious words” of the Qur’an, with perhaps a dozen interpretations put forward by scholars for its meaning. V. Vacca (*Sidjdjīn*, EI², vol. IX, 538) groups the various explanations under 1) the seventh level of Hell, or a rock or well in Hell, or even the home of *Iblis*; 2) the record of deeds for all humankind. Some lexicographers have perhaps erroneously connected the term with the root *s-dj-n* (prison), and this has influenced other interpreters of this term/passage. (See also Smith and Haddad, *Islamic Understanding*, 96). Bangladeshi ‘ulama’ use the term to denote Hell generally (*dojokh* / দজখ). In local discourses, the opposite term is *‘Illiyin*, which is a book in which the deeds of the righteous are written, but which is also used for the highest level of Paradise (Cf. al-Ḥakim al-Tirmidhi, *Nawadir al-uṣul fi ma‘rifat aḥadith al-Rasul*. Istanbul, 1293 AH, Qtd. in Halevi, 273). *Sijjin* is mentioned in the Qur’an once, in 83:7-8, “No! Indeed, the record of the wicked is in *sijjeen*. And what can make you know what is *sijjeen*?”



7. Funeral procession. Arriving at the *idgah* field attached to a cemetery in Rajshahi. Only men attend the procession, *janaza* prayers and burial of this female community member.

4.6 The angel Ruman

Immediately after the soul returns from its brief heavenly journey, some medieval eschatological manuals contain a section which deals with "the angel who enters the grave before Munkar and Nakir."⁶⁸ Unlike many of the angel actors in the narratives of the *barzakh*, this angel's name is known and introduced forthrightly. Ruman, whose face is as bright as the sun,⁶⁹ enters the grave, wakens the dead and demands that he write out his *amol-nama*⁷⁰ or record of good and bad deeds. The deceased protests that he has no paper, pen and ink, but Ruman demands that he use his finger for a pen and his saliva for ink. For a writing

⁶⁸ Al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar* (trans. Habibullah Khan), 56.

⁶⁹ Al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar* (trans. Habibullah Khan), 46: "সূর্যের ন্যায় দীপ্তিময় রুমান নামীয় ফেরেশতা তাদের পূর্বে কবরে এসে মৃত ব্যক্তিকে জাগ্রত করবেন এবং তার পাপ পুণ্য লিপিবদ্ধ করতে বলবেন।" ("An angel named Ruman, who is as bright as the sun, will come into the grave before them and awaken the dead person and instruct the dead to write his or her sins and righteous acts.")

⁷⁰ *Amol* is the Bengali pronunciation of the Arabic *amal* (works; actions), and *nama* (book) is from Persian.

surface, he tears off an end of the deceased's shroud. When the dead comes to his misdeeds and hesitates to write, he is struck by the angel until he agrees to write it all out. Then he is commanded to roll up the *amol-nama* and to fasten it using one of his fingernails. This done, Ruman snatches the document from the soul and hangs it around his neck. This episode is clearly connected in the traditional treatises to the Qur^ānic verse 17:13-14, where God says:

Every man's fate We have fastened on his own neck: On the Day of Judgment We shall bring out for him a scroll, which he will see spread open. (It will be said to him:) "Read thine (own) record: Sufficient is thy soul this day to make out an account against thee."⁷¹

Muslims in Rajshahi, both men and women, view the *amol-nama* as a constant referent in their spiritual quest for success in the afterlife. What one does on a daily basis will eventually be written in each individual's *amol-nama*. This *amol-nama* will be fastened around one's neck as in the narrative just mentioned, to hang there until the day of resurrection, when God will demand that the soul read it out before him. This 'record of deeds' which the person has earned will be 'sufficient' in itself to judge the quality of the individual's life. It is also this *amol-nama* to which *neki*⁷² (good deeds) are added when one recites meritorious passages and *dowas* at auspicious times, and from this *amol-nama* bad deeds can be erased through righteous actions as well.⁷³ Finally, an individual's loved ones can even bring to bear on the *amol-nama* of the deceased by the good deeds done in his or her name after death, which is a central theme of the next chapter of this study. In general, it

⁷¹ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, ed. *The Holy Qur^ān: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Elmhurst, New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur^ān, Inc., 2001).

⁷² *Neki* (নেকি) is a commonly used synonym for *so'ab* (merit) in Bengali, derived from the Persian *nek* (pure, upright, excellent). Like *so'ab*, *neki* can be amassed and accounted for with mathematical sums.

⁷³ A hadith from al-Bukhari provides an example of how a person can add and/or subtract specific sums of *neki/so'ab* to one's *amol-nama* during life: "Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "The congregational prayer of anyone amongst you is more than twenty (five or twenty seven) times in reward than his prayer in the market or in his house, for if he performs ablution completely and then goes to the mosque with the sole intention of performing the prayer, and nothing urges him to proceed to the mosque except the prayer, then, on every step which he takes towards the mosque, he will be raised one degree or one of his sins will be forgiven. The angels will keep on asking Allah's forgiveness and blessings for everyone of you so long as he keeps sitting at his praying place. The angels will say, 'O Allah, bless him! O Allah, be merciful to him!' as long as he does not do hadith or a thing which gives trouble to the other." The Prophet further said, "One is regarded in prayer so long as one is waiting for the prayer" (al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 34, no. 330).

should be noted that the *amol-nama* is a constant topic of discussion among lay Muslims of Rajshahi and local ‘ulama’.

4.7 Interrogation by Munkar and Nakir

The questioning of the soul in the grave by the two angels and the subject of the punishments of the grave, which we address after this, are the most well-known and most commonly attested events to transpire in the grave, both in popular belief and also according to the *sahih* hadith collections. Although the names of the angels, Munkar and Nakir, only appear once in the ‘canonical’ hadith⁷⁴ and are totally absent in the Qur’an, information about their activities is quite prominent in the early textual sources.

As with each of the preceding topics related to the soul after death, one gets the clear impression from the various texts that the primary objective of these fearsome narratives is didactic rather than descriptive. This is certainly the case when we consider that the various accounts in the eschatological manuals contain differences in the order of events to take place after death. The emphasis is almost always on the need to warn individuals who still have some time left to do something about their eternal future while they still can.⁷⁵ Indeed, many *mutakallimun* and *muhaddithun* justify the use of weak hadith,⁷⁶ not least in al-Ghazali’s *Ihya’ ‘ulum al-din*, because it is deemed appropriate to use any means to accomplish good, in this case, to warn believers to exercise good works.

Because of the sheer popularity of the narrative of the two questioning angels, both in the hadith manuals and in popular piety today, it is necessary to mention the visible aspects of these beings: they are blue-black angels “who rend apart the earth with their fangs. They have

⁷⁴ Al-Tirmidhi, *Sunan*, KJ, no. 70. See EQ: "Adhab", "Munkar wa Nakir".

⁷⁵ Al-Ghazali, *Dhikr al-mawt*, 7: "Know that the heart of the man who is engrossed in this world and is given over to its vanities and harbours love for its appetites must certainly be neglectful of the remembrance of death." Al-Ghazali spends as much time in his *Kitab dhikr al-mawt* warning his readers to take the afterlife seriously as he does actually depicting the events of the *barzakh* and eschaton.

⁷⁶ See T.J. Winter, 'Introduction' in al-Ghazali, *Kitab dhikr al-mawt* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1989), xx, and especially footnote 67, xxix.

their hair down dragging the ground. Their voices are like cracking thunder, their eyes like flashing lighting and their breath like a violent wind. In the hand of each one of them is an iron rod so heavy that the inhabitants of heaven and earth together could not lift it. If the largest mountain were hit by it, it would be destroyed.”⁷⁷

While the medieval interpreters and writers have provided an array of elaborate details to the episode of the interview by Munkar and Nakir, the authoritative hadith from al-Bukhari and Muslim are fairly straightforward. Let us turn to one of several *sahih* hadith which recount the narrative of the questioning in the grave:

“Narrated Anas (AS): The Prophet(SA) said, “When a human being is laid in his grave and his companions return and he even hears their footsteps, two angels come to him and make him sit and ask him: What did you use to say about this man, Muḥammad (SA)? He will say: I testify that he is Allāh’s slave and His Apostle. Then it will be said to him, ‘Look at your place in the Hell Fire. Allāh has given you a place in Paradise instead of it.’” The Prophet (SA) added, “The dead person will see both his places. But a non-believer or a hypocrite will say to the angels, ‘I do not know, but I used to say what the people used to say!’ It will be said to him, ‘Neither did you know nor did you take the guidance (by reciting the Qur’an).’ Then he will be hit with an iron hammer between his two ears, and he will cry and that cry will be heard by whatever approaches him except human beings and jinns.”⁷⁸

The first thing to notice is that the angels require the dead person to sit up in his or her grave. As seen in the previous chapter, this is why the graves in Bangladesh are built with a few feet of room above the dead person – they must be able to sit up for the interrogation. Regarding the questions asked in the grave, there is some variation from place to place and in different textual sources to the questions which are asked. Sometimes, as in Shi’a traditions, the questions, “What is your *qibla*?” or “Who is your Imam?” are added to the narrative.⁷⁹ In

⁷⁷ Al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira*, 33; see also al-Ghazali, *Dhikr al-mawt*, 145; and al-Qadi, *Daqa’iq al-akhbar* (trans. Habibullah Khan), 47: “মৃত ব্যক্তিকে কবরে রাখার পর বীভৎস কদাকার রক্তমাভ চোখবিশিষ্ট ভয়াল দর্শন দুজন ফেরেশতা কবরে আগমন করবেন। তাদের গলার স্বর মেঘ গর্জনের ন্যায় এবং দৃষ্টিশক্তি এতই প্রকর যেন চোখের দৃষ্টিশক্তি হরণকারী বিজলী।”

⁷⁸ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, KJ, no. 422.

⁷⁹ Bess Allen Donaldson describes the Shi’i belief in Iran that Munkar and Nakir require the dead to answer the questions, ‘Who is your imam’ and also to recite the names of the twelve Shi’i imams in order. °Ali appears to help the believer through the ordeal. (*The wild rue*, 74). Some active Shi’i communities in the USA currently teach that the dead is asked the following six questions in the grave (in Arabic): Who is your Lord? What is your *din*? Who is your *nabi*? What is your *qibla*? Who are your imams? (all twelve imams are named by the dead) Did you die believing all these things? Interview: Sheikh Abdul Jalil. Personal interview. July 13, 2009, New

the government religious education manual for school children in Bangladesh, however, the authoritative Sunni script is followed.⁸⁰ Emphasis is placed on learning the answers in Arabic through rote memorization, even though Bangladeshis in general do not speak or understand Arabic:

Table 4.1 *Class five textbook – questions and answers in the grave*

	<u>Question</u> ⁸¹	<u>Answer</u>
1. English meaning.	1. Who is your Lord'?	1. My Lord is Allah.
Pronunciation (English).	<i>Man rabbuka?</i>	<i>Rabbi Allah.</i>
Pronunciation (Bengali).	মার রাব্বুকা ⁸²	রাব্বি আল্লাহ
Bengali Meaning.	তোমার রব কে?	আমার রব আল্লাহ
2. English meaning.	2. What is your 'din' (religion)?	2. My 'din' is Islam.
Pronunciation (English).	<i>Ma dinuka?</i>	<i>Dini al-Islam.</i>
Pronunciation (Bengali).	মা দীন কা	দীনী আল ইসলাম
Bengali Meaning.	তোমার দীন কি?	আমার দীন ইসলাম
3. English meaning.	3. Who is this man?	3. He is Allah's rasul.
Pronunciation (English).	<i>Man hadha al-rajulu?</i>	<i>Hadha rasul Allah.</i>
Pronunciation (Bengali).	মান হাযার রাজুলু	হাযা রাসূলুল্লাহ
Bengali Meaning.	এই ব্যক্তি কে?	ইনি আল্লাহর রাসূল

Many reports indicate that the righteous will be able to respond with the correct answers to the questions, regardless of their potential fear of the angels or their agitated state of mind, because of the fact that they are *mu'min* and destined for the Garden. In contrast,

Haven, CT, USA. Sheikh Jalil is a full-time cleric who officiates Muslim funerals in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area.

⁸⁰ *Islami Shikkha*, Class 5. National Education and Textbook Board, November, 2004, 17.

⁸¹ The sources in *sahih* hadith collections and medieval manuals are quite uniform in reporting these three questions in this form, with the appropriate answers also being given. See al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar* (Tr. by °A°isha °Abd al-Rahman), 51; Al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar* (trans. Habibullah Khan), 40, teaches the Arabic phrases in their Arabic and Bengali scripts, and then adds the meaning of each phrase in Bengali, much as I have done in the chart above. The national standardised religious textbooks for schools in Bangladesh contain identical instructions: *Islami Shikkha*, 17.

⁸² This Bengali textbook makes a few mistakes when transliterating the Arabic phrases into Bengali. Here 'man rabbuka?' is transliterated 'mar rabbuka?' Other small inconsistencies appear as well, which is surprising given the local emphasis on memorizing and preparing oneself to face the questions and answers in the grave accurately in Arabic.

those who did not truly follow Islam will not be able answer the questions properly, even if they practised the correct answers beforehand.

Based upon a number of authoritative hadith,⁸³ the medieval interpreters have established that the two angels Munkar and Nakir, subsequent to receiving correct answers, enlarge the space of the tomb and open a window upon the Garden for the faithful believer to enjoy the vision of his or her future abode, and to receive wafts of pleasant breezes from Paradise.⁸⁴ (Naturally, this occurs *after* the angels show the righteous a vision of the Fire, from which they have been saved). For the unfortunate soul, a window with a view into the Fire is opened in the grave so that he can see his future abode continually. This, as well as immediate punishment with blows from an iron rod or hammer and the squeezing of the tomb⁸⁵ around the person, signal the beginnings of the punishment of the grave – the *°adhab al-qabr*.

4.8 The trial of the grave

The *°adhab al-qabr* is so central to hadith and medieval reports (as well as contemporary sermons) about the period in the grave that it has become almost synonymous with cosmological belief in the interregnum *barzakh* period. But due to the sheer volume and diversity of reports about these events, it is a somewhat difficult task to describe with clarity even the general narratives provided by medieval compilers and local Bangladeshi *°ulama*³. Nevertheless, the torment of the grave, along with Munkar and Nakir's interrogation, remain the most prominent themes of the *barzakh* period, and have cemented in the minds of many generations of Muslims the tripartite cosmological construct introduced by the *muhaddithun*

⁸³ For example, see al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, KJ, no. 461.

⁸⁴ See al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, KJ, no. 456.

⁸⁵ Al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar* (Tr. by A'isha °Abd al-Rahman), 55: "So his grave presses him and his ribs are mixed together..."

of the second and third centuries AH⁸⁶, which included a *barzakh* period of conscious life in the grave in between the *dunya* and *akhira*. A recent example of the acceptance of this doctrine is observable in the contemporary thought of Bangladeshi theologian A. N. M. Mostafizur Rahman when he writes:

Of the stages of the Hereafter, the grave is the first stage. The one who achieves peace here will of a certainty obtain peace in the remaining stages. But should one encounter danger there, then the remaining stages will undoubtedly be all the more terrifying.⁸⁷

While not mentioning punishment in the grave directly, several verses in the Qur'an connect the day of a person's death with angels administering corporal punishment. These passages mention angels who strike the faces and backs of souls they have just removed or are presently removing from bodies: "Then how will it be when the angel takes them in death, striking their faces and their backs?" (47:29) Qur'an 6:50 not only mentions the same ideas as 47:29, but also seems to indicate that retribution for sin is to begin immediately: "Today you will be awarded the punishment of humiliation for what you used to say against Allah." It is perhaps easy to see how inferences were made from these Qur'anic passages to the development of the conscious and immediate stage of punishment in the grave.⁸⁸

Authoritative hadith of the Prophet Muhammad's words also add weight to the important nature of this belief in the early stages of hadith canonization. In hadith literature, the Prophet himself was certain of the punishment of the grave, feared it, and prayed to escape it regularly. This fact could not have escaped the notice of the nascent community, if indeed these hadith reports are from that earliest period and not a later retroactive statement

⁸⁶ Halevi (*Muhammad's Grave*, 215-216) describes the mutation of the concept of *barzakh* from a mere barrier separating the dead from the living in the Qur'anic worldview to a third cosmological entity occupying the time-space between *al-dunya* and *al-akhira* in post- Qur'anic thought.

⁸⁷ "কারণ কবর হল- আখেরাতের মঞ্জিলসমূহের মধ্যে প্রথম মঞ্জিল। এখানে যে শাস্তি লাভ করবে বাকী মঞ্জিলগুলো তার জন্য অবশ্যই শাস্তিময় হবে। আর যদি তা বিপদ শঙ্কুল হয় তবে বাকী মঞ্জিলসমূহ আরো অনেক ভয়াভহ হবে এতে কোন সন্দেহ নেই।" in A. N. M. Mostafizur Rahman, *Kobor ki poheli rat*, 14.

⁸⁸ For discussion of the historical development of these ideas in Islamic tradition, see EQ: *Munkar wa Nakir*.

of contemporary orthodoxy. A hadith from Muslim's collection provides interesting details of how the Prophet began this practice:

°A'isha reported: The Holy Prophet (may peace be upon him) entered my house when a Jewess was with me and she was saying: Do you know that you would be put to trial in the grave? The Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) trembled (on hearing this) and said: It is the Jews only who would be put to trial. °A'isha said: We passed some nights and then the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) said: Do you know that it has been revealed to me: "You would be put to trial in the grave"? °A'isha said: I heard the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) seeking refuge from the torment of the grave after this.⁸⁹

So great was the Prophet's belief in the torment of the grave (in hadith accounts) that °A'isha was able to say that he regularly sought protection from it in his prayers after this incident. In fact, the most authoritative collections of hadith, al-Bukhari and Muslim, contain many variations of how exactly the Prophet prayed to escape the °*adhab al-qabr*. Following is one of the many variants contained in al-Bukhari's collection of the wording which the Prophet used when seeking protection from this terror:

Narrated °A'isha: The Prophet used to say, 'O Allah! I seek refuge with You from the affliction of the Fire, the punishment of the Fire, the affliction of the grave, the punishment of the grave, and the evil of the affliction of poverty...O Allah! Cleanse my heart with the water of snow and hail, and cleanse my heart from all sins as a white garment is cleansed from filth, and let there be a far away distance between me and my sins as You made the East and West far away from each other. O Allah! I seek refuge with You from laziness, sins, and from being in debt."⁹⁰

We saw earlier how the angel Ruman first visits the grave to command the *ruh* to "write" its *amol-nama* down, and then fastens this to its neck. We also noted that the two angels Munkar and Nakir carry out the much discussed interrogation in the grave, after which they occasionally administer rewards or punishments of their own. After these two leave the premises, for the one who died in a state of obedience and whose good works are 'heavy' in

⁸⁹ Muslim, *Sahih*, bk. 4, no. 1212.

⁹⁰ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 75, no. 388. See also al-Ghazali, *Dhikr al-mawt*, 135; Similar reports of the Prophet's prayer for protection are repeated in al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 12, no. 795; bk. 52, no. 77; bk. 75, no. 375; bk. 75, no. 381; and in Muslim, *Sahih*, bk. 35, no. 6534.

the scales of judgment, there is a brief moment of stress when the deceased is shown his place in the Fire from which he has been saved.⁹¹ In addition, some accounts include an episode of the members of the body defending the person from the angels of punishment, just as they had previously done when the angel of death had come to remove the soul from the body.⁹²

Occasionally the dead person is praised and acclaimed by the very earth he or she is buried in for having led a righteous life.⁹³ The dead can also be visited by a beautiful personage, clothed in finery, and fragrant-smelling, who introduces himself (it is a male personage) as “your righteous deeds.” This personage declares to the fortunate dead, “Rejoice at the mercy which is come to you from your Lord and at gardens in which there is bliss everlasting.” He then provides the dead with a window on Paradise, other furnishings for the tomb (silks to wear and perfumes from Paradise⁹⁴), and according to many reports, expands the size of the tomb to make it roomy for the duration of the stay.⁹⁵ Finally the deceased is rewarded with a state of restful sleep which allows him to pass the time unconsciously until the day of resurrection.⁹⁶ An imam in Rajshahi assured me that for the truly righteous believer, it will feel just like that unintentional and luxurious nap that you slip into after a good rice meal on a hot afternoon, when you wake up a couple of hours later completely unaware of where the time has gone.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, KJ, no. 422: "Then it will be said to him, 'Look at your place in the Hell Fire. Allah has given you a place in Paradise instead of it.'"

⁹² Al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar* (Tr. by °A°isha °Abd al-Rahman), 58: The feet (walking to prayer), the right hand (almsgiving), and the head (prayer) all defend the corpse against the oncoming angels of torment. See also *Dhikr al-mawt*, 134.

⁹³ Al-Ghazali, *Dhikr al-mawt*, 133.

⁹⁴ Al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira*, 34.

⁹⁵ Al-Ghazali, *Dhikr al-mawt*, 136; Al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar* (Tr. by °A°isha °Abd al-Rahman), 53: "his grave will be widened as far as the eye can see." These actions are alternately performed by Munkar and Nakir in some variants.

⁹⁶ Along these lines, al-Ghazali's account of the *barzakh* suggests that the 'sleep' category is true for many of the dead: "Next are the ones whom God allows to slumber, so that they do not know what has happened to them until they are awakened with the first blast [of the trumpet]." See al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira*, 40-41. The prophets and saints (*awliya'*) have the choice of walking about the earth or passing the time in heaven (after a limited time in the grave).

⁹⁷ Interview: Hafez Kari Muhammad Nurul Islam. 26 May, 2006 / 24 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

After Munkar and Nakir depart from the unfortunate sinner's interrogation (having administered a few severe blows of their own⁹⁸), a personage who is ugly and sick-smelling arrives as the person's bad deeds personified. Then a punishing angel who is deaf, dumb and blind seizes the soul and thrashes him with an iron rod of titanic size. With each blow the dead person is unmade, turned to dust, or thrust many meters down into the earth, only to be restored again for the next blow. A parade of snakes, scorpions, fire and darkness, evil smells, flesh-hooks and emotional torment of regret wrack the poor dead sinners in the various reports. As has been mentioned already, these reports are used to great effect in the countryside of Bangladesh for the purpose of stimulating present accountability and righteous deeds, rather than to teach doctrines with theological precision.

4.9 The states of the grave

Will all the dead remain in their tombs until the judgment day, or are there any exceptions? For the unfortunates, is there an end to the punishment and a period of sleep or temporary unconsciousness? Where will the righteous and the damned wait? The answers to these queries, which make up the knowledge of the *ahwal al-qabr* (states of the grave) are as divergent and full of variety as the narratives of the punishment of the grave.

The term of the punishment of the grave is limited by many Islamic writers to seven days for the righteous, and up to forty days for sinners,⁹⁹ though for some exceptional sinners,

⁹⁸ Al-Ghazali, *Dhikr al-mawt*, 136-137. Al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira*, 36: "As for the profligate, the two angels said to him, "Who is your Lord?" and he replies, "I do not know." so they say to him, "You do not know and are not aware?" then they strike him with those iron rods until he is beaten down to the seventh earth. Then the earth casts him back into his grave, and they hit him seven times more."

⁹⁹ "The true believer is tested for only seven days, while the heretical unbeliever is tested for forty days in the grave." Al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar* (trans. Habibullah Khan), 55. See also al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar* (Tr. by °A°isha °Abd al-Rahman), 54. The *ruh* may stay around the grave for one month, then for one whole year to see who comes to pray for it and what good works are offered to its account. The forty-day *chollisha* ceremony in Bangladesh not only celebrates the end of funerary procedure for the dead (until the one-year anniversary ceremony, the *batshorik*), it also marks the (desired) departure of the roaming soul from the vicinity of the grave and of the living: "মৃত লোকের আত্মা দীর্ঘ একমাস পর্যন্ত ঘর -বাড়ী ঘুরে ফিরে দেখে, আত্মীয় স্বজন তার পরিত্যক্ত সম্পদ কিরূপে বিলি বন্টন করে নিচ্ছে এবং কিভাবে তার ঋণভার শোধ করছে। এক মাস গত হওয়ার পর রুহ এক বছর পর্যন্ত কবরের ভিতর ঘুরে ফিরে প্রত্যক্ষ করে, কে তার জন্য প্রার্থনা করছে।" ("The soul of the dead continues to roam around the homestead for a whole

it does seem that conscious torture can continue until the resurrection, as the hadith passage quoted on the next page demonstrates. There is the idea in some reports that even the righteous *mu'min* will suffer seven days of torment in the grave as a cleansing and purifying measure to pay for his sins, though many other reports describe how a person can avoid the torment of the grave by dying on Friday¹⁰⁰ or through reciting certain *dowas* faithfully. Fridays, which are also the day when Muslims are encouraged to visit the graves and pray for the souls of the departed, is a day of exemption from the torture of the grave, according to hadith reports.¹⁰¹ This same exemption holds true for other Islamic holidays, such as the two *'ids*, *'Ashura*, the Night of Power, the 15th of Shaban, the first Friday in Rajab, etc. On these occasions the dead come out of their graves to collect the good deeds and *dowas* done on their behalf by loved ones. Such deeds and prayers act as a kind of sustenance for the dead.¹⁰²

Another question arising in the minds of believers in the first three centuries of Islam relates to the location of the *ruh* for various types of individual Muslims, after the trials of the grave have been completed. Hadith reports specify that some of the dead will remain in their tombs until the judgment day. Some will be told to sleep "like a bridegroom" until the resurrection, while severe offenders endure constant conscious punishment, in some cases by dogs or pigs who are their bad works incarnate.¹⁰³ Other traditions mention the dead roaming the earth after their bodies sufficiently decompose.¹⁰⁴ The more optimistic narratives promise that the righteous will be preserved in vessels attached to God's throne, in the crops of green

month to see how the survivors and family are giving [to the poor] of the wealth that was left behind, and also whether and how they are repaying the debts of the deceased. After one month of roaming, the soul goes back and forth (?) one whole year inside the grave to observe *who* is praying for him or her.") Al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar* (trans. Habibullah Khan), 55.

¹⁰⁰ Al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar* (trans. Habibullah Khan), 44: "যারা শুক্রবার দিন অথবা রাতে ইস্তিকাল করে, আল্লাহ তাআলা তাদেরকে কবর আযাব থেকে বহুলাংশে নাজাত দিবেন।" ("Those who die on Friday or during the night on Friday, God will abundantly save them from the torture of the grave.")

¹⁰¹ See EQ: *munkar wa nakir*.

¹⁰² See al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar* (Tr. by *'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman*), 63; Al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar* (trans. Habibullah Khan), 56.

¹⁰³ Al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira*, 36.

¹⁰⁴ Al-Ghazali, *Dhikr al-mawt*, 131. *'Abd al-Rahman* (trans.), *The Islamic Book*, 62.

birds sitting in trees in the Garden¹⁰⁵, or else sheltered in the horn of Israfil, only to fly out of the horn to return to their re-formed bodies when it is blown on the Day of Resurrection.

¹⁰⁶Still other reports have the souls of the unrighteous dead congregating in a well, known as ‘Barhut,’ in the Hadramaut, while the souls of the righteous gather in the well of Zamzam at Mecca, or in still other places. Al-Ghazali presents an elaborate description of levels of punishment and states of bliss in the tomb, which are directly related to the person’s attainments and function in life (scholar, martyr, prophet).¹⁰⁷

A hadith from al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi, mentioned by al-Ghazali in his *Ihya’ ʿulum al-din*, will serve to demonstrate the type of imaginative variety and endless detail which must be faced when trying to consolidate a narrative from hundreds of such reports:

Said Abū Hurayra, ‘The Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace) has said, “The believer in his grave is in a verdant garden. For his sake his tomb is widened by seventy cubits, and he shines with light until he becomes as the full moon. Know you in what regard [the text] *His shall be a miserable life*¹⁰⁸ was revealed?” And [his Companions] said, “God and His Emissary know best.” “The unbeliever’s punishment in his grave,” he said. “Ninety-nine dragons [*tinnīn*] are let loose against him. Do you know what a dragon is? It is formed of ninety-nine serpents each of which has seven heads, which maul and savage him, and blow into his body until the Day of Resurrection.”¹⁰⁹

The states of various souls in their graves, as we have seen, represent a dichotomous polarization of moral character with accompanying, symbolic retribution: a window on the Fire for the evil, and a window which allows breezes from Paradise for the good *arwah*. For the sinners the tomb is kept dark, and may be accompanied by fire, whereas the righteous enjoy light of various forms. The earth of the unfortunate’s grave squeezes the corpse until its

¹⁰⁵ Al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira*, 40; Alternately, the souls are in the beaks of the green birds of Paradise. See al-Qadi, *Daqa’iq al-akhbar* (Tr. by ʿAʿisha ʿAbd al-Rahman), 64; Al-Qadi, *Daqa’iq al-akhbar* (trans. Habibullah Khan), 58.

¹⁰⁶ For an account of medieval beliefs regarding the variety of locations of the dead souls waiting for the day of judgment, see al-Ghazali, *Dhikr al-mawt*, 131, and especially the translator’s footnote on that page. See also al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira*, 35-38.

¹⁰⁷ See al-Ghazali, *Al-Durra al-fakhira*, 33-44. Al-Ghazali’s breakdown of various forms of punishment is based on four levels of conscientious obedience during life (pp. 33-40), and a second four-fold description (pp. 40-44) of privileges in the *barzakh* is based on one’s station as ʿ*alim*, prophet, martyr, or ordinary believer.

¹⁰⁸ Qur’an 20:124.

¹⁰⁹ Al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi, *Nawadir al-usul*, 159. Qtd. by al-Ghazali in *Dhikr al-mawt*, 138.

ribs break and mix with one another,¹¹⁰ while the blessed *mu'min's* grave is expanded by seventy cubits or by an unmeasured distance.¹¹¹ For the *kafirs* and ingrates the very earth speaks curses, and there is retributive punishment which in some cases can last indefinitely until the resurrection. But for the true Muslims, there is only acclaim, praise and comfortable rest with some of the amenities of Paradise to hold them over until they receive their full reward.

In Chapter Three, we examined the activities of the local community on behalf of a deceased Muslim in Bangladesh, and the observances of the family, friends and 'ulama' over a period of forty days after a death, many of which are intended to aid and assist the dead person in the trial of the grave. In this chapter we have seen just how many beliefs are at work in the minds and imaginations of Rajshahi Muslims when they contemplate the death of a friend or loved one. For literate 'ulama' with the time and opportunity to study, there is a robust and growing body of hadith literature available in Bengali translation (for the many who did not learn to use Arabic practically), providing ever-increasing access to eschatological information. For the new generation of better trained 'ulama', their sponsoring organizations from overseas and returned scholars from the Middle East are making ever-widening numbers of written resources available in Arabic, Urdu and Persian.

For the local lay-Muslims in Rajshahi, ideas and beliefs about the 'life of the grave' are acquired and perpetuated through oral sermons heard during religious holidays, at Friday *jumu'a* prayers, at multi-day religious festivals held in the winter (*waz mahfil*¹¹²), through audio cassettes and CDs of sermons purchased in the bazaar, on religious television programming, and most importantly, at the regularly occurring funerals and associated *khotom*, *milads* and *chollisha* ceremonies. It is these latter ceremonies on behalf of the dead,

¹¹⁰ Al-Qadi, *Daqa'iq al-akhbar* (Tr. by 'A'isha 'Abd al-Rahman), 55.

¹¹¹ Al-Ghazali, *Dhikr al-mawt*, 134, 138.

¹¹² *Waz* (Ar.) denotes 'sermon', 'lecture'. *Mahfil* (Ar.) denotes 'assembly', 'congregation'

performed by the survivors, which so vibrantly and directly impact on the deceased loved one in the community's imagination. The community and individual friends and family members choose to give of their time and resources to help those who have died experience peace and success in the grave and beyond that, in the final judgment. It is to the phenomenon of assisting those who have recently died to which we turn in the next chapter for a closer analysis.

Chapter 5 – Assisting the Dead in Rajshahi

Then He says to His Angels, “I bring you to witness that I have accepted the testimony of My bondsmen regarding My bondsman, and have disregarded My knowledge of him.”

Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad*

“*Keu jekhon more galo, tokhon tar amol, so’ab, ekebare shesh hoye galo.*” (When a person dies, his good works, his collecting of merit – they are all terminated completely!).¹ I looked up at Dr. Alomgir Hossein, the venerated Professor Emeritus and *amir* of a nation-wide Ahl-i-Hadith movement. His statement was in response to my question about local practices of praying and reciting for those who had recently died. What about the family members who surround the body of the deceased to recite Qur’an passages? “*Ota tar jonno kono kaje lagche na...Je-i porbe, tar neki hobe.*” (That doesn’t have any effect on the deceased...he who recites the passages [alone] will receive merit.”).²

The conversation reproduced above from my fieldnotes represents an extreme position in the landscape of Bangladeshi Islam and is characteristic of reformist aversion to an array of popular Islamic practices that have been considered essential to generations of Muslim Bengalis. Ahl-i-Hadith hard-liners reject even the most pervasive Islamic ritual in the region, the *milad* prayer service, a gathering to recite the Qur’an and distribute food to bring God’s favour in a variety of family and community circumstances. The concern of these pietists is to keep Islam pure from fanciful innovations and to purge local practice from what is viewed as unscriptural additions by the people.

Leaving Dr. Hossein’s home and walking through his neighbourhood, one is immediately confronted with the incongruous reality that the majority of people who surround his home, his mosque and his madrasa are involved in a very different Islam from that which he describes. The majority of Rajshahi’s Muslims continue to practise an entire complex of ritual activities which are discredited by the Ahl-i-Hadith, including rituals related to circumcisions and births, but also rituals related to finding a lost or stolen item, deflecting jealousy, cursing an enemy, exorcising pestering demons from humans or trees, and blessing a new business or newly constructed home. We noted in the Introduction that the

¹ “কেউ যখন মরে গেল, তখন তার আমল, সওয়াব, একেবারে শেষ হয়ে গেল”।

² “ওটা তার জন্য কোন কাজে লাগছে না...যে-ই পড়বে, তার নেকি হবে”। Interview: Dr. Alomgir Hossein. 18 December, 2007. Rajshahi.

narrow case study being used to examine the discourse surrounding these differences is that of death-related belief and ritual.

For the outside observer who has been influenced by various notions of ‘orthodox Islam’ available in Western scholarship or the press, the purist version of Islam espoused by the Ahl-i-Hadith may seem quite logical and coherent. Having studied formal Islam in academic institutions that focused on Islamic texts, many Western scholars of Islam in the 19th and 20th centuries found themselves in agreement with the orthodox ‘ulama’ of Islamic universities in the Near East³ – that the seemingly magical and superstitious beliefs and rituals of the Muslim masses were merely popular innovations and unrelated to orthodox Islam. This is the very point that the reforming *Ahl-i-Hadith* activists in every city of Bangladesh would like to communicate.

But in Bangladesh, the Hanafi Muslims are not so easily convinced. Nor do their ‘ulama’ take kindly to being dismissed as unlettered and ignorant. This chapter explores a few of the most popular and contentious examples of Hanafi death-related practices in order to uncover the contemporary discourse that is ongoing in Rajshahi. To accomplish this, we directly access statements and exegetical explanations about relevant hadith from Hanafi and Ahl-i-Hadith leaders in Rajshahi, especially in regard to these beliefs and ritual practices.

After initial interviews where I listened to numerous Ahl-i-Hadith and Hanafi ‘ulama’ describe what, from their perspectives, is Islamically prescribed in the event of a death in the community, I later followed up those interviews by hand-carrying copies of authoritative hadith related to this very debate back to these leaders. Together in their madrasas and mosques we read four key hadith passages⁴ at the crux of the debate and then I recorded their analyses of the same. For some of my informants, being faced with authoritative hadith that

³ See discussion of this point in the Introduction.

⁴ Discussions with informants were in no way limited to these four key hadith passages, but ranged through dozens of hadith passages, Qur’an passages and other Islamic sources. These four were highlighted for the purposes of pursuing a limited case that could be presented within the confines of this thesis.

seemed to contradict their positions was momentarily uncomfortable and brought out some creative examples of scriptural exegesis.

These investigations in the field, when combined with relevant historical and comparative research, lead to the conclusion that the majority Hanafi ‘ulama’ of Rajshahi are not ignorant of the sources of their religion. Rather, they show that certain problematic and paradoxical practices have been a part of global Islam from its earliest period and find a solid footing in the most authoritative texts. In light of this conclusion, the Ahl-i-Hadith reformists’ rejection of these practices becomes as theologically and religiously problematic as the supposed heterodoxy of the Hanafi majority’s practices.

In what follows we begin by taking a closer look at the *so’ab* economy in Rajshahi – the pervasive cosmological framework that permeates so much of life and ritual activity. This religio-cultural background is essential to the discussion of the specifics of transmitting *so’ab* to the deceased. After this, we look at a cross-section of religious positions held by local Muslims in regard to the ability of the living to assist the dead – a continuum which ranges from complete affirmation to a total denial of this concept. In the last half of the chapter, we study four hadith passages related to assisting the dead during *al-barzakh* which are important to Rajshahi ‘ulama’ for understanding human agency in relation to the dead. After becoming familiar with the passages themselves, we end with a tour of the hermeneutical interpretations offered by both Ahl-i-Hadith and Hanafi ‘ulama’ for these authoritative traditions. Their interpretations highlight different facets of the current discourse in Rajshahi, as well as the way that individual practitioners are negotiating and adjusting their own doctrinal positions and practices in light of their understanding(s) of ‘true’ Islam.

5.1 *So’ab* management in hadith thought

The accumulation of *so’ab* is such a fundamental part of daily thought and action in Rajshahi that it can be considered to be a matrix through which local Muslims see religion

and all of life. The practical purposes of religion for sincere believers are to please God and to reach Paradise.⁵ That being the case, the path to both of these for most Sunnis is through the careful management of *so 'ab*. In Chapter Three we saw that merit can be accumulated, stored and transferred to the dead through a variety of means, including reciting the Qur'an, reciting other *dowas*, feeding the poor at *milads*, and so on. Here we examine this 'so 'ab economy' as it appears in the hadith literature, a product itself of early Islamic history. The hadith record as it relates to the collection of *so 'ab* informs Rajshahi believers' daily lives to such a great extent that it is necessary for us to have a firm grasp of this subject before proceeding.

There is a recurring theme in hadith literature of the possibility of storing up *so 'ab* and losing *so 'ab* through personal actions. Conspicuous in many of these scripture passages is a seemingly mechanistic correlation between a ritual action and an automatic, immediate result. Such passages often include a reference to multiples of reward, such as five times, ten times or twenty-five times the normal *so 'ab* for performing an action at specific times or in specific ways. While no hadith apparently reveals the exact quantity of merit which will insure Paradise, the goal of *so 'ab* amassing seems to be focused on outweighing one's evil deeds with good deeds in the heavenly scales.⁶

One Hanafi mosque in Rajshahi has this slogan written above the main entrance: '*Namaz* is the key to Paradise.'⁷ Probably the most oft-repeated specimen of religious advice related throughout Bangladesh is the reminder to faithfully fulfil the salat obligation of five times of prayer every day. Sermons on how to wash correctly for salat, the futility of salat if the washing is not done correctly, how to hold one's hands in the only acceptable position

⁵ See introduction to Dr. Umar Sulaiman Al-Ashqar, *Paradise and Hell: In the light of the Qur'an and Sunnah*, Translated by Nasir Uddin Al Khattab (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House/IIPH, 1999), 10.

⁶ Qur'an 23:102: "Those whose scales are heavy, they are the successful; but those whose scales are light, they are the ones who have lost their souls in Hell dwelling forever. The fire will burn their faces, and there they will be gloomy with lips displaced." See also Qur'an 101:6-11; 21:47; 99:78.

⁷ "নামাজ বেহেস্তের চাবি"। This maxim can also be found painted on rickshaws and 'baby-taxis'. In Bangladesh, the Persian *namaz* is used in place of the Arabic *salat* to refer to the five times daily prayer.

across the belly-button,⁸ as well as keeping one's mind from wandering, and the proper attitudes of sincere devotion during salat, are commonly heard throughout the year. The following hadith is a touchstone for many oral teachings about the need for praying the salat in the mosque, instead of at home or at one's place of business:

Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet said, "The prayer offered in congregation is twenty five times more superior (in reward) to the prayer offered alone in one's house or in a business centre, because if one performs ablution and does it perfectly, and then proceeds to the mosque with the sole intention of praying, then for each step which he takes towards the mosque, Allah upgrades him a degree in reward and (forgives) crosses out one sin till he enters the mosque. When he enters the mosque he is considered in prayer as long as he is waiting for the prayer and the angels keep on asking for Allah's forgiveness for him and they keep on saying: 'O Allah! Be Merciful to him, O Allah! Forgive him,' as long as he keeps on sitting at his praying place and does not pass wind."⁹

Lay Muslims in Rajshahi regularly relate the maxim that praying in the mosque is twenty-five times more meritorious than performing salat at home, yet without making reference to the hadith specifically. Certainly, many local believers have heard this teaching at the mosque, where it may have been preceded with "In the hadith it is written..." or "The Holy Prophet said..." but with no specific verse or reference given. Qur'an or hadith verse references are almost never included in quotations from these sources in oral sermons in Bangladesh, nor in most published texts.

Notice in the hadith above the minute reckoning not only of the amount of merit for performing salat at the mosque but also with every step taken in the direction of the mosque after flawless performance of *wudu* (ablution). One sin is forgiven and the person is raised one degree in reward for every step. The angels join in the effort of personal salvation as long

⁸ This is one point disputed by the Ahl-i-Hadith, who teach a different position for the folded hands during salat - the hands should be folded higher across the chest. Interview: Muhammad Sayeedur Rahman Khan. Interviewed by Author. Digital recording. 31 December, 2007. Rajshahi.

⁹ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 8, no. 466. For parallels of this idea, see al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 34, no. 330; bk. 11, no. 619; bk. 11, no. 620; Two hadith mention that the Prophet said prayers at the mosque are twenty-seven times greater than those said at home. See al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 11, no. 618; bk. 11, no. 621.

as the individual maintains the correct prayer positions.¹⁰ This is all in addition to the knowledge that prayer in the mosque is generating twenty-five times the merit one would have received for performing salat at home.

Some Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’ balk at this type of claim. Assigning mechanistic multiples of *so’ab* to particular actions seems superstitious to some, who may even see these claims as a gimmick used by Hanafi imams to increase attendance at the local mosque. Fieldwork for this project uncovered numerous situations where reformist ‘ulama’ were in the habit of proscribing activities and beliefs which turned out, on closer examination, to be part of the genuine Sunni hadith canon – a point which Hanafi ‘ulama’ were eager to point out.

A second group of hadith traditions introduce another topic, the notion of efficacious speech acts. One of the most commonly heard religious sayings in Rajshahi is, “*Ek borofer dosh neki*” (One letter brings ten *neki/so’ab*).¹¹ In this case, a letter refers specifically to a letter of the Qur’an, and refers to hadith traditions which ascribe one good deed to every single letter, not word, of a Qur’an recitation.¹² This notion is scrupulously combined with another promise which appears in the hadith literature that “the reward of good deeds is multiplied ten times.”¹³ Particularly conscientious believers can try to estimate the amount of reward in a given Qur’an recitation based on these principles: ten times the number of actual

¹⁰ An anecdote from the earliest biography of Muhammad provides a warning rather than an encouragement about proper salat. During a fever in Medina, the prophet told those who were so sick that they had begun to pray sitting down, “the prayer of a seated man has only half the value of a prayer performed standing!” So the Muslims forced themselves, in spite of their weak and shaky condition, to pray standing, that they might gain merit.” Ibn Ishaq, *The Life*, 91.

¹¹ On *Neki* (নেকি), refer to n. 72 on page 170. I also heard local residents quote this maxim as “*Ek ‘alif’ bolle dosh neki hoy*” (“এক আলিফ বললে দশ নেকি হয়”।), where the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, *alif*, is substituted for the Bengali word for ‘letter’.

¹² In this case, the relevant hadith tradition comes into the Rajshahi context through the compendium *Bihishti Zewar*: “It is mentioned in a Hadith that the person who listens to a single letter of the Quran while he is in a state of *wudu*, 10 rewards will be written in his favour, 10 sins will be wiped out, and his status will be elevated by 10. The person who recites a single letter of the Quran while he is sitting down and offering his *salāt*, 50 rewards will be written in his favour, 50 sins will be wiped out, and his status will be elevated by 50. The person who recites a single letter of the Quran while standing shall have 100 rewards written in his favour, 100 sins wiped out, and his status elevated by 100...” (English translation of *Bihishti Zewar* passage taken from the on-line version at http://www.jamiaashrafia.org/recite_quran3php accessed on 15 December, 2008).

¹³ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, Book 31, No. 118; See also Qur’an 6:160.

letters in a passage of scripture, times the number of times it is recited, would equal a multiple of *so'ab*.

Added to this understanding of *so'ab* accumulated at an exponential velocity are certain auspicious phrases and memorised formulae in local Rajshahi Islamic practice which are known and used to various ends. 'Ozifa' books¹⁴ contain collections of the most auspicious of these, along with how many repetitions are best and what situations require them: healing recitations for a sick child; reducing the pain at the time of death; simple recitations just meant to accrue *so'ab*; safety during an upcoming journey, and so on. The following hadith, which provides an example of powerful speech, is reproduced in full:

Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "If one says one-hundred times in one day: "None has the right to be worshipped but Allah, the Alone Who has no partners, to Him belongs Dominion and to Him belong all the Praises, and He has power over all things (i.e. Omnipotent)", one will get the reward of manumitting ten slaves, and one-hundred good deeds will be written in his account, and one-hundred bad deeds will be wiped off or erased from his account, and on that day he will be protected from the morning till evening from Satan, and nobody will be superior to him except one who has done more than that which he has done."¹⁵

This hadith demonstrates the potential agency of powerful speech. A specific confession of God's *tawhid* (unity) connected with an affirmation of his divine attributes, sanctioned and delivered by the Prophet himself, is here declared to be worth the sum of the *so'ab* achieved by setting free ten slaves, plus one hundred good deeds. An additional one hundred bad deeds are subtracted from the personal account of the believer, while he or she enjoys special protection from Satan the entire day. The last sentence introduces a comparison between Muslims based on their righteous deeds, and suggests that the pursuit of *so'ab* does more than just accrue merit to the account of individuals, but also affirms one's relative position of holiness in the community and provides a means of creating distinctions

¹⁴ অযিফা বই, a general category of prayer and recitation manual available at book stalls.

¹⁵ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 54, no. 514.

based on spiritual accomplishments. This aspect of *so'ab* accumulation could be explored further.¹⁶

Not all hadith related to amassing merit work on exclusively numeric principles. There is another category of traditions which can be said to generate the ultimate reward, guaranteed entrance to Paradise or the promise of having all sins forgiven, or both. But while these traditions do not add multiples of *so'ab* in the same way, they often preserve the seemingly mechanistic correlation between a human action and an automatic spiritual result:

Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet said, "Whoever fasted the month of Ramadan out of sincere Faith (i.e. belief) and hoping for a reward from Allah, then all his past sins will be forgiven, and whoever stood for the prayers in the night of Qadr out of sincere Faith and hoping for a reward from Allah, then all his previous sins will be forgiven."¹⁷

Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "(The performance of) 'Umra is an expiation for the sins committed (between it and the previous one). And the reward of Hajj Mabruur (the one accepted by Allah) is nothing except Paradise."¹⁸

Here are two hadith related to the performance of central Islamic duties, that of the fast during Ramadan, and two types of pilgrimage, the 'minor' pilgrimage to Mecca (*umra*), which can be performed any time during the year, and the hajj itself, incumbent upon all Muslims who are able to perform it (at least once) during their lives. The first hadith promises complete forgiveness for sins merely for performing a sincere and complete month of fasting during Ramadan. Also added is a promise that to keep prayers and vigil during the *laylat al-qadr*, sometimes referred to as the 'Night of Power' during the last part of Ramadan, will accomplish the same meritorious result – total forgiveness of sins.

¹⁶ Many other examples of hadith which demonstrate the effectiveness of specific verbal constructions for the accumulation of *so'ab* could be cited. Another prime example is al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 78, no. 673: Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "The following are two words (sentences or utterances) that are very easy for the tongue to say, and very heavy in the balance (of reward) and the most beloved to the Gracious Almighty (And they are): *Subhan Allah wa bi-hamdihi; Subhan Allahi-l-'Azim.*"

¹⁷ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 32, no. 231.

¹⁸ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 27, no. 1.

Meanwhile, the second tradition cited notes that the Prophet said the performance of the optional and ‘lesser’ pilgrimage to Mecca wipes one’s record of sins clean since the last time the person performed it. And the successful primary hajj, that which is performed in all ways correctly so as to be acceptable to God (*hajj mabrur*), is a certain guarantee of entrance to Paradise. Rajshahi residents with the means are able to travel to Mecca to perform both pilgrimages and do so every year. Some wealthy people have had the opportunity to go several times, as was the case with one *‘alim* I interviewed who goes every year. Occassionally, Rajshahi Muslims perform the hajj to Mecca on behalf of another family member who is either too weak to go, or who has already died. The *so ‘ab* from a properly performed major pilgrimage can be transferred just as all other forms of merit can.

Another powerful action which can result in the ultimate reward is the repetition of Surat al-Mulk (Qur’an 67) every night. The person who faithfully follows this prescription can expect to be spared the punishment in the grave, according to one tradition.¹⁹ A local Hanafi *‘alim* explains that a person who reads Surat al-Mulk at night and then dies overnight has automatically been forgiven his sins and granted *jannat* (Paradise). Surat al-Mulk is analogous to a passport, the *‘alim* relates, which when presented at the border between two countries, allows the holder to pass into the other country. Surat al-Mulk is “a passport into another world.”²⁰

When it comes to calculating amounts and multiples of *so ‘ab*, it is important to note that it is just as possible to lose *so ‘ab* as it is to gain it. Various types of neglect and sin, such as failing to execute *wudu* properly before prayer, can create a negative balance in one’s account. Although fewer hadith speak to the negative aspect of *so ‘ab* accrual, nevertheless, there are some specific examples, as the following suggests:

¹⁹ Al-Suyuti, *Sharh al-sudur*, 207 (ctd. in Halevi, 331, fn. 74).

²⁰ “বিভিন্ন জগতের পাসপোর্ট”। Interview: Hafez Maulana Abdul Aziz. 6 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "If somebody keeps a dog, he loses one Qīrāṭ (of the reward) of his good deeds every day, except if he keeps it for the purpose of agriculture or for the protection of livestock." ²¹

There are many other examples in the hadith of generating an automatic correlation between actions and personal reward, whether in accumulating multiples of *so'ab* in one's account, or being granted the ultimate reward of guaranteed entrance to Paradise. These include following the bier of the deceased on its way to the cemetery²²; tarrying throughout the entire burial and *janaza* prayer service²³; visiting the sick and infirm;²⁴ giving alms to the poor; keeping night watch at a city or encampment as military duty;²⁵ voluntary (*nafal*) fasts throughout the year;²⁶ volunteering to give the call to prayer from the mosque;²⁷ arriving early or first for salat; educating, freeing and marrying one's own slave;²⁸ service rendered

²¹ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 54, no. 541; and also al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 39, no. 515. On the term *qirat*, see n. 54 on page 123.

²² Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, KJ, no. 409.

²³ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, KJ, no. 410.

²⁴ Muslim, *Sahih*, bk. 4, no. 2242: "Abu Huraira reported that the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) said: Who has observed fast among you today? Abu Bakr (Allah be pleased with him) replied: It is I. He (the Holy Prophet again) said: Who among you followed the bier today? Abu Bakr (Allah be pleased with him) replied: It is I. He (the Holy Prophet again) said: Who among you led a poor man today? Abu Bakr (Allah be pleased with him) replied: It is I. He (again) said: Who among you visited an invalid today? Abu Bakr (Allah be pleased with him) said: It is I. Upon this the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) said: Anyone in whom (these good deeds) are combined will certainly enter paradise."

²⁵ Muslim, *Sahih*, bk. 20, Number 4703: "It has been narrated on the authority of Salman who said: I heard the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) say: Keeping watch for a day and a night is better (in point of reward) than fasting for a whole month and standing in prayer every night. If a person dies (while performing this duty), his (meritorious) activity will continue and he will go on receiving his reward for it perpetually and will be saved from the torture of the grave."

²⁶ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 31, no. 118: "Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "Fasting is a shield (or a screen or a shelter). So, the person observing fasting should avoid sexual relation with his wife and should not behave foolishly and impudently, and if somebody fights with him or abuses him, he should tell him twice, 'I am fasting.'" The Prophet added, "By Him in Whose Hands my soul is, the smell coming out from the mouth of a fasting person is better in the sight of Allah than the smell of musk. (Allah says about the fasting person), 'He has left his food, drink and desires for My sake. The fast is for Me. So I will reward (the fasting person) for it and the reward of good deeds is multiplied ten times.'"

²⁷ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 48, Number 854: "Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "If the people knew what is the reward of making the call (for the prayer) and (of being in) the first row (in the prayer), and if they found no other way to get this privilege except by casting lots, they would certainly cast lots for it. If they knew the reward of the noon prayer, they would race for it, and if they knew the reward of the morning (i.e. Fajr) and Isha prayers, they would present themselves for the prayer even if they had to crawl to reach there.'"

²⁸ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 52, Number 255: "Narrated Abu Burda's father: The Prophet said, "Three persons will get their reward twice. (One is) a person who has a slave girl and he educates her properly and teaches her good manners properly (without violence) and then manumits and marries her. Such a person will get a double reward. (Another is) a believer from the people of the scriptures who has been a true believer and then he believes in the Prophet (Muhammad). Such a person will get a double reward. (The third is) a slave who observes Allah's Rights and Obligations and is sincere to his master.'"

faithfully by a slave to his or her master; fighting in *jihad* out of no other motivation than sincere devotion to Allah;²⁹ enduring the death of three children during one's lifetime;³⁰ bearing with patience the death of a friend;³¹ dying on a Friday;³² and many others as well.

5.2 Assisting the dead in *al-barzakh*

Rajshahi Muslims exhibit a general preoccupation with discussing, collecting, and accounting for *so'ab*. It is clear from what we have just seen that the authoritative hadith collections support this state of affairs. Hadith reports about *so'ab* are regularly mentioned in sermons and orally recited even by illiterate and semi-literate citizens. When it comes to the general need to collect merit for one's future in the grave and the Hereafter, Rajshahi's Ahl-i-Hadith and Hanafi Muslims mostly agree. The image of the heavenly scales where one's good deeds and bad deeds will compete on the mysterious basis of 'weight' is universally known and given credence.³³

Disagreement, confusion and polemical discourse occur when this discussion is expanded to include the popular practice of sending amounts of *so'ab* to those whose lifespan has already ended – to loved ones in *al-barzakh*. Fieldwork in Rajshahi uncovered three primary positions held by lay persons and 'ulama' regarding the ability of the living to affect those in *al-barzakh*: the Ahl-i-Hadith reformist position, the Hanafi popular position, and a small cluster of modified positions in between these two polar extremes.

²⁹ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 53, Number 352: "Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "Allah guarantees him who strives in His Cause and whose motivation for going out is nothing but Jihad in His Cause and belief in His Word, that He will admit him into Paradise (if martyred) or bring him back to his dwelling place, whence he has come out, with what he gains of reward and booty.""

³⁰ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, *KJ*, Number 340: "Narrated Anas: The Prophet said, "A Muslim whose three children die before the age of puberty will be granted Paradise by Allah due to his mercy for them.""

³¹ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 76, Number 432: "Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "Allah says, 'I have nothing to give but Paradise as a reward to my believer slave, who, if I cause his dear friend (or relative) to die, remains patient (and hopes for Allah's Reward).'"

³² Ibn Abi al-Dunya, *Kitab al-qubur*, nos. 33-37 (ctd. in Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 335, fn. 101).

³³ See Qur'an 23:102: "Those whose scales are heavy, they are the successful; but those whose scales are light, they are the ones who have lost their souls in Hell dwelling forever. The fire will burn their faces, and there they will be gloomy with lips displaced." See also Qur'an 101:6-11; 21:47; 99:78.

The Ahl-i-Hadith reformist position on assisting the dead is summarised by the well-worn theological gauntlet, “*Manush mara gele, tar amol ekebare shesh hoye jae.*” (When a human dies, his *amol* (works) come to a complete end).³⁴ Recall the Ahl-i-Hadith scholar’s strict reaction to the interview question about reciting the Qur’an in front of the dead in the opening paragraph of this chapter: “*Ota tar jonno kono kaje lagche na...Je-i porbe, tar neki hobe.*” (That doesn’t have any effect on the deceased...he who recites the passages [alone] will receive merit.”).³⁵

These are the ‘ulama’ who are the most troubled by the prevalence of *bida’i* practices in Bangladesh. They take issue with organising anything called a *milad*, since the Prophet and his Companions, it is asserted, did not celebrate birthdays or death anniversaries. Celebrating the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, the *maulud al-nabi*, is said to be an impious innovation which the first generations of Muslims did not practise.³⁶ In a logical extension

9. A Hanafi mosque in Rajshahi



³⁴ This pivotal scripture comes from Muslim, *Sahih*, bk. 13, no. 4005: Abu Huraira (Allah be pleased with him) reported Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: When a man dies, his acts come to an end, but three, recurring charity, or knowledge (by which people) benefit, or a pious son, who prays for him (for the deceased).

³⁵ “ওটা তার জন্য কোন কাজে লাগছে না...যে-ই পড়বে, তার নেকি হবে”। Interview: Dr. Alomgir Hossein. 18 December, 2007. Rajshahi.

³⁶ A business man from a moderately reformist family in Rajshahi reported that his family and neighbourhood used to celebrate the *milad al-nabi* annually, but discontinued this practice in the early 1990s. Interview: Muhammad Obaidul Hakim. 17 May, 2006. Rajshahi. For published Ahl-i-Hadith prohibitions against this rite, see Hafez Muhammad Ayub, মীলাদ, শবে বরাত অ মীলাদুন্নবী কিন বিদআত? (*Milad, shobe borat o milad-un-nabi keno bida't? / Why Are Milads, Shobe Borat and the Milad-un-Nabi Bida't?*) (Dhaka: Al-Islah Prokashoni, 2000), 15-16, 21; Hafez Mahmudul Hasan, ইবাদতের নামে (*Popular Heresies*), 30-31.

of the hadith about one's *amol* ending at death, they prohibit all *khotom* recitations and *bokshano* (transfer) of *so'ab* to the dead in the forty days following a death.³⁷ As strict puritans, they observe the most austere funeral rites possible, bury the dead, and keep close watch that the family of the deceased does not display any signs of mourning beyond the prescribed three days allotted by scripture.³⁸ All in all, strict Ahl-i-Hadith 'ulama' attempt to maintain orderly behaviour based on their view of sacred texts and endeavour to avoid excesses of emotion, superstition, and any practices with extra-Islamic roots.

The hardline Ahl-i-Hadith position which prohibits assisting the dead is reminiscent of Halevi's concept of an original 'Qur'anic understanding' of the *barzakh*, in which the dead and the living did not have any scope for communication or mutual exchange.³⁹ This understanding seems to be evident when one considers the Qur'anic record about the afterlife *without* the hadith, and is posited by Halevi as the starting point in early Islamic views of death and the afterlife.⁴⁰ In Halevi's view, when the Qur'an was first being transferred orally and assembled, the *barzakh* was a barrier that was seen to be intact and effective, keeping the living from communicating with or helping the dead, and *vice versa*. Then, in the Islamic second and third centuries, this ontological framework was transformed into the 'post-Qur'anic understanding' of *barzakh*, represented by the hadith literature (discussed below).

In the 'Qur'anic understanding', there certainly was a greater emphasis on human responsibility and the direct correlation between an individual's actions and the reward he or she earns. A verse of the Qur'an which is very often mentioned by Ahl-i-Hadith leaders in Rajshahi is Qur'an 35:18: "And no bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another. And if a heavily laden soul calls [another] to [carry some of] its load, nothing of it will be carried,

³⁷ Hasan, *Ibadoter name*, 36-37.

³⁸ For all but bereaved widows, whose prescribed mourning period is four months and ten days. See Editing Committee, *Diniyat*, 219; *Sahih Bukahri*, *KJ*, bk. 30, nos. 310, 1279-1282.

³⁹ See the discussion of *al-barzakh* in Chapter Four for a discussion of this dichotomy. This section does not mean to imply that the Qur'an does not allude to Muhammad's ability to intercede for Muslims, which it does.

⁴⁰ Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 215-219.

even if he should be a close relative.” This verse and several other similar verses of the Qur’an⁴¹ provide strong support to those ‘ulama’ who strive to maintain an awareness of individual responsibility and to promote the notion of just rewards for human actions.

But ‘on the ground’ in Rajshahi, only a small fraction of Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’ are practically able to maintain such a purist perspective. This may be because many of these men have married wives (or their children have married spouses) who are from Hanafi families, and are occasionally called on to attend funerals and *milads* for a deceased father-in-law, brother-in-law and so on. If a co-worker at one’s place of employment invites an Ahl-i-Hadith adherent to a *khotom* recitation to collect merit, he may be faced with the potentially drastic prospect of breaking with important social etiquette if he refuses on purist religious grounds (though that is what some reformists do).⁴²

Another reason that many Ahl-i-Hadith do not keep the hard-line position on completely avoiding observances to assist the dead is that variable interpretations of authoritative scriptures are a problematic reality. For example, the hadith that seemed so pivotal to the Ahl-i-Hadith party-line position above, (“When a man dies, his acts come to an end”) curiously turns out to be only the first half of an authoritative tradition which goes on to delineate *exceptions* to this rule – three exceptions to be precise. The full text of this famous passage is:

Abu Huraira (Allah be pleased with him) reported Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: When a man dies, his acts come to an end, but three, recurring charity, or knowledge (by which people) benefit, or a pious son who prays for him (for the deceased).⁴³

⁴¹ See Qur’an 53:38-39 “That no bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another; And that there is not for man except that [good] for which he strives. See also 36:54 and 6:164.

⁴² More than one Ahl-i-Hadith informant reported attending Hanafi religious meetings, funerals and *milads*, but just not pronouncing the objectionable phrases and blessings. Multiple Interviews, January and February, 2008, Rajshahi.

⁴³ Muslim, *Sahih*, bk. 13, no. 4005.

According to informants,⁴⁴ recurring charity (*sadaka jaria*⁴⁵) refers to any generous contribution that a pious Muslim makes during his or her life which keeps bearing an effect after the person has died. Examples given include building a hospital, planting fruit trees which keep blessing others with fruit, underwriting the construction of a school, madrasa or mosque, or endowing a scholarship. ‘Knowledge’ (*‘ilm*) is a contribution of (usually pious) wisdom, which can be transferred by publishing a religious tract or book, or additionally by teaching nuggets of wisdom to one’s own spiritual pupils. If the teaching one distributes is retained and put into practice by one’s followers, than the *so ‘ab* keeps accumulating to one’s own account even after death.

A pious son or daughter (*nek shontan*⁴⁶) who remembers to pray for a parent is allowed by this authoritative hadith as a prescribed way that one’s account can continue to accrue merit even after death. In other words, pious Muslim children who remember to faithfully beseech God so that the torture of the grave would be reduced, or so their parents’ sins will be forgiven, or for God to grant them *so ‘ab* generally and entrance to Paradise, can, according to this hadith, actually improve the state of affairs for their dead parents. By omission, this verse would seem to indicate that the prayers of other friends and well-wishers would not be nearly as effective in adding *so ‘ab* to the account of the deceased or affecting a person’s position in *al-barzakh* or at the final judgment.⁴⁷

Proponents of the middle position on assisting the dead in *al-barzakh* almost always began discussion on the topic by quoting this hadith (above) or some close variant. Not only the more lenient Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’, but also many Hanafi ‘ulama’ who in recent years

⁴⁴ Interview: Muhammad Saiful Islam. 12 December. Rajshahi; Interview: Dr. Alomgir Hossein. 4 January, 2008. Rajshahi; Interview: Hafez Maulana Abdul Aziz. 7 December, 2007. Rajshahi.

⁴⁵ ছদকায়ে জারিয়া

⁴⁶ নেক সন্তান

⁴⁷ Gayo Muslims in the highlands of Aceh (Indonesia) have an interesting way of interpreting this pivotal hadith report. They take “children who do good works” (from a similar version of this hadith in Abu Daud’s collection) to mean *all* the survivors, family and friends alike, who arrange “large and effective ritual meals and chanting sessions, in order to generate merit for the deceased.” Thus, pious works by one’s children are equated with holding *milad*-like ceremonies to benefit the dead. Gayo scripturalist ‘ulama’ counter that this hadith is limited to one’s own children, and to their prayers only. See John Bowen, ‘Death and the history of Islam’, 35.

have been exposed to reformist doctrine and polemics against certain popular practices – leaders from both backgrounds often seem to feel most comfortable standing on this hadith and its message as the foundation for a theology of assisting the dead. As a Hanafi madrasa principle related, “The hadith says that when a person dies, his *amol*, and all his works come to an end. But there are three ‘lines’ – three systems which remain open for him.”⁴⁸

The third position on assisting the dead is really the *status quo* in Rajshahi – the idea that has prevailed for generations in Bangladesh that Muslims can assist those in *al-barzakh* in a multiplicity of ways. In fact, local Hanafi opinion stresses the importance of acts on behalf of the dead as a measure of one’s love for the deceased – to omit such actions is tantamount to abandoning all human feeling and kindness toward loved ones. This position – the ‘Hanafi position’ – also begins from the solid footing of *Sahih Muslim*⁴⁹ – the famous hadith that describes the three open ways of accruing *so’ab* after death. But the Hanafi understanding moves far beyond this starting point to encompass much more active and efficacious means of participation by the broader Muslim community.

As was seen in Chapter Three, Rajshahi residents begin recitations of Qur’an portions, the entire Qur’an, the *kalema*, and special *dowas* immediately after death has occurred and continue to organise *milads* for this purpose for forty days following each death. Expensive food is prepared with care and distributed to the poor, and the *so’ab* of these good works is transferred to the account of the loved one. Money is given and hearty meals are provided to the local imam and madrasa students so that they will recite more *dowas* on behalf of the dead. Children of the deceased and others continue to visit the graveyard every Friday throughout the year to ask forgiveness for the dead, and annual ‘death anniversaries’

⁴⁸ “হাদিসে আছে মানুষ মারা গেলে তার আমল, তার শব কৰ্ম বন্ধ হয়ে যায়। কিন্তু তিনটা লাইন – তিনটা পধ্যতি তার চালু থাকে”। Interview: Hafez Maulana Abdul Aziz. 7 December, 2007. Rajshahi.

⁴⁹ Muslim, *Sahih*, bk. 13, no. 4005.

(*orosh*⁵⁰) are duly organised and announced in the local newspapers so that as many as possible will come to make recitations and participate in the sacralised meal.

The local Hanafi praxis is perhaps a good contemporary example of Halevi's theory of a post- Qur'anic cosmological shift with regard to the meaning of *al-barzakh* and the communication potential between the living and the dead. As was noted earlier, beginning in the first quarter of the eighth century, or the beginning of the second Islamic century, there began to be a shift in the Muslim community's understanding of their own relationship and responsibility to those in *al-barzakh*. Tombstone records and other available sources suggest a developing practice of cemetery rituals centred around prayers and recitations which were intended to affect the dead person's comfort in the grave and success at the coming divine judgment. One of the very earliest examples of Islamic material culture ever found is the tombstone of Ibn Khayr, which was uncovered in Egypt and dates from just twenty years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The inscription on the tombstone reads:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate, this grave belongs to 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Khayr al-Ḥajrī.

Forgive him, O God, and make him enter Paradise by your mercy, and let us go with him.

Seek forgiveness for him whenever this inscription is read, and say "Amen!"

This inscription was written in Jumādā II of the year 31.⁵¹

Such beliefs and the accompanying prayers and recitations for the dead seem to have been practised widely throughout the Middle East, North Africa and other Islamic lands from very early. From these and other researches, Halevi concludes that "this ceremony of seeking God's forgiveness for the sins of another individual was perhaps one of the central aspects of Muslim piety during the first century of Islam."⁵²

⁵⁰ ওরশ

⁵¹ Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 14-15.

⁵² Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 27.

The authoritative hadith collections, assembled in the second and third Islamic centuries, are seen by many scholars to be a useful reflection of discourses which were prevalent in the rapidly changing and expanding Muslim *umma* of that period.⁵³ As such, the hadith collections remain the primary carriers and transmitters of the ‘post- Qur’anic understanding’ of the location and accessibility of souls in *al-barzakh*. It is to this corpus of authoritative guidance for the global Sunni faith that we turn in what follows to explore two additional methods they prescribe for assisting those already in the graves – the efficacious testimony of the community, and praying the *janaza* in large numbers.

5.3 Key example I: Speaking well of the dead

The principal and the *fiqh* instructor at Aliganj Dar-us-Sunnat Alim Madrasa in Rajshahi complained that some of the Hanafi imams surrounding the madrasa complex had a bad habit of asking at funeral services, "What is your testimony regarding Rahmat? Is he a Muslim?" Those attending answer, "He is a [good] Muslim!" or "We give testimony!" This custom, called *shakkho newa*,⁵⁴ or gathering a testimony, is performed by some Hanafi imams as a formal segment of the funeral proceedings.⁵⁵

The reformist madrasa principal and his co-teachers charged that these poorly trained Hanafi imams believe and teach that giving testimony to the character of the dead by a group of Muslims somehow results in an altered outcome for the deceased in the Hereafter. The reformist complaint makes clear that the Hanafi ‘*ulama*’ are not just commenting on the deceased’s character in a casual way. Rather, it is apparent that the Hanafi prayer leaders are perpetuating a ritual practice that signifies a belief in the community’s ability to affect the

⁵³ See Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 67: “But the Modernist also must realise that although the Hadith in part does not represent the verbal and pure Prophetic teaching, it has certainly an intimate connection with the Prophet and especially represents the earliest development of the Community’s understanding of that teaching.”

⁵⁴ সাক্ষ্য নেওয়া

⁵⁵ William Lane reported a similar custom among Egyptian Muslims of the early 19th century: “Then, addressing the persons present, he says, “Give your testimony respecting him.” They reply, “He was of the virtuous.” The bier is now taken up...” *An Account*, 522.

afterlife of those already dead. Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’ teach that believing such things is equal to believing in baseless superstition, and that practising them is *bid‘a*, an impious innovation to the faith and deserving of God’s wrath.

How did such diametrically opposite positions regarding this community practice come about within cohesive neighbourhoods made up of people who speak the same language, share the same culture and indeed, come from the same extended families? If reformist charges that this practice is an innovation are accurate, can they point to a similar Hindu practice or a regionally specific animistic origin for this custom? What about the popular Hanafi masses who cherish this custom? Is this just the yearning of ignorant agriculturalist peasants for the survival of loved ones and their success in the Hereafter? Or is there an Islamic root to this practice which they are able to articulate?

Remarkably, the most famous and authoritative hadith collections in global Sunni Islam, the *sahih* collections by Muhammad ibn Isma‘il al-Bukhari and Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, contain several reports about the Prophet Muhammad’s teaching and behaviour on this very topic. Many of these hadith reports are even found under section headings such as *kitab al-jana’iz*, ‘Book on Funerary Practices’, contained within these collections. The Hanafi masses, it turns out, do not have to contrive remote theological rationalisations for why they ‘gather a testimony’ at funerals. Whether Hanafi ‘ulama’ are interpreting the hadith literature according to its original intended meaning or not, they certainly are interpreting scripture. The first and second hadith passages which were shown to professional Rajshahi ‘ulama’ are discussed below:

Narrated Anas bin Mālik (AW): A funeral procession passed and the people praised the deceased. The Prophet (SA) said, "It has been affirmed to him." Then another funeral procession passed and the people spoke badly of the deceased. The Prophet (SA) said, "It has been affirmed to him". ‘Umar bin Al-Khaṭṭāb asked (Allāh’s Apostle SA), "What has been affirmed?" He replied, "You praised this, so Paradise

has been affirmed to him; and you spoke badly of this, so Hell has been affirmed to him. You people are Allāh's witnesses on earth."⁵⁶

The Prophet Muhammad and one of his closest associates are sitting outdoors in this tradition, when a group of Muslims carry a bier or body in front of them on the way to the graveyard. The Prophet comments that it has been made *'wajib'* for him, a somewhat unusual use of the Arabic legal term for 'obligatory'. In this case, the sense seems to be 'mandatory', so that Paradise has been determined for the deceased. In the case of the person about whom the community spoke ill in the anecdote, the Prophet reportedly declares that Hell has been made obligatory punishment. This hadith ends with the profoundly suggestive declaration that fellow Muslims are *shuhada' Allah fi'l-ard*, God's witnesses on earth. The implied assertion of the responsibility of the local community in the assigning of individual destinies is explored further below. But first, we look at a similar hadith in this group:

Narrated Abū Al-Aswad: I came to Medīna when an epidemic had broken out. While I was sitting with °Umar bin Al-Khaṭṭāb a funeral procession passed by and the people praised the deceased. °Umar said, "It has been affirmed to him." And another funeral procession passed by and the people praised the deceased. °Umar said, "It has been affirmed to him." A third (funeral procession) passed by and the people spoke badly of the deceased. He said, "It has been affirmed to him." I (Abū Al-Aswad) asked, "O chief of the believers! What has been affirmed?" He replied, "I said the same as the Prophet (SA) had said, that is: if four persons testify the piety of a Muslim, Allāh will grant him Paradise." We asked, "If three persons testify his piety?" He (the Prophet SA) replied, "Even three." Then we asked, "If two?" He replied, "Even two." We did not ask him regarding one witness.⁵⁷

Here Muhammad's Companion °Umar is the subject, perhaps some years later. We are told that an epidemic has broken out in Medina, which helps to explain how three biers could pass by a seated observer in apparently one sitting. °Umar imitated Muhammad's own declarative statements based on the comments of those passing by with the biers of the dead. However, in this hadith °Umar drives home a more specific lesson, reportedly from the

⁵⁶ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih, KJ*, no. 448. Compare Muslim, *Sahih*, bk. 4, no. 2073 and al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 48, no. 810.

⁵⁷ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih, KJ*, no. 449. Compare al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, bk. 48, no. 811.

Prophet himself. He reveals that Muhammad had said that if four persons testify the piety of a Muslim, “Allah will grant him Paradise.” ‘Umar’s companions seem set on either pushing the boundaries of divine grace or learning as many theological corollaries to this principle as possible. They ask about cases having only three or two witnesses, but then decide against asking about only one.

The most immediate and relevant point to make about this tradition is the observation that it is included in the *sahih sitta*, the ‘genuine’ canon of Sunni hadith. For this sole reason, 99% of Sunni ‘ulama’ feel that they are bound to interpret this passage within an Islamically authoritative framework, rather than to apply critical tests to its provenance and authenticity. This is true even if systematic reformist doctrine seems to be opposed to this report and its implications. What is also relevant to note is that, in light of such straightforward messages about human agency in the hadith literature, local imams and ‘ulama’ in thousands of villages and small towns can be expected to interpret its message without any regard for whatever theological winds may be blowing in other parts of the Muslim world. In other words, they can be expected to apply the canonical scriptures to their lives and their teaching.

It turned out that when I produced these two hadith passages for Rajshahi ‘ulama’ to review and interpret, many of these men could recite them from memory, including Ahl-i-Hadith leaders. As we saw in Chapter Two, the *sahih sitta*, the six authoritative hadith collections of Sunni Islam, are rarely disputed by actual imam practitioners.⁵⁸ Given that this observation applies equally to Hanafi and Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’ of Rajshahi, the various responses to the hadith reports listed above were based wholly on discerning the correct context and best Islamic interpretation of the reports. The authenticity and historicity of the hadith themselves were not disputed.

⁵⁸ Chapter Two of this thesis contains a discussion of Sunni attitudes towards the six authoritative hadith collections.

On the one hand, the Hanafi ‘ulama’ answer to how to interpret these hadith is their public practice of taking a witness (*shakkho newa*) at funerals. While some Hanafi imams have discontinued this practice due to reformist pressure, there are still plenty of imams who keep it. As in most community rituals, the deeper framework of meaning underlying the practice is not always articulated, much less understood, by all the participants.⁵⁹ Still, while rural areas around Bangladesh surely contain some Hanafi ‘ulama’ who unreflectively lead the *shakkho newa* rite merely as an extra step to help the deceased gain Paradise, being themselves less than certain of its efficacy, urban imams in Rajshahi faced with a multi-dimensional social and religious context demonstrate a nuanced approach in their interpretations of these hadith.

One local Hanafi imam, Hafez Maulana Abdul Aziz, who regularly leads services to collect *so’ab* for the dead, interpreted these hadith passages at face value: “Since a large number of people say it – about his qualities, his character, his piety – in that way, the person also becomes praiseworthy before God.” In the case of the second hadith where the number of people giving witness is only four, Imam Aziz says that it is important that those giving witness to be authentic, pious believers themselves. “Truly good people must speak well of him. *This* makes it acceptable to God.”⁶⁰

Some Ahl-i-Hadith leaders in Rajshahi, when faced with hadith reports related to this ongoing debate, seemed to affirm activities which at other times they might be expected to denounce as *bida*^c. Recall Dr. Alomgir Hossein, the national Ahl-i-Hadith leader quoted at the very beginning of this chapter, who said, “When a person dies, his good works, his collecting of merit – they are all terminated completely!”⁶¹ When presented with the two hadith above, he agreed in an unqualified manner with their content, affirming what appeared

⁵⁹ Bowen, *Muslims through discourse*, 251-262.

⁶⁰ Interview: Hafez Maulana Abdul Aziz. 9 January, 2008. Rajshahi. (min. 1-2).

⁶¹ “কেউ যখন মরে গেল, তখন তার আমল, সওয়াব, একেবারে শেষ হয়ে গেল”। Interview: Dr. Alomgir Hossein. 18 December, 2007. Rajshahi.

to be their most obvious, superficial meanings, without bringing any theological nuance or hermeneutical qualification to bear. “So, if the people (*jonogon*⁶²) speak well of him...he’ll go to Paradise; And if the people speak poorly of him, then Hell has become mandatory for him.”⁶³

The previous example notwithstanding, it is Ahl-i-Hadith-trained ‘ulama’ who offered the most textured interpretations of these authoritative hadith. A madrasa graduate from the flagship Ahl-i-Hadith madrasa in Rajshahi noted that if we knew more about the context in which these statements were made, it might become more clear.⁶⁴ Perhaps those who were commenting on the characters of the deceased were associates of the Prophet, in which case they would have been very authoritative statements. “We wouldn’t expect God’s Apostle to speak thus if the ones giving witness were just ordinary people.”⁶⁵ Other informants also speculated in interviews that these affirmations were most probably made by Muhammad’s Companions.

A number of Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’ had the unfortunate experience of strongly asserting the reformist position that “when a person dies, his *amal* is terminated completely”⁶⁶ just moments before being handed copies of authoritative hadith which seemed to contradict this notion categorically. Two reformist madrasa teachers at Dar-us-Sunnat madrasa found themselves in just such a situation during one field interview. But after several moments of thoughtful consideration of the two cited hadith, they stated that they agreed with the hadith generally, but highlighted the fact that the testimony given by the passers-by

⁶² জনগণ

⁶³ One wonders if these statements would match up with other sermons Dr. Hossein has given in the past on human responsibility and the finality of death. During the same interview, this scholar said that *bokshie dewa* (বকশিয়ে দেওয়া / transferring *so’ab* to the dead) is not supported in scripture and that the idea of passing on merit was only spiritual guesswork about the way the unseen world operates. “The Qur’an says, ‘No one will bear another person’s burden.’” (quoting Qur’an 35:18).

⁶⁴ Although the *asbab al-nuzul* (occasions of revelation) is an important category of Qur’an *tafsir* for Rajshahi ‘ulama’, informants did not mention any such sources for interpreting hadith passages.

⁶⁵ “এমনি সাধারণ মানুষ মন্তব্য করলে তো, আল্লাহর রাসূল এইভাবে কথা বলার কথা না”। Interview: Muhammad Saiful Islam. 10 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

⁶⁶ This statement was in keeping with the *first half* of the famous hadith in Muslim, *Sahih*, bk. 13, no. 4005.

in these anecdotes was spontaneous.⁶⁷ The Prophet and his Companions *overheard* people giving testimony about the deceased, and there was no social pressure being created which would have affected their witness. These teachers asserted that the spontaneous aspect of the witness is crucial to understanding this hadith – people’s spontaneous witness about a man’s life, they said, generally corresponds to reality.⁶⁸

Another well-known Ahl-i-Hadith figure in Rajshahi affirmed the idea that truly pious Muslims can exert some influence when it comes to adjudicating the deceased person’s position in the Hereafter: “If an authentic, pious believer gives the witness, God will grant *jannat* (Paradise); and if an authentic, pious believer gives a bad witness, he’ll receive *jahannam* (Hell).” But he was also careful to combine this idea with the notion that, being good and pious Muslims, their judgment would bear an extremely high likelihood of being accurate anyway – a mistake in the judgment of pious Muslims, especially those who are aware that their testimony bears eternal weight, would be extremely unlikely.⁶⁹

Another famous hadith which underscores the message of the two traditions cited above is from the *Musnad* of Ibn Hanbal (d. 855) and is likely to be of even earlier origin than the authoritative al-Bukhari and Muslim *sahih* collections. Ibn Hanbal’s *Musnad* is a favourite of Salafi purists around the world, and is no less respected by Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama^o in Bangladesh. This report which is believed to be from the Prophet Muhammad opens a window on God’s perspective about ‘giving a witness’:

Said Abū Hurayra, ‘The Emissary of God (may God bless him and grant him peace) said, “A bondsman may die, and the people may praise him abundantly, while God knows him to be otherwise. Then He says (Exalted is He!) to His Angels, “I bring you to witness that I have accepted the testimony of My bondsmen regarding My bondsman, and have disregarded My knowledge of him”.’⁷⁰

⁶⁷ স্বতঃস্ফূর্তভাবে

⁶⁸ Jalaluddin Shorkar and Muhammad Abdul Mannan. 9 February 2008. Rajshahi.

⁶⁹ Interview: Muhammad Golam Rabbani. 27 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

⁷⁰ Ahmad b. Muhammad Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad* (Cairo: n.p., 1313 AH.), vol. II, nos. 384, 408. (also qtd. by al-Ghazali in *al-Ihya*, 120).

In this hadith report, God admits that the person being affirmed is not worthy of Paradise, but that he is prepared to ‘disregard’ his knowledge of the sinner’s true character because “I have accepted the testimony of My bondsmen.” With such hadith circulating even among conservative Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’ in Bangladesh, one can easily see where confusion and disputes about sacred beliefs and local practices may find their source. Were the above hadith tradition to be taken at face value, it would signify nothing but a massive role of influence for the community of believers in determining the outcome of the salvation of individuals – an idea which published Ahl-i-Hadith texts and the many committed ideologues of the movement categorically refute.⁷¹

5.4 Key example II: Large numbers at the funeral prayer

The first two hadith highlighted the power of *shuhada’ Allah fi’l ard* – the witnesses of God on earth – and their individual and collective ability to affect the position of the deceased in *al-barzakh*, and the destiny of the deceased in the Hereafter, based on their affirmation of his or her character as a good or bad Muslim. In the next two key hadith passages, the operative factor affecting the position of the dead is seen to be the number of Muslims who attend the *janaza* funeral prayer.

'A'isha reported Allah's Apostle (may peace be upon him) saying: If a company of Muslims numbering one hundred pray over a dead person, all of them interceding for him, their intercession for him will be accepted.⁷²

Here the condition for a community of Muslims to successfully affect the position of the deceased is that they number at least one hundred persons, and that they all intercede, or pray with sincere intention, on behalf of the dead. If these conditions are met, then their

⁷¹ The extreme position, held by only a section of Ahl-i-Hadith leadership in Rajshahi, is that nothing whatsoever can benefit a person after the moment of his or her death. Others grant that the prayers of the deceased’s children can have an effect – but nothing else. (Interviews: November, 2007 – February, 2008. Rajshahi). Ahl-i-Hadith literature reflects this tension as well. See Hafez Muhammad Ayub, আল্লে হাদীসদের পরিচয় (*Ahl-i-Hadith identity*), 11-14; and Hafez Mahmudul Hasan, ইবাদতের নামে প্রচলিত বিদআতসমূহ (*Popular Heresies*), 30-36.

⁷² Muslim, *Sahih*, bk. 4, no. 2071.

“intercession for him will be accepted.” Traditionally, Muslim mourners have been concerned about lessening the torment of the grave, which even good Muslims may endure temporarily to atone for sins. The accepted intercession in this case may be assumed to lessen this torment, and additionally, to transform the deceased’s prospects on the final judgement day.

Rajshahi residents normally notice and comment on the relative number of people who attended a particular *janaza* funeral prayer service. There is a preoccupation with getting as many people as possible to attend the *janaza*. Similarly, a small turnout is regarded as an unfortunate and possibly a dangerous eventuality. Talk at tea-stalls after a funeral often revolves around how many people came and prayed for the dead: “Tons of people went to Rofik’s *janaza*, there were lots of prayers. Looks like he’ll get to Paradise for sure!”⁷³ A few people even count the *so’ab* being generated by calculating the number of people in attendance multiplied by the various *dowas* and prayers.

When questioned during the first round of field interviews, most Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’ dismissed the concept of trying to get as many people as possible to attend the *janaza* as a superstition of the ignorant and uneducated.⁷⁴ However, as the above authoritative hadith and the next quotation would seem to indicate, there are authoritative Islamic sources for these community activities and beliefs – sources not in the least bit obscure or inaccessible:

‘Abdullah b. ‘Abbās reported that his son died in Qudaid or ‘Usfān. He said to Kuraib to see as to how many people had gathered there for his (funeral). He (Kuraib) said: So I went out and I informed him about the people who had gathered there. He (Ibn ‘Abbās) said: Do you think they are forty? He (Kuraib) said: Yes. Ibn ‘Abbās then said to them: Bring him (the dead body) out for I have heard Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: If any Muslim dies and forty men who associate

⁷³ Interview: Mrs. Rowshan Sultana. 16 March, 2006. Rajshahi.

⁷⁴ “মুর্খরা করে”। Multiple interviews, December, 2007. Rajshahi.

nothing with Allah stand over his prayer (they offer prayer over him), Allah will accept them as intercessors for him.⁷⁵

Three additional features of this report are noteworthy. Like the previous hadith report, this hadith also affirms that the Prophet himself is the source of the idea that numbers at the *janaza* prayer matter. Here, however, the number required is forty Muslims, and the result is the same: God will “accept them as intercessors for him.” A person who accepts the hadith corpus as authoritative and authentic might choose to see the variance in the number of intercessors required as evidence that this is a separate statement of the Prophet from a different occasion, rather than a contradiction with the earlier hadith statement.

Secondly, the addition in this report of a qualifying statement about the forty men as those who “associate nothing with Allah” is worth a careful look, and was noticed by Rajshahi ‘ulama’ who commented on these passages (see below). The third thing that stands out, however, is how ‘Abdallah b. ‘Abbas, the subject in this account, waited to bring out the dead body of his son until he was informed of the number of people present and assembled for the *janaza* service. Being satisfied with the number (forty) he consented to bring out the body for prayer and burial.

Though my Hanafi informants never cited this passage as a good reason to delay the *janaza* service, nearly every Ahl-i-Hadith imam interviewed mentioned the nasty local practice of delaying the *janaza* and burial in order to encourage more Muslims to come for the prayer. This tendency within the Muslim culture of Bangladesh to delay the funeral until more Muslims arrive is so problematic that it has been warned against not only in modern polemical treatises, but also in older Islamic manuals like *Bihishti Jeor* and the government sponsored *Diniyat*.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Muslim, *Sahih*, bk. 4, no. 2072.

⁷⁶ “অধিক লোকের অংশগ্রহণের জন্য জানাযা বিলম্ব করা মাকরুহ” (It is reprehensible to delay the *janaza* so that more people may participate). Editing Committee, *Diniyat*, 216.

Interpretations of these hadith by Hanafi leadership fall in line with the seemingly straightforward message contained in the reports, and also reflects the general practice of the Hanafi majority communities in Rajshahi and the surrounding countryside. A local leader in a suburb of Rajshahi affirmed the benefits of large numbers praying at the *janaza* based on simple mathematics:

“It’s good if a lot of people go. It’s good because – say these five people pray, then he [the deceased] receives five ‘*neki*’. “When you say one ‘*alif*’, you get ten *neki*.” So again, when one hundred people say one ‘*alif*’ for me, then I get one hundred times ten *neki*. And if five people say just five letters of the Qur’an, then it’s five times ten equals fifty – I get fifty *so’ab*. But if one hundred pray, I get even more *so’ab*. This is why it is better for the deceased if more people pray more prayers on his behalf.”⁷⁷

Two professional Hanafi imams at different mosques expanded on the hadith reports about forty and one hundred people praying at a *janaza* by spontaneously citing another popular tradition from memory (without references):

“In the hadith it states: ‘Whenever forty people are gathered at a *janaza* – any forty people – any gathering – any seminar – there is always one good person in the group, one righteous person. And in a *jamaat* when just one [righteous] person is present for prayer, if just one person’s prayer (*namaz*) is accepted by God, then God accepts the prayer (*namaz*) of the whole group. It’s in the hadith.”⁷⁸

In this way, the Hanafi imams seemed to indicate a consistent spiritual law about groups generally, namely, that whenever there are forty Muslims (or people more generally) present, there is always at least one especially pious person in the group. And it is on account of this person’s piety that the prayers of the whole group are sometimes acceptable, and it is also due to this person’s presence that the object of the prayers is granted. One of the imams

⁷⁷ “অনেক লোক যাওয়া ভাল। এইজন্য ভাল যে, আমি ধরেন, এই পাঁচটা মানুষ দোয়া করছে, সে পাঁচটা আমল পাচ্ছে – একটা ‘আলিফ’ বললে, দশটা নেকি হয়। তাহলে আবার একশ জন যদি আমার জন্য ‘আলিফ’ বলে, তাহলে একশ দশে কথা বলছে। তাহলে আমার জন্য পাঁচজন যদি পাঁচটা ‘আলিফ’ বলে, তাহলে আপনার পাঁচ-দশে পঞ্চাশ আমার সওয়াব হল। কিন্তু একশ জন যদি বলে, তাহলে আমার আরও সওয়াব হল। ওই জন্য বেশি ব্যক্তিদের বেশি দোয়া করলে তার জন্য ভাল হয়”। Interview: Lotifa Sharmin. 3 January, 2008. Rajshahi.

⁷⁸ “হাদিসে আছে – চল্লিশজন ব্যক্তি জানাযায় থাকলে – যেকোন চল্লিশজন – যেকোন মযমাতে – যে কোন সেমিনারে – তার ভিতরে একজন ভাল মানুষ থাকে, একজন নেককার থাকে। এবং একটা জামাতের মধ্যে একজন ব্যক্তি যদি থাকে, যদি দোয়া করে, এক জনের নামায যদি কবুল হয়, তাহলে আল্লাহ-তা’আলা সবার নামাযই কবুল করবে। হাদিসে আছে”। Interview: Hafez Maulana Abdul Aziz. 7 December, 2007 . Rajshahi.

further explained that when one such righteous person is present in a given situation, such as a funeral prayer or *milad* service, God “cuts a little ‘slack’ – the [dead] person is given salvation to a certain extent on his behalf. The hadith is accurate from this point of view: on his behalf [the deceased] receives forgiveness. He’s given some ‘slack’, since forty people together are interceding to God on his behalf.”⁷⁹

‘Ulama’ at the reformist Aliganj Dar-us-Sunnat Alim Madrasa reflected at length on the possible interpretation of the hadith under consideration. One of the teachers felt compelled to highlight the phrase “forty men who associate nothing with Allah” as a special prerequisite to such a situation bearing an effect on the deceased. Since “associating” in this passage is from the Arabic root for *shirk*, a major sin (or perhaps the greatest sin) in the Qur’anic understanding, this ‘*alim* felt that this phrase might hold the key:

“Many people around here are fond of saying that ‘education is divine’ and other such phrases. We don’t always realise how much we commit *shirk* [by associating other things with God]. So when this hadith says that the forty men who do not associate anything with Allah attend the *janaza*, that is significant. Such people’s prayers are significant.”⁸⁰

In spite of his position as a reformist ‘*alim*, this leader’s interpretation still does not erect a barrier to human agency in determining an individual’s outcome. The ‘*alim* places the operating principle at the level of the character of those attending the *janaza* – righteous persons’ prayers bear a powerful effect.

Certain Hanafi imams do display a grasp of the positions being contested by the Ahl-i-Hadith, as well as the ultimate theological concerns to which they relate. One Hanafi ‘*alim* was careful to note that while there certainly can be a good effect to boosting the number of people and the amount of prayer at the time of *janaza*, the deceased person’s record and character while living are vitally important considerations in *al-barzakh* and the Hereafter.

⁷⁹ “কিছুটা ছার দেওয়া হয় – কিছুটা তার জন্য নাযাত পাওয়া যায়। হাদিস এক দিক ঠিক আছে। তার জন্য কিছুটা মাফ পাবে। কিছুটা ছার পাবে, যেহেতু চল্লিশজন মিলে আল্লাহর সুপারিশ করছে”। Interview: Hafez Kari Muhammad Nurul Islam. 26 May, 2006 / 24 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

⁸⁰ Interview: Muhammad Abdul Mannan. 9 February 2008. Rajshahi.

This imam was careful to clarify that if a person is completely impious and not at all concerned with God during his life, then even if all the population of the world shows up at his funeral to say *janaza namaz*, it will not avail him anything.⁸¹

Both Ahl-i-Hadith and Hanafi leaders seemed to agree that since prayer is beneficial to the deceased, having more people pray is always helpful. But the Ahl-i-Hadith were careful to warn against delaying the funeral to increase the numbers. One Ahl-i-Hadith *‘alim* was cautious about the ‘Islamic-ness’ of desiring a large number at a funeral: “There is a belief in Muslim society generally that the prayers of more people bear a greater positive effect. This is why they say it is best if as many as possible gather at a *janaza*. But it isn’t right to delay the burial of the body for this reason.”⁸²

Another Ahl-i-Hadith imam says that many times local communities are guilty of stalling the *janaza* service until after *Jumu‘a* prayers on Friday, in hopes of having a large crowd ready-made for the funeral, and thereby securing more *so‘ab* for the deceased. But this is an un-Islamic practice, according to the cleric. One must bury one’s dead as quickly as possible and waiting for a crowd is forbidden.

A leader with reformist leanings at the Islamic Foundation in Rajshahi complained that for certain politicians or famous people, several *janaza* prayers may be organised,⁸³ for example, in Dhaka and in the home town of the person, so that as many as possible can offer prayers. To do this the body is carried from one city to the next. Additional ‘*gaibi janaza*’⁸⁴

⁸¹ Interview: Hafez Kari Muhammad Nurul Islam. 24 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

⁸² “বেশি সংখ্যক মানুষের দোয়া বেশি সংখ্যক কল্যাণ বহন করতে পারে, এই রকম একটা বিশ্বাস মুসলিম সমাজে আছে। এইজন্য জানাযায় বেশি লোক সমবেত হাওয়া, এটাকে উত্তম বলা হয়। কিন্তু এজন্য, লাশ কবরস্থ করার বাপারে বেশি দেরি করা ঠিক না”। Interview: Maulana Habibur Rahman. 13 December 2007. Rajshahi.

⁸³ This practice could be explored using Douglas Davies’ theory of ‘offending death’, deaths of certain individuals which create a public sense of grief and loss for large numbers of people. How does the Hanafi practice of holding multiple *janaza* services in different cities for national figures relate to this notion? Is this public response increased in cases where the figure dies violently, or too early in life, or due to an act of terrorism, as has occurred in inter-party political conflicts? This connection deserves further scholarly attention. See Douglas Davies, ‘Health, morality and sacrifice: the sociology of disasters’ in Richard K. Fenn (ed.) *Sociology of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 404-17; Douglas Davies, *Death, ritual and belief: the rhetoric of funerary rites* (2nd Ed.) (New York: Continuum, 2002), 211-12.

⁸⁴ গায়েবি জানাযা . Literally translated, this term is ‘absent funeral ceremony’.

services are also organised later by people in other cities even after a notable person has been buried. All of these extra-Islamic practices, says the leader, are “nothing but baseless superstitions.”⁸⁵

As with the first pair of hadith taken to local mosques and madrasas, these two hadith occasionally seemed to cause a brief moment of cognitive dissonance in the minds of my Ahl-i-Hadith interviewees, as was the case at Badurtola madrasa. Kari Aatur Rahman Khan had just finished a lengthy and emphatic monologue in which he emphasised that besides the ‘three which remain’,⁸⁶ *nothing else* could affect the dead after they die. In the same moment I asked him whether or not it was true that if forty Muslims attend a *janaza* service and pray without ascribing anything else with Allah, that the person will go to *jannat*. With unbounded enthusiasm he exclaimed that this was in the *sahih* hadith and it is true. After three or four seconds passed, a concerned expression seemed to cross his face, and he hastened to add, “*Allah take khhoma korte PAREN,*” emphasizing the last word (“God may forgive him”).⁸⁷ Thus, the madrasa teacher seemed to modify slightly his own last statement in terms of the firmness of his commitment to that position – this perhaps after noticing the potential incongruity of these statements.

Another well-known Ahl-i-Hadith figure used his own illustrations on more than one occasion to make a point of doctrine clear for me and the assembled madrasa teachers in his chamber. Regarding the hadith about forty and one hundred Muslims attending the *janaza*, Muhammad Golam Rabbani said: “Suppose that as madrasa principal I have a teacher who is extremely faithful to me and to the madrasa. Now that teacher, for some unavoidable reason is late to work one day. According to the rules, I put a red mark in his attendance sheet to record that he was absent or late that day. At that exact moment, the other teachers crowd

⁸⁵ “কুসংস্কার-গোঁড়ামি ছাড়া আর কিছুই নয়”। Maulana Habibur Rahman favoured using the word ‘*gorami*’ (fundamentalism/ extremism) interchangeably with ‘*kushongskar*’/ superstition), which did not seem congruous except that he believes that the Hanafi practices are obdurate and extremely reprehensible.

⁸⁶ Refer to pages 197-198.

⁸⁷ Interview: Kari Aatur Rahman Khan. 14 December 2007. Rajshahi.

around me and say, ‘Sir, he is your very faithful teacher.’⁸⁸ Won’t you please ‘look into it’? Won’t you see if you can’t ‘consider’ what can be done in this case?’⁸⁹ Will I not listen to them? Now how much more merciful and generous is Allah? He is totally, completely beyond our imagination in terms of kindness and generosity. He can forgive huge amounts of sins of his faithful. He will ‘*consider*’ – he will ‘*look into it.*’⁹⁰

This take on the hadith report emphasizes God’s mercy as well as his sovereignty. According to Golam Rabbani, God’s sovereignty is the ultimate determining factor in who gets forgiveness and who does not, regardless of infractions committed against his own religious rules. But he also allows his faithful followers to make petitions on behalf of their fellow-servants, and, according to this *‘alim*, seems inclined to listen.

Though *khotom* recitations, *bokshano* (transferring merit), and the decision about whether to hold *milads* during the forty days following death are the most publically contested points of practice between Ahl-i-Hadith and Hanafi Muslims in Rajshahi, other very closely related rituals also figure into the overall discourse about Islamic funerary rites. Hanafi attempts at delaying the *janaza* funeral prayer until more people can attend generate ongoing tensions between next-door neighbours and otherwise friendly *‘ulama’* from opposing groups. The generations-old custom of ‘gathering a witness’ from the survivors at the funeral adds a familiar sense of comfort to Muslim believers who have spent their whole lives in closely knit, compact communities. The community knows the deceased well – and as the authentic hadith show, the community affirms, and in some sense establishes the goodwill necessary to reduce any punishment in *al-barzakh* and provide for ‘heavy’ good deeds in the scales of judgment.

⁸⁸ আনুগত্য শিক্ষক।

⁸⁹ “তার বিষয়ে একটু দেখবেন – দেখবেন, একটু ‘কনসিডার’ করা যায় কি না...”

⁹⁰ “তিনি ‘কনসিডার’ করবেন – তিনি দেখবেন”। Interview: Muhammad Golam Rabbani. 24 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

But for Ahl-i-Hadith reformists who are at pains to establish what they view as pure religion, these community rituals dangerously impinge on essential pillars of divine cosmology – God’s foreknowledge and predestination of human destinies, as revealed in the Qur’an; and ultimate human responsibility for actions done in this world. In this environment, ritual choices can reflect and affect the way the community may ultimately perceive the nature of God and the laws of the universe created by him.

Dozens of Qur’an and hadith verses about predestination are known to Rajshahi Muslims. Reformists, for whom textual conformity is the highest value, are watchful that mere humans do not appear to be impinging on God’s omnipotence nor seeming to alter his divine foreknowledge – since God “leads astray whomsoever He will and guides whomsoever he will.”⁹¹ Affirming the dead by ‘gathering a witness’ and manipulating crowd size could be interfering with God’s will, since “God created for Paradise those who are fit for it while they were yet in their father's loins and created for Hell those who are to go to Hell. He created them for Hell while they were yet in their father's loins.”⁹²

Ideas of God’s pre-determination of individual lives are closely echoed in the Bengali notion of fate, or *kopal*.⁹³ Nearly as pervasive as thoughts about accumulating *so’ab* for the future are the daily references to the fact that our lives are really determined by *kopal*. This

⁹¹ Qur’an 14:4. On Qur’anic verses that relate to predestination, see also 2:272; 2:28; 2:88; 5:18; 5:40-41; 6:125; 7:178-179; 11:34; 11:117-119; 14:4; 17:16; 39:23; 39:37-38; 42:44-46; 76:31. A full analysis of this theological concept is outside the scope of the present work.

⁹² Muslim, *Sahih*, bk. 33, no. 6436. Many other authoritative hadith add colour to this concept, including Muslim, *Sahih*, bk. 60, no. 473: “Narrated ‘Ali: While we were in a funeral procession in Baqi Al-Gharqad, Allah's Apostle came and sat down, and we sat around him. He had a small stick in his hand and he bent his head and started scraping the ground with it. He then said, "There is none among you, and no created soul but has his place written for him either in Paradise or in the Hell-Fire, and also has his happy or miserable fate (in the Hereafter) written for him." A man said, "O Allah's Apostle! Shall we depend upon what is written for us and give up doing (good) deeds? For whoever among us is destined to be fortunate (in the Hereafter), will join the fortunate peoples and whoever among us is destined to be miserable will do such deeds as are characteristic of the people who are destined to misery." The Prophet said, "Those who are destined to be happy (in the Hereafter) will find it easy and pleasant to do the deeds characteristic of those destined to happiness, while those who are to be among the miserable (in the Hereafter), will find it easy to do the deeds characteristic of those destined to misery." Then he recited: 'As for him who gives (in charity) and keeps his duty to Allah and believes in the Best reward from Allah, We will make smooth for him the path of ease. But he who is a greedy miser and thinks himself self sufficient, and gives the lie to the Best reward from Allah we will make smooth for him the path for evil.'" (Qur’an 92:5-10).

⁹³ কপাল

widely held belief, which forms a strange congruity with Brahmanic Hinduism and the Indian environment in general, was related to me by poor Muslims in Rajshahi on an almost weekly basis: When a person is born, God ‘writes’ his life circumstances on his forehead (the words for *forehead* and *fate* are the same in Bengali). This is the fatalistic explanation for why one person must struggle as a rickshaw driver with too many mouths to feed, and another lives in a big house and is driven about in a private car.

Beyond maintaining respect for God’s omnipotence and omniscience through his expressed pre-determination of individual outcomes, a second theological concern of reformists is usually operational under the surface of such community discourses. This concern is to ensure individual responsibility for one’s *amol* – one’s record of deeds done in *al-dunya*. After all, the Qur’an repeatedly makes it clear that “there is not for man except that for which he strives.”⁹⁴ Maintaining a sense of individual responsibility for actions and a belief in divine punishment are as indispensable to social equilibrium in society as to maintaining Qur’anic exactitude. As Halevi asks, “What perceived effect did these rituals have on the dead? If Muslims viewed prayers, shrouds, and the other gifts they bestowed upon the dead as efficacious, were they not bothered by the possibility that they could alter a person’s fate, achieving for him in the afterlife a higher reward than that merited by his own record of faith and works?”⁹⁵

In this light, the contingency of *withholding* a *janaza* prayer for a dead person takes on new significance. Though it is rare, Hanafi and Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’ have been known to introduce this threat or even carry it out, based on well-known scriptural prohibitions against distributing the funeral prayer to unworthy individuals.⁹⁶ This eventuality not only threatens

⁹⁴ See Qur’an 53:38-39: “That no bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another; And that there is not for man except that [good] for which he strives.” See also 35:18, 36:54 and 6:164.

⁹⁵ Halevi, *Muhammad’s Grave*, 232.

⁹⁶ I only know of one case where a *janaza* and Muslim burial were withheld during my time in Rajshahi. Hanafi law proscribes giving the *janaza* prayer for heretics, *mushriks* (those who commit *shirk*), and apostates (কাফির, মুশরিক বা মুরতাদ); a person convicted and executed for killing his parents; one who dies while committing treason

the well-being of the soul who must face *al-barzakh* and the judgment without having received the *so'ab* of these community rituals – it also serves as a warning to the rest of the community to maintain the ideal Islamic standards of piety and social comportment.

But withholding the *janaza* prayer and other ritual blessings is not a policy that is actively pursued by either group of Muslims in Rajshahi as some kind of arrogant programme to *alter* God's sovereign choice regarding an individual's future. Rather, this extreme measure is only applied when the community fears that by *affirming* the dead person with proper Islamic burial rights, it might actually be transgressing what seems to be obvious evidence that the deceased is already under God's curse or has left the fold of Islam.

Herein we are faced with some of the paradoxes of religious faith, and specifically, of the practical faith considerations of Muslims living in Rajshahi in the first decade of the 21st century. A majority of Rajshahi's Muslims face questions of assisting dead loved ones from the simple perspective of practical utility – what will be of greatest benefit to the deceased in *al-barzakh* and how can I contribute to his or her well-being? Hadith and Qur'anic considerations are also important, but these must be made to fit coherently with the historical practices of the community, with expected social behaviours at the time of death, and with the emotional needs of survivors. The fact that there are well-known, accessible Islamic scriptures that point to conflicting notions of appropriate death rites suggests that these community debates are unlikely to go away any time soon.

against an Islamic state or while committing robbery; still-born babies; and a few other cases. See Editing Committee, *Diniyat*, 201; The Prophet Muhammad reportedly chose not to attend certain individuals' *janaza* prayers as a social punishment, but allowed the rest of the community to complete the rite – a practice that is emulated by influential Rajshahi 'ulama' (Interviews: November, 2007 – February, 2008. Rajshahi). For a fascinating discussion of instances of withholding or boycotting Muslim funerals in the early Islamic centuries, including accounts of the refusal to bury the third Caliph, 'Uthman, see Zaman, *Death, funeral processions*, 29-36. See Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 232-233, for a discussion of how God prevents 'ritual accidents' from ever occurring in the writings of Ibn Abi al-Dunya.

Chapter 6 – Evaluations and Direction for Further Research

Eaton has described the interaction of local Islamic contexts in South Asia with the universal norms of Islam as a ‘double movement’ in which people “living in different ages and cultures managed, without rejecting their local cultures, to incorporate into their lives a normative order as they understood it to have been revealed in the Qur^ʿan.”¹ As we have seen in this analysis of religious discourse, this ‘double movement’ is dynamically alive today in Bangladesh, where multiple visions of ‘lived Islam’ are being negotiated, challenged, defended and in some cases transformed. The presence of the modern Ahl-i-Hadith in Rajshahi is stimulating this process afresh for each new individual and neighbourhood where reformist influences come into contact with traditional Hanafi ways. The resultant discourses necessarily reflect local histories of conquest, migrations, earlier reformist movements, and many other forces that affected the Islamic environment in the Bengal region. The desire of contemporary local ‘ulama’ to preserve their historic position of authority and status in the community, as well as concerns about their own fortunes and livelihood in the face of religious reform tendencies, add crucial political and economic dimensions to the religious contestations unfolding here.

In this thesis we have listened to Rajshahi ‘ulama’ as they interpreted key hadith texts related to a specific theological debate of local importance – whether or not Muslim family and friends can perform actions which will benefit the dead during his or her stay in *al-barzakh*, and at the final judgment. While this particular case study offered a fascinating glimpse into currently contested theological doctrines between Hanafis and Ahl-i-Hadith groups, it also brought to light the contours of a living religious discourse in one particular South Asian Islamic context. Field research revealed that traditionalist ‘ulama’ in Rajshahi understand their ritual practices and faith positions in Islamic terms, not in syncretistic, local

¹ Richard M. Eaton, ‘Introduction’, in *India’s Islamic Traditions, 711-1750*, ed. Richard M. Eaton (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6.

or environmental terms. In each case examined, Hanafi ‘ulama’ rooted their beliefs and practices in authoritative texts from the Qur’an and Sunni hadith canon. Strong Islamic scriptural support for ‘traditional’ Hanafi death practices, like gathering a witness and ensuring large numbers at funerals, was seen to create a greater exegetical problem for the reformist Ahl-i-Hadith than for the traditionalists, who were able to take the relevant texts at face value. Other popular practices, such as *khotom* recitations, transferring *so’ab* (merit), and the numerous *milad* ceremonies to benefit the dead, were shown in Chapter Three to be rituals which are also widespread in the rest of the Muslim world, including the Middle East. This finding is all the more striking in light of the general Salafi accusation that these types of activities are un-Islamic innovations with dubious origins in the Indian cultural environment.

To conclude this study, we now turn to a few observations pertaining to the progress of Ahl-i-Hadith reform in Rajshahi, and look at the possible reasons why reform continues to have a limited reach. For over two centuries reformist programmes have been active in Rajshahi, but have seen only moderate success at transforming the traditionalist beliefs and practices of the local communities. We have already seen that the sources of religious knowledge themselves, the authoritative hadith, may be the most important reason for the difficulty that reformists have in transforming local religious practices (Chapter Five). But in addition to textual debates are the social realities of living and working in a religiously mixed community, the unavoidable contingencies that result from intermarriage between the two groups, and the financial concerns of the professional Hanafi ‘ulama’ which can be threatened by reformist programmes. In what follows we examine these additional dimensions to the discourses between the Ahl-i-Hadith and the Hanafi majority living in Rajshahi. Finally, we conclude this chapter (and thesis) with a speculative discussion that raises questions about the relationship of local reformist efforts in Rajshahi to the broader global Salafi movement.

6.1 The sliding scale of reform

Geographical variation. Discussions with informants suggest that Ahl-i-Hadith reform efforts in Rajshahi have been spotty. Various parts of Rajshahi City, such as the areas adjacent to Rajshahi University (Kazla, Binodpur), Hetimkha, and the larger Tikapara area, have been strongly influenced by reformist ideas, while certain other neighbourhoods, principally around Lokkipur and areas to the west of it, have been less affected.² Each neighbourhood has its own history of settlement and migration from the Partition period – histories which would make excellent individual research projects for young scholars. Where highly conservative reformist families and institutions are more concentrated, they can collectively create an atmosphere of pressure on other individuals in a neighbourhood to conform to reformist ways or remain silent about traditional Hanafi practices.

Individual ‘ulama’ and others interviewed in the city were often limited to their own perspectives, and conflicting reports about the reach of reformist efforts in particular neighbourhoods highlight this dimension. It is quite impressive to hear imams and the madrasa principal at one large Ahl-i-Hadith complex declare that *khotom* and *milads* are practically gone from Rajshahi (*utiye diyeché*),³ while a madrasa principal in an important Hanafi mosque-madrasa complex less than ¼ mile away declares that “all” the homes in the area hold *khotom* and *milads* when a family member dies.⁴ One layman in another section of the city (Lokkipur) had not even heard of anyone forbidding *khotom*, *milads*, or the reciting of 125,000 *kalema* for the dead – “no one” has stopped doing these rituals, he claimed. “Everyone does all of these. It has not decreased.”⁵ Another non-clergy informant in the same neighbourhood claims that “100 per cent” of the households hold fourth- and fortieth-day

² There certainly are Ahl-i-Hadith mosques in these areas, but they are more rare.

³ “উঠিয়ে দিয়েছে”. Interview: Muhammad Golam Rabbani. 14 December, 2007. Rajshahi.

⁴ Field interviews. November, 2007 – February, 2008, Rajshahi.

⁵ “সবাই করে। কমে যায় নি”. Interview: Samsul Haque. 5 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

milads and arrange for *khotom* to be recited next to the shrouded body.⁶ In a suburb on the far northern side of Rajshahi (where the Ahl-i-Hadith have been most active), village religious leaders acknowledged that “very recently” they have heard others saying that if one’s own child recites *khotom* on behalf of a dead parent, it is effective (*kobul hobe*⁷), but that if others do it, it is not effective. These individuals followed this point with a discussion of “newly discovered scientific research”⁸ [indicating scripture-based rather than tradition-based teaching] which reveals that the *only* thing that will help a person who has died is the good works they themselves have done.⁹ These informants living on the edge of town seemed to be in the very process of integrating new reformist knowledge into their already substantial knowledge of Islamic doctrine.

Ahl-i-Hadith: “Doctrinal purity? Meet Bangladesh.” Reformist Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’ in Rajshahi do not seem to have internalised all of the official doctrines of their Ahl-i-Hadith organizations nor of the broader Salafi reform agenda. Two influential reformist ‘ulama’ strenuously forbade the fourth and fortieth day *milads* for the dead and laughed out loud when I mentioned reciting 125,000 *kalema* beside the shrouded body, something that is considered routine and essential in local Hanafi culture.¹⁰ But during the same interview, these two men spontaneously brought up the importance of the post-death *talqin* – the ‘coaching’ of the deceased in the grave on how to answer the questioning angels Munkar and Nakir (see Chapter Four). Other Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’ in Rajshahi also affirmed the legality and advisability of this ritual, whereas Hanafi imams strangely did not emphasise the *talqin* and some even advised against it. As the *talqin* is a hotly debated issue of conservative Salafi

⁶ Interview by author. 1 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

⁷ “কবুল হবে”

⁸ “নব-আবিষ্কৃত বৈজ্ঞানিক ‘রিসার্চ’”

⁹ Interview by author. 3 January, 2008. Rajshahi.

¹⁰ Interview by author. 13 December, 2007. Rajshahi.

reform in other Islamic contexts,¹¹ it is notable that it does not seem to be a primary issue in the religious discourse of reform in Rajshahi.

In general, Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’ in Rajshahi seem to have consolidated themselves around a modified Salafi position which allows them to participate in the extreme, purist distinctives of the broader South Asian Ahl-i-Hadith movement, while at the same time coexisting in a Hanafi majority environment where social relationships are highly valued. As it relates to disputes surrounding funerary rites, most importantly the fourth and fortieth day *milads*, the Ahl-i-Hadith have established a socially acceptable yet sufficiently reformist position by articulating their prohibition against treating *any day* as more special than another day for performing acts of *so’ab* accrual, while still permitting the ritual’s performance in general. Thus, Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’ roundly charge the cultural tendency of prescribing special days for performing rituals with having local animistic or Hindu origins.¹² Anyone who sacrifices a cow to feed the poor, or organises a *milad* on one of these special days because he thinks it is a divine command, will bring judgment on his own head instead of *so’ab*. All acts of benefiting the deceased must be spontaneously motivated, and therefore recitation in exchange for payment, as in the case of hired madrasa students, is strictly prohibited.¹³ The Ahl-i-Hadith critique the pervasive Hanafi customs by declaring that worshippers can hold such rituals on any day *except* the fourth or fortieth days!¹⁴ The salient point here is that acts to benefit the dead, including acts that might be considered un-Islamic in more rigorous reformist contexts, are allowed to continue with minimum censure by family and associates of Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’:

¹¹ Bowen, *Muslims through discourse*, 251-262.

¹² Field interviews. November, 2007 – February, 2008. Rajshahi.

¹³ Interview: Muhammad Golam Rabbani. 14 December, 2007. Rajshahi; Interview: Muhammad Shofiqur Islam. 13 December 2007. Rajshahi.

¹⁴ “জরুরী মনে করিয়া নির্ধারিত দিনে ইসালে সওয়াবের ব্যবস্থা করা বিদ’আত”। (It is *bid’a* to urgently try to collect *so’ab* for others because it is a specific day). Editing Committee, *Diniyat*, 222.

“You can feed the poor and destitute in order to send *so 'ab* to the deceased. Any time you like – but you shouldn't specify specific days for this... You can say any *dowa* – no matter how small – ‘*Alhamdulillah*’, ‘*La ilaha illa lah*’, [*sic.*] or longer suras – on behalf of the dead, and transfer the *so 'ab*. But it should not be done because it is a specific day or time. The main thing is passing *so 'ab* on to others.”¹⁵

We have noted earlier that the broader Hanafi majority generally considers holding *milads* for dead relatives to be a basic obligation of family responsibility – and that to neglect to organise a *milad* is a serious abandonment of one's duty and concern for loved ones, especially in the case of parents. In such a religious environment, it seems that the Ahl-i-Hadith are negotiating practices and norms so that they can continue to meet the felt spiritual needs of as wide a constituency as possible. An Ahl-i-Hadith community leader described one creative way that local Hanafi norms interact with strong reformist currents. This man's father was a strong proponent of Ahl-i-Hadith doctrines, along with most of the village elders in their home village near Rajshahi. *Milads* for the dead were socially proscribed. However, according to the community leader, the village elders subsequently adopted a system to allow for *milads* for the dead to be organised once per year during any night of the holy month of Ramadan. This *milad* is known by a different name – *majlis* – but in all other respects is exactly the same as the fourth and fortieth day *milads* of Hanafi Rajshahi:

“We don't hold the fortieth day *milad* [*chollisha*] – but we hold the ‘*majlis*’ for the dead person during the month of Ramadan. At a *majlis* all the local people are invited to a meal and fed; a cow is killed, and all the people in the village are invited for both the *iftar* [breaking of the fast at sunset] and the later evening meal. We did this at my own village home for my father the year before last. The difference is the Hanafis do this on the fortieth day and we Ahl-i-Hadith are doing it during the fasting month – we're holding the *majlis*.”¹⁶

¹⁵ “গরিব-মিস্কীন যারা, অসহায় ও দুস্থ, তাদেরকে খানা খাওয়ানো যায় মুর্দার সওয়াব পৌঁছানোর নিয়তে। যখন ইচ্ছা তখন। এইজন্য দিন-তারিখ ঠিক করা ঠিক না... যেকোন দোয়া, যত কমই হোক – ‘আলহামদুলিল্লাহ’, ‘লা ইলাহা ইল্লাল্লাহ’ – বা আরো লম্বা সুরাগুলো পড়তে পারে ও সওয়াব বখশিয়ে দিতে পারে। কিন্তু বিশেষ দিন-সময় ভেবে করা উচিত না। সওয়াব একজন আর একজনের জন্য করা হচ্ছে মূল বিষয়”। Interview by author. 13 December, 2007. Rajshahi.

¹⁶ “আমরা চল্লিশা করি না – কিন্তু রমজান মাসে মৃত ব্যক্তির জন্য মজলিস করা হয়। মজলিস মানে সমস্ত লোক দাওয়াত করে খাওয়ানো। গরু জবাই করে, অর্থাৎ, সমস্ত গ্রামের লোক ডেকে ইফতারের এবং রাতের খাওয়ানো। আমার বাড়িতেও গত বছরের আগের বছর আমার আন্নার জন্য করা হল। পার্থক্য হল, হানাফীরা করে চল্লিশ দিনের দিন, আর আমরা আহলে হাদিসরা রোজার সময়ে করছি – মজলিস করছি”। Interview by author. 31 December, 2007. Rajshahi.

In this way, the Ahl-i-Hadith may have accommodated the movement in some areas to the local history and cultural environment of the broader community. What is noteworthy is that the *majlis* ceremony for the dead which this man's family and friends observe is no more a part of Ahl-i-Hadith doctrine or broader Salafi reformism than is the Hanafi *milad* that the Ahl-i-Hadith want to remove from local Islamic practice. In fact, in the context of northwest Bangladesh, it is a new adaptation in the local environment.¹⁷

Intermarriage and social networks. The uneven reach of reform movements and pervasive traditionalist patterns serve to create an atmosphere where Ahl-i-Hadith compromise with local histories and structures is inevitable. Compromise is also made necessary by the bonds of extended families and the maintenance of social networks. Others have ably described the primacy of *shomaj*, or the local collective, in the Bengali cultural consciousness.¹⁸ Educated and uneducated Bangladeshis, almost without exception, demonstrate keen awareness of what the *shomaj* will say or think in relation to one's own actions and behaviour. "*Shomaj kharap bolbe*"¹⁹ ("*Shomaj* will speak poorly...") serves as a major social constraint, and parents usually discipline small children by telling them that people will think or speak poorly of them if they behave poorly – rather than speaking in terms of bad and good, or right and wrong.

Ahl-i-Hadith leaders, senior professors and other local religious figures openly admitted during interviews that they are required by their obligations to *shomaj* to attend Hanafi ceremonies that they reject on religious principle. More than one university professor mentioned attending important functions at the invitation of colleagues. In a personal

¹⁷ This is true of the Bangladeshi environment. Similar adaptations in other reformist traditions outside Bangladesh also occur.

¹⁸ This term is often rendered *samaj* according to the Sanskrit-based transcription systems of some scholars. Other studies have highlighted the importance of the *shomaj* in the Bengali social environment. See Peter J. Bertocci, 'Elusive villages: social structure and community organization in rural East Pakistan' (Ph.D. Thesis, Michigan State University, 1970); Jeff Kemp, 'Informal religious leadership in a Bangladeshi village' (Ph.D. Thesis, Edinburgh University, 1998); Philip Anthony Bushell, 'Shah Jalal(r): patron saint of Sylhet' (Ph.D. Thesis, Brunel University, 2006).

¹⁹ "সমাজ খারাপ বলবে"।

example of the ‘pull’ of *shomaj*, I joined a friend who is a business owner in the city to attend a *milad* whose purpose was to bless the opening of a new store established by one of his friends – even though the friend who took me along leans toward Ahl-i-Hadith ideology.

The reality of mixed marriages between Ahl-i-Hadith and Hanafi families presents the greatest number of challenges and compromises for reformists. Bangladeshis are intensely aware of extended networks of blood relations, and this network is doubled when a person gets married. Large families have the effect of amplifying these new networks of obligation and support exponentially. The vast majority of Rajshahi marriages are arranged by the families and not the individuals. In the traditional Bengali cultural model, the new wife is literally brought home to the husband’s parents’ home, where the new couple begins married life together in a ‘joint family’.²⁰ The new bride assumes a domestic life under the direct supervision of her mother-in-law.

When a reformist marries a Hanafi, he or she will very soon be asked to attend *milads*, participate in *khotom* recitations and otherwise be present at functions where he or she does not agree with the proceedings. Parents of the bride and groom will equally find themselves invited to an entire array of social functions which, in the case of mixed marriages, will present these parents with necessarily conscious religious choices. The son of the current *amir* of the largest Ahl-i-Hadith organization, Bangladesh Jomi’ote Ahl-i-Hadith, is married to a Hanafi wife. He is also the director of the movement’s powerful Jubo Shongho student wing. One of his associates mentioned to me that when the son’s in-laws pass away, the *amir* of the organization will attend their *milads*.²¹ Most of my informants similarly resolve such uncomfortable contingencies by acquiescing with physical attendance at *milads* and other rituals, but not participating in the objectionable aspects where reformist doctrine had proscribed particular activities.

²⁰ “পেঁজোখ পরিবার”

²¹ Interview by author. December, 2007, Rajshahi.

“When my father-in-law passed away – my father-in-law was Hanafi – my wife is Hanafi – but I’m Ahl-i-Hadith – I don’t do *milads* – I don’t hold *milads* in this house. But since my father-in-law passed away – I live in the same house – you need to hold a *milad*, if you don’t, *shomaj* will criticise you – [they’ll say] “No one prayed for him.” So I arranged a *milad* for him. I go to *milads*, yes, I myself go – this is a social custom [a custom of *shomaj*]. I go, I stay seated, but I don’t recite [the recitations]. This is a sort of responsibility.”²²

Children resulting from mixed marriages raise additional questions. Parents admitted to long-standing disagreements regarding whether their offspring should be taught to pray in the Ahl-i-Hadith or Hanafi style:²³

“Marriages are becoming more and more mixed. You’ve got Hanafis and Ahl-i-Hadith in the same family. Take my son, will he pray [*namaz*] like me or like his mother? We’re always having this conflict. His mom tries to get him to pray like her, and I...I don’t say anything, I just take him to the mosque with me to pray...then [he also has to decide] which way he’s going to pray – will he hold his hands here [at the belly] or here [at the chest]. We have problems along these lines...”²⁴

One Ahl-i-Hadith man who married a Hanafi wife recounted a story about the construction of their new home in Rajshahi. Upon completion, they just moved in and said a prayer of dedication, without a fancy, expensive *milad* to bring God’s blessing on the home – a tradition rejected by local Ahl-i-Hadith. When his wife’s relatives in a distant village heard that they had moved into the new home already without inviting them to the *milad*, they refused to speak with this Rajshahi family for several years. They completely refused to even

²² “আমার শ্বশুর যখন মারা গেলেন – আমার শ্বশুর হলেন হানাফী – আমার স্ত্রী হচ্ছে হানাফী – কিন্তু আমি ত আহলে হাদিস – আমি ত মিলাদ করি না – এই বাড়িতে মিলাদ করি নি। কিন্তু যেহেতু আমার শ্বশুর মারা গিয়েছেন, আমি একই বাসায় থাকি – মিলাদ করার দরকার, না করলে সমাজ নিন্দা করবে – “তার জন্য দোয়া হল না”। তখন আমি মিলাদের আয়োজন করলাম। মিলাদে আমি যাই, আমি নিজেও যাই – এটা হল সামাজিক শিষ্টাচার। আমি যাই, আমি বসে থাকি, আমি উচ্চারণ করি না। এটা দায়বদ্ধতা, আর কি”। Interview by author. December, 2007, Rajshahi.

²³ Hand positions, whether to recite ‘*Amin*’ and the *fatihah* out loud, and other aspects of *salat* are different, depending on one’s community.

²⁴ “বিয়েগুলো ‘মিস্ত্র’ হয়ে যাচ্ছে। একই পরিবারে কিন্তু হানাফী থাকছে, আহলে হাদিস থাকছে। আমার ছেলে, সে আমার মত নামায পড়বে, না ওর মায়ের মত পড়বে, এই ‘কনফ্লিক্ট’ সব সময় হয় আর কি। ওর মা চেষ্টা করে, তুমি এই ভাবে পড়ো, আর আমি...কিছু না বললেও, আমার ছেলে যাবে একসঙ্গে মসজিদে, নামায পড়বে, তখন সেও কোনটা গ্রহণ করবে – এইখানে হাত বারধবে, না এইখানে হাত বারধবে, এইভাবে সমস্যা হয় আর কি”। Interview by author. February, 2008. Rajshahi.

believe that he would not hold this dedication *milad*, and all indications to the contrary, accused the man and his wife of excluding them from the ceremony.²⁵

As a result of all these pressures of living in a overwhelmingly traditionalist atmosphere, the tendency is for the ideal reformist doctrine of the Ahl-i-Hadith to become mixed with traditional Hanafi religion. Put another way, it is difficult for reformist programmes to be completely successful in a religious environment where they are a minority, and where reformists are willing to marry and work side-by-side with Muslims who have different theological commitments. An Ahl-i-Hadith leader summarizes this point: “Here there is no such thing as pure Ahl-i-Hadith. Every family is becoming mixed. Due to becoming mixed, some Hanafi practices are entering the Ahl-i-Hadith, and some Ahl-i-Hadith practices are being adopted by Hanafis.”²⁶ It may be more accurate to say that, in fact, reformist and traditionalist doctrinal positions have rarely been consistently held and kept distinct from their rival positions in the Bangladeshi context.

Financial considerations. A common theme in Bengali folklore and short stories is the meta-narrative of the unlettered, impious *pir*, *fakir*, or imam from out of town who tricks a whole village population into supporting him financially in exchange for his religious services. Similarly cynical sentiments are kept alive in local Rajshahi culture by numerous less-than-qualified professional mosque imams who, according to local informants, ‘eat’ by doing religious duties.²⁷ Of course, the society easily distinguishes between these lesser imams and its highly trained, pious and accomplished scholars.

More than one lay Muslim among my informants accused local ‘ulama’ of promoting *khotom* recitations and *milad* ceremonies for personal economic gain. One middle-aged

²⁵ Interview by author. 26 May, 2006. Rajshahi.

²⁶ “এইখানে পুরো আহলে হাদীস, তা তো না। প্রত্যেকটা ‘ফামামি’ ‘মিক্সড’ হয়ে যাচ্ছে। কাজে, ‘মিক্সড’ হলে, যার ফলে কিছু সংস্কার তো... হানাফী সংস্কার আহলে হাদীসের মধ্যে আসছে, আহলে হাদীস সংস্কার হানাফীর মধ্যে যাচ্ছে – সেটা হয়”। Interview by author. December, 2007, Rajshahi.

²⁷ “ইমামতি করে খায়”

Hanafi resident confided that whenever someone dies in her neighbourhood, the local Hanafi imam comes around and says, “Hey, when are you going to hold the *milad*? You need to hold a *milad* for your dad’s well-being.”²⁸ She says that the imam knows he will be handed gifts in cash at the time of the *milad* by family members who desire him to pray for the soul of the departed. Another resident, an office employee, believes that *milads* and *khotom* are a way for *moulvis* (local clerics) to make a good deal of money without working very hard. There is no way, says the office worker, that the local imams would ever let the practice of *milads* fall by the wayside, as this would impact on their income directly. He describes the work imams and madrasa students perform for funerals as a mere economic arrangement between the family and the professional clergy:

“I brought him. He’s my worker – I’m the boss. I brought him as a day-labourer. What are his wages? 100 taka, 200 taka – feeding him two meals, or it could be three meals, good or bad food [depending on the household]. Starting from the day of the death, to the fourth day, then to the fortieth day *milad*, those who recite *khotom* eat well. This is the ‘condition’ – there is no other ‘condition.’”²⁹

Hanafi ‘ulama’ in Rajshahi have shown an aptitude for navigating the challenges which Ahl-i-Hadith reformism has brought. They have succeeded in preserving equilibrium in their own financial well-being and in the social life of the community by minimizing disruptions to family and mosque traditions. Maulana Rezaul Karim, described by local informants as a dyed-in-the-wool Hanafi traditionalist imam and madrasa teacher of considerable reputation, has managed to maintain a nuanced approach to differences of practice and doctrine called for by the times. While encouraging attendance at *milads* for the dead, he is able to articulate the merits of the Ahl-i-Hadith point of view with respect:

²⁸ “এই! মিলাদ কবে হবে? তোমার আন্নার জন্য মিলাদ করার দরকার...” Interview by author. 16 March, 2006. Rajshahi.

²⁹ “আমি তাকে ডেকে নিয়েছি। সে কর্মচারি - আমি মালিক। তাকে নিয়ে এসেছি পারিশ্রমিক হিসাবে। পারিশ্রমিক কী হতে পারে? ১০০ টাকা, ২০০ টাকা। দুই বেলা ভাল-মন্দ খাবার হতে পারে। মৃত্যুর দিন থেকে, চার দিনের দিন পর্যন্ত, চল্লিশ দিনের মিলাদ পর্যন্ত, যারা খতম পড়ে তারা একটু ভাল খেতে পায়। এই হল ‘কন্ডিসান’ - অন্য কোন ‘কন্ডিসান’ নাই!” Interview by author. 10 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

“Even within our Islamic religion there are various doctrinal positions, which we call *majhab* [Ar. *madhhab*]. The main four *majhab* – Hanafi, Shafi’i, Maliki, Hanbali – not one of these *majhabs* mentions this *milad* system with its accompanying prayers. [Instead], they teach that you can pray for the deceased person at absolutely any time.³⁰

Maulana Karim was even willing to concede the official Ahl-i-Hadith position that the local practice of organizing *milads* on the fourth day after death, the seventh day, the fortieth day and the one year anniversary, are due to Hindu religious culture seeping into Islamic practice over many centuries.³¹ The Ahl-i-Hadith position may be true, but it would be difficult to prove conclusively, given that similar ceremonies have been an important part of Islamic practice in the Middle East for hundreds of years, including services for the dead on the third/fourth day and the fortieth day following death.³²

Through adaptation and adjustment, Maulana Karim has been able to make the debate over *milads* and *so 'ab* accrual work for him instead of against him. He has done this by presenting himself as a type of Hanafi reformist leader who can still go out and come in among the (‘unlettered’) Hanafi masses, and is therefore able to bring a softer message of reform to the erring Muslims – albeit ever so gradually. The key for this scholar, teacher and imam is to accept all invitations to *milads*, thereby maintaining his own influence and the steady income that his stature and reputation have earned him – while at the same time bringing the ‘good news’ that *milads* are for *every day* of the year, not just special days. They can be arranged on absolutely any day – a position with which the Ahl-i-Hadith can hardly disagree:

So then, since *milads* are a part of society, we go on those special days, but we try to explain correct [*sahih*] doctrine. We tell them, “You can pray prayers [for the dead] any time; Don’t just call us on the fortieth day, on the third day, or on the one-year

³⁰ “আমাদের ইসলাম ধর্মের ভিতরেও বিভিন্ন মতভেদ রয়েছে, যেটাকে আমরা মাযহাব বলে থাকি। আমাদের মূল যে চারটি মাযহাব আছে – হানাফী, শাফেঈ, মালিকী, হাম্বলী – এই চার মাযহাবের কোন মাযহাবই এই মিলাদের ‘সিস্টেম’, যেটা দোয়া করা হয়, এটা তারা বলে না। তারা বলে, যে কোন সময়ে যখন তখন মৃত ব্যক্তির জন্য দোয়া করতে পারে”। Maulana Muhammad Rezaul Karim. Interview by Author. Digital recording. 6 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

³¹ Maulana Muhammad Rezaul Karim. Interview by Author. Digital recording. 6 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

³² Refer to section 3.7 of this thesis.

anniversary – you can call on us *any day*. You can go to the graveyards to pray every Friday. You can pray for your mother and father every day.” These are the things we explain to them.”³³

In this way the Hanafi *‘alim*’s status and income remain unaffected, or even potentially improve, due to his artful *rapprochement* with contemporary Ahl-i-Hadith influences. He simultaneously helps his congregants and students understand the criticisms of the vocal reformist minority and offers a gradual, less intrusive, way of absorbing the new religious information without creating unnecessary breaches with *shomaj*.

Bangladesh reformism in South Asian context

From the mid-18th century until now Bengal and North India have been the scene of repeated waves of reformist *da‘wa* (outreach), as noted in Chapter Two. While many of these movements and their leaders were successful in creating a following, the broader Muslim populations in the region never adopted the new doctrinal codes of these movements. Certainly, some of the more flagrantly un-Islamic practices were brought to the attention of the Sunni traditionalist *‘ulama*’, who gradually ceased celebrating Hindu festivals, Shi‘a *Muharram* observances and *ta‘ziya* processions, and the more overt forms of prostration and direct prayer to Sufi *pirs* (dead or alive). But it is still possible to find Sunnis doing all of these things and more in the Bengali countryside, as I have personally witnessed on numerous occasions. As Ahmad relates, “The practices condemned as heretical by the fundamentalist reformers a hundred years ago were found persisting at every level of Bengali

³³ এর পরেও, সমাজে আছে দেখে আমরা করি কী, আমরা যাই ওই দিনের দিন, সহিহ কথাটা মানুষকে বুঝাবার চেষ্টা করি। তাদেরকে বলি যে, “আপনারা যখন তখন দোয়া করতে পারেন; খালি চল্লিশার দিনে আমাদের ডাকা দরকার নেই, তিন দিনের দিন ডাকা দরকার নেই, বাৎসরিক দিন ডাকা দরকার নাই, আপনারা যেকোন দিন আমাদের ডাকতে পারেন। প্রতি শুক্রবার আপনারা কবরস্থান জিয়ারত করতে পারেন, আপনারা ‘ডেলি’ সকালে আব্বা-আম্মার জন্য দোয়া করতে পারেন”। এইগুলো আমরা বুঝাইয়া দিয়ে থাকি”। Interview: Maulana Muhammad Rezaul Karim. Interview by Author. Digital recording. 6 February, 2008. Rajshahi.

Muslim society as late as the 1960s...There is nothing to indicate that things are any different even today.”³⁴

The reasons for this lack of progress on the part of reformists, in spite of their sometimes spectacular efforts, is partially due to the understandable inertia that would result from centuries of dependence on the local *pir*³⁵ as guide in the absence of other more highly trained ‘ulama’, and as mediator with God in times of health-related, agricultural and economic crises. Local Muslims depended on immediate access to intermediary power in cases of sickness and need, and never effectively gave up on their patronage of tomb-shrines as special loci of power, or *tabij* (amulets produced by ‘ulama’) for cures.

Another important reason for the lack of religious reform at the grass-roots level was direct opposition from the Hanafi ‘ulama’, who preached against the reformist doctrines in their local constituencies and even participated in public *bahas* (debates) with reformist scholars to vigorously defend the Hanafi *status quo*. These ‘ulama’ sought to maintain their status as leaders and their livelihoods. After all, eliminating the buying of *tabij* (amulets), and *milad* services for important family and social events, would result in a direct reduction in their incomes and importance as religious mediators.

Reformist efforts did have other important side-effects on the population at large in Bengal and north India. The public agitations and staged debates which occurred between reformists and traditionalists brought out large crowds, who began to hear and see religion being discussed as if it were quite important. These public activities created a “breach in the *mullah* ranks, forcing open a period of religious debates and confrontations. In the long run, these conflicts had positive results: despite their explosive potentialities they created a new interest in Islam and the Islamic way of life amongst the divines as well as their lay

³⁴ Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 71. Ahmed further concludes that in the wake of some of the most vigorous, and even successful, reformist movements in north India in the 19th century, “a massive switch-over of allegiance from the traditional to the reformed doctrines on the part of the rural population may be altogether ruled out.” (50).

³⁵ See n.16 on page 53.

following.”³⁶ New interest in Islam on the part of nominal Bengal Muslims gradually resulted in a changing sense of personal and community identities, from locally bound or ethnic identities to an increasing acceptance of an Islamic identity. Muslim lay persons began to cultivate an awareness of the broader global *umma* for the first time. Locally, social solidarity and cohesion grew among the community as the British Raj created political systems in which population percentages of Hindus and Muslims had a direct bearing on economic provisions and political representation.

Today, contemporary Islamic discourses between reformists and traditionalists in other parts of South Asia have not been adequately studied, given that there are literally hundreds, if not thousands, of distinct Islamic social and religious contexts that could be investigated (there are significantly greater numbers of Muslims in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan than there are in the Arab world). Though it has not been sufficiently studied by scholars of Islam, the type of religious discourse that we have been examining in the Rajshahi context was recently shown to be occurring in certain other South Asian Islamic contexts, specifically among the Kerala Muslims of south India and the Chitrali rural Muslims in north Pakistan. The Osellas reported³⁷ that in Kerala the local Sunni population has divided itself into the oppositional categories of ‘Sunnis’ (Shafi’i traditionalists who oppose purifying reform), and a reformist group known locally as the ‘Mujahids’. The Osellas’ sensitively produced descriptions of the discourses on the ground in Kerala Islam preserve the nuances and paradoxical realities that occur when Islamic identities are being forged and contested. Marsden, in his field-based ethnography among the rural Chitrali of the mountainous Northwest Frontier Province in Pakistan, covers, among other topics, the “spirit of critical debate, which pervades village life” among the Chitrali.³⁸ He also documents organised religious debates (*bahus korik* in the Chitrali dialect) being organized by local Muslims. As

³⁶ Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 74.

³⁷ Filippo and Caroline Osella, ‘Islamism and social reform in Kerala’, 317-346; 320, 324.

³⁸ Magnus Marsden, *Living Islam*, 85.

more scholars invest the time and interest to learn about South Asia's many Muslim communities, there is reason to hope that more ethnographic material for comparison on this rich subject of reformist-traditionalist discourse will be forthcoming.

6.2 Local reform and global Salafism

Contemporary religious discourses in Rajshahi challenge current understandings of what it means to be a fundamentalist, Salafi Muslim in the 21st century. The normal expectation might be that the 'ulama' of the 'popular' masses with their 'unorthodox' practices based on allegedly un-Islamic origins would be the ones forced to resort to elaborate hermeneutical explanations of scripture. Here, however, we have examined a case study where the ultra-conservative reformist 'ulama' seem to avoid taking the most literalist meaning of the text, and instead offer various interpretations which do not necessarily suggest themselves in the scriptural passage. It is the Hanafis who seem comfortable with the more 'literalist' interpretations of scripture, while the Ahl-i-Hadith are forced to engage in additional hermeneutical steps. This realisation provides yet another important reminder that 'lived' Islam in local contexts cannot be forced to fit into neat, pre-defined categories based on conceptions of 'Salafism' or 'popular Islam'.

The observation above also calls into question the exact nature of the relationship of reformist doctrine to authoritative Sunni texts. Are the sources of religious knowledge and authority among the Ahl-i-Hadith really limited to the Qur'an, hadith and first three generations of Islamic history, as claimed?³⁹ Or is there another framework of knowledge and meaning constructed just beneath the surface of Salafi reformism here which is perhaps not even visible to some reformist scholars and practitioners? From an outsider's perspective, it does seem that certain aspects and passages of the hadith literature are being used by Ahl-i-

³⁹ Stéphane Lacroix, 'Between revolution and apoliticism: Nasir al-Din al-Albani and his impact on the shaping of contemporary Salafism' in *Global Salafism: Islam's new religious movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 60-61.

Hadith scholars to construct a streamlined, consistent Salafi reform agenda – at the expense of circumscribing or avoiding large swathes of the authoritative canon. What is the exact nature of this additional reformist matrix, if it really exists? What are the criteria and priorities being used to create the boundaries of the reformist programme, and is anyone consciously providing guidance to this process, or is it a natural result of other forces?

We noted earlier that religious discourses are necessarily rooted in local histories, but it is also true that they are intimately connected to trans-national Islamic identities and networks. For many centuries, those Bengali Muslims who were able to do so travelled to Mecca to perform the hajj, often staying on a couple of years or more to study under important Islamic scholars. Since the mid-18th century, these travellers have often returned with Wahhabi-inspired puritan zeal, as in the cases of Shah Wali Allah and Dudu Miyan who founded the Fara’idi movement, a pre-cursor to the modern Ahl-i-Hadith in Bengal.⁴⁰ With the general increase in wealth and the ease of modern air travel between Mecca and Bangladesh (including government-sponsored chartered flights), more local Muslim men and women than ever before are availing themselves of this spiritual opportunity, and with it the potential to have their own Islamic faith and practice altered.

Similar to the hajj phenomenon in terms of Bangladeshis crossing international borders is the massive number of Bangladeshi labourers who go for between two and ten years to work in Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., and other Gulf states, as mechanics, house servants and other types of menial labour. There are thousands of lower- and middle-class families in Rajshahi with at least one member who has had this experience and returned. Though some informants who returned from the Gulf complained to me of disrespectful treatment from the Arabs, others have been inspired to reform their own Islamic practices and even join mosques in Rajshahi which seem to promote a more ‘pure’ form of doctrine.

⁴⁰ See Chapter Two.

New communication technologies are similarly expanding trans-national connections between Salafi-minded Muslims at an unprecedented velocity. The internet contains thousands of reformist Salafi web sites, which promote the ‘true path’ by posting polemical treatises against traditionalist practices, making available video sermons by famous preachers, and providing printable versions of key Salafi texts.⁴¹ Online blog forums allow Muslims living in Britain to instantly reach like-minded Salafi reformist brethren in the blogosphere. These Muslims can consult with other Salafis when they have an urgent concern about the ‘Islamic-ness’ of accepting a Muslim friend’s invitation to a ‘*milad*’ to perform recitations for a dead relative. Computer-literate Muslim young people in the middle class of Bangladesh have these same opportunities at their fingertips.

Islamic television programming has been on the increase in the first decade of the 21st century in Bangladesh. ATN Bangla has had weekly Islamic shows for many years, but beginning in 2007, two new stations were opened and appeared on the bundled cable television package to which the majority of Bangladeshi households subscribe. The new stations, Islamic TV and Digonto TV, both air a steady diet of Islamic teaching shows. Popular preachers such as former Bangladesh M.P. Delwar Hussain Saidi, and the extremely popular Indian tele-preacher Dr. Zakir Naik, take aim on air at Muslim practices considered to be *bid‘a*, or alternately, at Christian, Hindu and secular world-views. Their sermons are also available for purchase as DVDs in thousands of local shops around the country.

Trans-national identities in Rajshahi are also extended by local Muslims’ own desire to be connected to a greater global discourse of Salafi reform, a desire which in many respects has been successfully realised. As mentioned earlier, Ahl-i-Hadith leaders interviewed in Rajshahi spent long years studying in Arabic at Medina University, considered the top Salafi institution of higher education in the world, or at other universities in Saudi

⁴¹ See www.assalafi.com, www.salafitalk.net, www.MuslimMatters.org, www.thedeenshow.com, www.halaltube.com. Some Ahl-i-Hadith websites are <http://ahlalhadeeth.wordpress.com>, www.ahlehadees.org, and www.at-tahreek.com.

Arabia. This is to say nothing of the important intellectual contributions that Indian Ahl-i-Hadith ‘ulama’ made to the early development of hadith studies at Medina University itself, a topic which has only recently been highlighted by Abou Zahab and Lacroix.⁴² Ahl-i-Hadith in South Asia have similarly been the beneficiaries of close collegial ties to Saudi Ahl-i-Hadith scholars from the late 19th century until now.⁴³ Earlier it was noted that there are over 17,000 registered madrasas in Bangladesh, but also many more that have been funded by outside channels and remain unregistered.⁴⁴ Until the attacks in the United States on 11 September, 2001, the largest Ahl-i-Hadith madrasas in Bangladesh enjoyed regular financial backing from Saudi and other Gulf sources of funding. Since that time, Western powers and the Bangladeshi government have disrupted some of these flows of funds, causing a direct impact to Ahl-i-Hadith programmes in Rajshahi.⁴⁵

In addition to the funding and construction of new madrasas there are the reformist-funded new hospitals, multiple large Islamic universities, banks and their accompanying micro-credit programmes – and the thousands of low-skilled jobs created in a country with high unemployment and insufficient jobs. Jobs created include positions for ‘peons’, office assistants, errand runners and other functionaries which are a normal feature of Bangladeshi

⁴² Abou Zahab, ‘Salafism in Pakistan: the Ahl-e Hadith movement’, 128; Stéphane Lacroix, ‘Between revolution and apoliticism’, 62.

⁴³ In the 1980s numerous Ahl-i-Hadith mosques were built in Pakistan and Bangladesh with Saudi funds. After the Gulf War of 1991, Saudi Arabia switched its patronage of Islamic reform groups in Pakistan from the Jamaat-e Islami to the Ahl-i-Hadith (due to the former’s support of Saddam Hussain). Mariam Abou Zahab, ‘Salafism in Pakistan: the Ahl-e Hadith movement’, in *Global Salafism: Islam’s new religious movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 130; On ties between South Asian Ahl-i-Hadith and influential scholars in the Saudi religious establishment, see the discussion in Stéphane Lacroix, ‘Between revolution and apoliticism’, 61-62; and Mariam Abou Zahab, ‘Salafism in Pakistan: the Ahl-e Hadith Movement’ in *Global Salafism*, ed. Roel Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 126-127 ; Ahl-i-Hadith madrasa graduates in Rajshahi discussed regular visits from Saudi funding representatives at their madrasas before the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US, and mentioned the names of specific Saudi organizations, including Al-Haramain, a charity foundation based in Saudi Arabia which was banned by the US and the United Nations as a terrorist organization. Interviews, January and February, 2008, Rajshahi; See report ‘U.S.-Based Branch of Al Haramain Foundation Linked to Terror’ (press release, US Department of the Treasury, <http://www.ustreas.gov/press/releases/js1895.htm> , accessed 6 February, 2010); and the website of the United Nations Al-Qaeda and Taliban Sanctions Committee (Committee 1267) (<http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/index.shtml>), accessed 6 February, 2010).

⁴⁴ Refer to page 61.

⁴⁵ Interview by author. 10 February, 2008, Rajshahi.

bureaucracy. These professional ties can create a sense of loyalty and gratitude from the destitute poor in Bangladesh – and this in turn can increase the ranks of the reformist Islamic body funding the particular institution.

The currents of the modern global Salafi movement, though non-directed and fractured themselves,⁴⁶ are integral to the identity of Ahl-i-Hadith leaders in Rajshahi. The reformists' religious conviction that they are following in the footsteps of the original Companions and Successors to Muhammad; the personal satisfaction that they are members of the 'saved' community; the religious confidence that is derived from a system of belief that offers coherent, decisive answers for day-to-day questions; and the continued financial sources that, in an otherwise depressed economy, funnel jobs, loans, scholarships and medical care to Islamically committed members, all reinforce the ties that Ahl-i-Hadith members feel towards the global Salafi community.

The case study of death-related belief and practice has turned out to be a productive means of locating and listening to the contemporary Islamic discourses taking place in Rajshahi. Research has shown Rajshahi to be a place where religious discourse is a vibrant and constant component of the lives of average working-class women and men, as well as professional 'ulama' and their madrasa students. It has revealed a highly textured theological environment where both educated and uneducated feel the need to consciously negotiate their own (or their family's) doctrinal position on specific public rituals meant to help the deceased in *al-barzakh*, while also maintaining social equilibrium and grappling with authoritative Islamic texts that challenge current customs and beliefs.

The discourse between Rajshahi's Hanafi 'ulama' and the reformist Ahl-i-Hadith leaders and institutions has been highlighted, providing just one example of this phenomenon

⁴⁶ Meijer, *Global Salafism*, 12-13.

to other scholars – the phenomenon of Islamic reform that is being played out in hundreds of locations and contexts within the subcontinent, each with a slightly different set of variables and unique local histories. Other slices of life from Rajshahi itself could be explored further in future studies to reveal additional layers of lived Islam in Rajshahi. These additional dimensions could encompass the influence of local Sufi *khanqahs*, the allure of Baul mystic cults, religious outreaches on university campuses, neighbourhood female *talim*⁴⁷ study groups, and the cross-currents of religious discourse which arrive in this small corner of the world in the form of Tablighi Jama'at short-term preaching groups from Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Muslim China and other places. These as yet unexplored religious facets of the composite experience of what it means to be a Muslim believer in Rajshahi would be welcome additions to knowledge about Islam in Bangladesh.

The modern and recent history of the Ahl-i-Hadith in Bangladesh, from mainly Bengali-language sources, was briefly sketched in Chapter Two. Much remains to be learned and understood regarding this vigorous and confident group of reformers who claim to have a support base of more than thirty-five million adherents in the subcontinent.⁴⁸ From field research in Rajshahi, it is clear that the attraction of Ahl-i-Hadith theology works in two directions. Because it presents a logical and tidy set of doctrines that eliminate seemingly incongruous superstitions and practices which do not mesh with other tenets of Islam, it appeals to many intellectuals who themselves are drawn to sincere piety and religious observance, but who may be liberal and peaceable in all areas of their lives. At the other extreme, it is now undeniable that in the last two decades the Ahl-i-Hadith mosques and networks of the northern suburbs of Rajshahi were the primary recruiting ground and formative areas for the nation's two most notorious terrorist organizations, the JMB and the

⁴⁷ Group instruction sessions, usually organized by Tablighi Jama'at, but also heavily attended by women affiliated with Islami Chattri Shongstha, the female student wing of Jamaate Islami.

⁴⁸ Muhammad Asadullah Al-Ghalib, আহলেহাদীছ আন্দোলন (*The Ahl-i-Hadith Movement*), see figures on 369, 381, 387, 472.

JMJB.⁴⁹ The fact that major intellectual ideologues for the Ahl-i-Hadith in Rajshahi, including Muhammad Asadullah al-Ghalib, were in the top leadership positions of the now banned terrorist organizations further indicates the dangerous, militant ends to which Ahl-i-Hadith doctrine can be turned. These topics deserve further dedicated research and scholarly publication.

⁴⁹ Refer to Chapter Two of this thesis.

Bibliography

Sources in Bengali

- Ali, A. K. M. Yakub. *Rajshahi-te Islam* (Islam in Rajshahi). Dhaka: Tamralipi, 2008.
- Amin, Maulana Muhammad Zaker. *Mrityu o hashorer age-pore* (The before and after of death and resurrection). Dhaka: Shorshina Library, 2005.
- Ayub, Hafez Muhammad. *Ahl-i-hadisder porichoy o itihash ebong majhab proshongo* (Ahl-i-Hadith identity and history, with reference to *madhhabs*). Dhaka: Ahl-i-Hadith Research Center, 2000.
- Ayub, Hafez Muhammad. *Milad, shobe borat o milad-un-nobi keno bida't?* (Why are *milads*, *shobe borat* and the *Milad-un-nobi bida't?*). Dhaka: Al-Islah Prokashoni, 2000.
- Boshiruddin, Maulana Khondokar Muhammad. *Dojokher ajab o behester shanti* (The wrath of hell and the peace of paradise). Dhaka: Beauty Book House, 2000.
- Editorial Board of Islamic Foundation Bangladesh. *Diniyat* (The book on *fiqh*). Dhaka: Islamic Foundation, 2004.
- Ghalib, Muhammad Asadullah al-. *Ahl-i-hadis andolon: utpotti o kromobikash, dokkhin eshiar prekkishoho*. (The Ahl-i-Hadith movement: origins and development, with special reference to the South Asia region). Rajshahi, Bangladesh: Hadees Foundation, 1996.
- Hasan, Hafez Mahmudul. *Ibadoter name procholito bid'at-shomuho* (Popular heresies done in the name of worship). Dhaka: World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), 2004.
- Hasan, Hafez Mahmudul. *Kobor-majar kendrik shirk-bid'at o kushongshkar* (Heresies and superstitions surrounding graves and tomb-shrines). Dhaka: World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), 2004.
- Islami shikkha, class five*. (Islamic education, class five; a government textbook for school children). Dhaka: National Education and Textbook Board, November, 2004.
- Jihadi, Maulana Abul Bashir. *Hashor diner bhayabahata* (The terror of judgment day). Dhaka: Qur'an-Hadith Research Center, 2001.
- Munshi, Al-Hajj Maulana E. K. M. Fazlur Rahman. *Baro chander fazilat o amal*. (Twelve months of virtue and good works). Dhaka: Bangladesh Taj Company, 2006 (6th printing).
- Qadi, Imam ° Abd ar-Rahim ibn Ahmad al-. *Daqa'iq al-akhbar fi dhikr al-janna wa' l-nar* (erroneously attributed on cover to al-Ghazali). Tr. into Bengali by Abu Sayeed Mu. Habibullah Khan, M.A. Dhaka: Shorshina Library, 1998.
- Rahman, Dr. Muhammad Mahbubar, 'Rajshahi City Corporation'. Forthcoming in *Banglapedia* (Encyclopedia of Bangladesh) revision. Dhaka: Bangladesh Asiatic Society.
- Rofikullah, Maulana Muhammad. *Behester meowa, ba adorsho nari shikkha* (The fruit of heaven: education for the ideal woman). Dhaka: Moshirekha Prokashoni, 2000.
- Saidi, Allama Delwar Hossain. *Porokaler Alochona* (Compact Disk / Discussion of the Hereafter). Dhaka: Spondon Audio Visual Center, undated/c. 2001.
- Siddiq, Maulana Abul Khayer Muhammad. *Mrityur age o moroner pore* (Before and after death). Dhaka: Shyamla Book Depot, 1997.
- Suyuti, Jalal al-Din al-. *Bushra al-ka'ib bi-liqa'i al-habib*. Tr. into Bengali by Maulana Muhammad Zaker Amin. Dhaka: Shorshina Library, 2005.
- Thanawi, Maulana Ashraf ° Ali. *Bihishti Zewar* (Heavenly Ornaments). Trans. Hazrat Maulana Samsul Haq. Dhaka: Emdadiyya Library, 2006 (orig. translation 1966).

English Translations

- Ashqar, Umar Sulaiman al-. *Paradise and Hell: In the light of the Qur'an and Sunnah*. Translated by Nasir Uddin al-Khattab. Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House/IIPH, 1999.
- Bukhari, Muhammad ibn Isma' il al-. *Sahih al-Bukhari*. Tr. by Muhammad Muhsin Khan. Ankara: Hilal Yayinlari, 1976.
- Ghazali, Abu Hamid al-. *Kitab dhikr al-mawt wa-ma ba'dahu*. Tr. by T.J. Winter. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1989.
- Ghazali, Abu Hamid al-. *Al-Durra al-fakhira. (The precious pearl: a translation from the Arabic)* Tr. by Jane I. Smith. Harvard University: Center for the Study of World Religions, 1979.
- Ibn Hisham/Ibn Ishaq. *Sirat Rasul Allah (The life of Muhammad)*. Tr. by Michael Edwardes. London: The Folio Society, 1964.
- Jawziya, Ibn Qayyim al-. *Al-Ruh*. Tr. by F. Amira Zrein Matraji. Beirut: Dar El Fikr, 1997.
- Kandhalvi, Muhammad Zakariyya. *Tablighi Nisab or Faza'il-i- Amal*. Tr. by Abdul Rashid Arshad. London: Anjuman-e-Islahul Muslemeen, n.d.
- Malik, Imam. *Al-Muwatta*. Tr. by Aisha Abdurrahman Bewley. Granada: Madinah Press, 1992.
- Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj. *Sahih Muslim*. Tr. by Abdul Hamid Siddiqi. Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf Publishers, 1976.
- Nawawi, Muhyi al-Din Abu Zakariyya' Yahya b. Sharaf al-. *Riyad al-Salihin (Gardens of the Righteous)*. Tr. by Zafrulla Khan. London: Curzon, 1975.
- Qadi, Imam °Abd ar-Rahim ibn Ahmad al-. *Daqa'iq al-akhbar fi dhikr al-janna wa' l-nar (The Islamic book of the dead)*. Tr. by °A'isha °Abd al-Rahman. Norwich: Diwan Press, 1977.
- Samarqandi, Abu Layth al-. *Kitab al-haqa'iq wa'l-daqa'iq*. Partial translation by John MacDonald. 'The Twilight of the Dead'. *Islamic Studies*, 4 (1965), 55-102.
- Tibrizi, Wali al-Din Muhammad b. °Abdallah al-Khatib al-. *Mishkat al-masabih*. Tr. by James Robson. Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf publisher, 1960.

Secondary Sources

- Abecassis, David. *Identity Islam and human development in rural Bangladesh*. Dhaka: The University Press, 1990.
- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 'Islam and the gendered discourses of death', *IJMES*, 25:2 (1993), 187-205.
- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 'Zones of theory in the anthropology of the Arab world', *Annual Review in Anthropology*, 18 (1989), 267-306.
- Ahmad, Aziz. *An intellectual history of Islam in India*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969.
- Ahmad, Aziz. *Studies in Islamic culture in the Indian environment*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964.
- Ahmad, Imtiaz, ed. *Ritual and religion among Muslims in India*. New Delhi: Manohar, 1984.
- Ahmad, Imtiaz and Helmut Reifeld, eds. *Lived Islam in South Asia: adaptation, accommodation & conflict*. Delhi: Social Science Press, 2004.
- Ahmed, Rafiuddin. *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: a quest for identity*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.

- Ahmed, Rafiuddin. *Understanding the Bengal Muslims: interpretative essays*. Dhaka: University Press, 2001.
- Alam, Arshad. 'The enemy within: madrasa and Muslim identity in North India'. *Modern Asian Studies*, 42, 2/3 (2008), 605-627.
- Alexiev, Alex. 'Tablighi Jamaat: Jihad's Stealthy Legions', *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter, 2005, 3-11.
- Antoun, Richard T. 'The social anthropologist and the study of Islam'. In *The study of the Middle East: research and scholarship in the humanities and the social sciences*, ed. Leonard Binder. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1976, 732-752.
- Antoun, Richard T. *Muslim preacher in the modern world*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- Arberry, A. J. *Sufism: an account of the mystics of Islam*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1950.
- Asad, Talal. 'Anthropological conceptions of religion: reflections on Geertz', *Man* (n.s.), 18:2 (1983), 237-59.
- Asad, Talal. 'The idea of an anthropology of Islam.' In *Occasional Papers Series*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1986.
- Banglapedia 2.0.0*. Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. Digital Reference Encyclopedia. 2002.
- Banu, U.A.Z. Razia Akhter. *Islam in Bangladesh*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992.
- Baxter, Craig. *Bangladesh: from a nation to a state*. Oxford: Westview Press, 1997.
- Bayly, S. *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society: 1700-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Bayly, S. 'Cult Saints, heroes and warrior kings: South Asian Islam in the making.' In *Religion and Public Culture: Encounters and Identities in Modern South Asia*, eds. K. Yandel and P. John. Richmond: Curzon, 2000, 211-232.
- Bertocci, Peter J. 'Elusive villages: social structure and community organization in rural East Pakistan'. Ph.D. Thesis, Michigan State University, 1970.
- Bertocci, Peter J. *The politics of community and culture in Bangladesh: selected essays*. Dhaka: Centre for Social Studies, 1996.
- Bisvasa, Sukumara. *Religion and politics in Bangladesh and West Bengal: a study of communal relations*. New Delhi: Institute of Developing Economies, 1993.
- Bloch, Maurice and Jonathan P. Parry (eds). *Death and the regeneration of life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Bowen, John R. 'Elaborating Scriptures: Cain and Abel in Gayo Society', *Man* (NS), 27(3) (1992), 495-516.
- Bowen, John R. 'On Scriptural Essentialism and Ritual Variation: Muslim Sacrifice in Sumatra and Morocco', *American Ethnologist* 19(4) (1992), 656-671.
- Bowen, John R. 'Death and the history of Islam in highland Aceh', *Indonesia*, 38 (1984), 21-38.
- Bowen, John R. 'Salat in Indonesia: the social meanings of an Islamic ritual', *Man* (n.s.), 24 (1989), 299-318.
- Bowen, John R. 'What is 'universal' and 'local' in Islam?' *Ethos*, 26(2) (1998), 258-261.
- Bowen, John R. *Muslims through discourse*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Bowen, John R. *Religions in practice: an approach to the anthropology of religion* (3rd Edition). New York: Pearson, 2005.
- Brown, Daniel. *Rethinking Tradition in modern Islamic thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Bushell, Philip Anthony. 'Shah Jalal(r): patron saint of Sylhet and Bangladesh'. Ph.D. Thesis, London, Brunel University, 2006.

- Bushell, Philip Anthony. 'Ritual Prayer and its consequences in the afterlife'. M.A. Dissertation, All Nations Christian College, 1987.
- Chakrabarti, Sumon K. 'Bangladesh: the shift in the balance of terror in South Asia'. *International Assessment and Strategy Center* (Alexandria, VA), March 13, 2006. Available at http://www.strategycenter.net/printVersion/print_pub.asp?pubID=96.
- Coffey, David. 'Admitted truths in Muslim-Christian dialogue : a study of William Muir, Sayyid Ahmad Khan and William Goldsack in 19th century India'. Ph.D. Thesis, Edinburgh University, 2003.
- Critchfield, Richard. *Shahhat, an Egyptian*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1978.
- Dévényi, K. and A. Fodor. *Proceedings of the colloquium on Paradise and Hell in Islam: Keszthely, 7-14 July 2002*. Budapest, Csoma de Koros Society Section of Islamic Studies, 2008.
- Davies, Douglas. *Death, ritual and belief: the rhetoric of funerary rites* (2nd Ed.). New York: Continuum, 2002
- Davies, Douglas. 'Health, morality and sacrifice: the sociology of disasters.' In Richard K. Fenn (ed.) *Sociology of Religion*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, 404-417.
- Dien, Mawil Izzi. *Islamic law: from historical foundations to contemporary practice*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
- Donaldson, Bess Allan. *The wild rue: a study of Muhammadan magic and folklore in Iran*. London: Luzac & Co., 1938.
- Dutton, Yasin. *The origins of Islamic law*. Surrey: Curzon, 1999.
- D'Souza, Diane. 'Devotional practices among Shia women in South India.' In *Lived Islam in South Asia: adaptation, accommodation & conflict*, ed. Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld. Delhi: Social Science Press, 2004, 187-206.
- Eaton, Richard M, ed. *India's Islamic traditions, 711-1750*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Eaton, Richard M. *The rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier, 1204-1760*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Eickelman, Dale F. 'Changing interpretations of Islamic movements'. In *Islam and the political economy of meaning*, ed. William R. Roff. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
- Eickelman, Dale F. 'National identity and religious discourse in contemporary Oman.' *International Journal of Islamic and Arabic Studies*, 6 (1989), 1-20.
- Eickelman, Dale F. 'The study of Islam in local contexts', *Contributions to Asian Studies*, 17 (1982), 1-16.
- Eickelman, Dale F. *The Middle East: an anthropological approach* (4th Edition). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002.
- Ellickson, Jean. 'A believer among believers: the religious beliefs, practices and meanings in a village in Bangladesh.' PhD Thesis, Michigan State University, 1972.
- El-Zein, Abdul Hamid. 'Beyond ideology and theology: the search for the anthropology of Islam', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 6 (1977), 227-54.
- Eklund, Ragnar. *Life between death and resurrection according to Islam*. Ph.D. Thesis, Uppsala: Uppsala Almqvist & Wilksells, 1941.
- Fernea, Robert and James Malarkey. 'Anthropology of the Middle East and North Africa: a critical assessment', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 4 (1975), 183-206.
- Fischer, Michael and Mehdi Abedi. *Debating Muslims: cultural dialogues in tradition and postmodernity*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990.
- Gaffney, Patrick D. 'Popular Islam', *Annals, AAPSS*, 524, (1992), 38-51.
- Gardner, Katy. 'Death of a migrant: transnational death rituals and gender among British Sylhetis', *Global Network*, 2 (2002), 191-203.

- Gardner, Katy. 'Death, Burial and Bereavement amongst Bengali Muslims in Tower Hamlets, East London', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 24 (1998), 507-21.
- Geertz, Clifford. 'Religion as a cultural system'. In *Interpretation of Cultures*, ed. Clifford Geertz. New York: Basic Books, 1973, 35-72.
- Geertz, Clifford. 'Thick description: toward an interpretative theory of culture'. In *Interpretation of Cultures*, ed. Clifford Geertz. New York: Basic Books, 1973, 3-30.
- Geertz, Clifford. *Islam observed: religious development in Morocco and Indonesia*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968.
- Gellner, Ernest. *Muslim society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Gibb, H.A.R. and J.H. Kramers. *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1953.
- Gilsenan, Michael. *Recognizing Islam: Religion and society in the modern Middle East*. London: Croom Helm, 1982.
- Goldziher, Ignaz. *Introduction to Islamic theology and law*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981 [orig. 1910].
- Gordon, Raymond G. *Ethnologue: languages of the world*. Orlando: SIL International, 2005.
- Halevi, Leor. *Muhammad's grave: death rites and the making of Islamic society*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Haykel, Bernard. 'On the nature of Salafi thought and action'. In *Global Salafism: Islam's new religious movement*, ed. Roel Meijer. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, 51-57.
- Herklots, G. A. and Ja'far Sharif. *Islam in India; or, the Qānūn-i-Islām: the customs of the Musalmāns of India; comprising a full and exact account of their various rites and ceremonies from the moment of birth to the hour of death*. London: n.p., 1921.
- Hours, Bernard. *Islam and Development in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Centre for Social Studies, 1995.
- Huq, Maimuna. 'The Politics of belief: women's activism in Bangladesh'. Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2006.
- Huq, Maimuna. Reading the Qur'an in Bangladesh: the politics of 'belief' among Islamist women'. *Modern Asian Studies*, 42, 2/3 (2008), 457-488.
- Hurgronje, C. Snouck. *Mekka in the latter part of the 19th century*. Tr. by J.H. Monahan. Leiden: Brill, 1931.
- Irwin, Robert. *For lust of knowing*. London: A. Lane, 2006.
- Islam, Sirajul. *History of Bangladesh 1704-1971*. Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1997.
- Karim, Anwarul. 'Baul', *Banglapedia: national encyclopedia of Bangladesh* (10 volumes), Dhaka, Asiatic Society, 2003.
- Katz, Marion Holmes. 'Women's mawlid performances in Sanaa and the construction of "popular Islam"', *IJMES*, 40(2008), 467-484.
- Kemp, Jeff. 'Informal religious leadership in a Bangladeshi village'. Ph.D. Thesis, Edinburgh University, 1998.
- Khan, Muin-ud-Din Ahmad. 'Muslim reform movements.' In *History of Bangladesh, 1704-1971*, ed. Sirajul Islam. Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1997.
- Khan, Muin-ud-Din Ahmad. *A History of the Fara'idi movement in Bengal*. Karachi, 1965.
- Kotalova, Jitka. *Belonging to Others: Cultural Construction of Womenhood in a Village in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1996.
- Lacroix, Stéphane. 'Between revolution and apoliticism: Nasir al-Din al-Albani and his impact on the shaping of contemporary Salafism.' In *Global Salafism: Islam's new religious movement*, ed. Roel Meijer. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, 58-80.
- Lambek, Michael. *A reader in the anthropology of religion*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.

- Lane, Edward William. *An account of the manners and customs of the modern Egyptians written in Egypt during the years 1833-1835*. London: East-West Publications, 1978 [orig. 1836].
- Lane, Edward William. *An Arabic-English Lexicon*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1955 [orig. 1865].
- Lapidus, Ira M. *A history of Islamic societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Lelyveld, David. *Aligarh's first generation: Muslim solidarity in British India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.
- Lukens-Bull, Ronald A. 'Between text and practice: considerations in the anthropological study of Islam', *Marburg Journal of Religion*, 4:2 (1999), 1-10.
- Maloney, Clarence. *Behavior and Poverty in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: The University Press, 1988.
- Mardin, Serif. *Religion and social change in modern Turkey*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.
- Marsden, Magnus. *Living Islam: Muslim religious experience in Pakistan's North-West Frontier*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Massignon, Louis. *The passion of Al-Hallaj, mystic and martyr of Islam*, 4 volumes. Tr. by Herbert Mason. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.
- Meijer, Roel. *Global Salafism: Islam's new religious movement*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.
- Metcalf, Barbara D, ed. *Islam in South Asia in practice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Metcalf, Barbara D. *Islamic Contestations: Essays on Muslims in India and Pakistan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Metcalf, Barbara D. *Islamic revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.
- Metcalf, Barbara D. 'Meandering madrasas: education, itinerancy and the Tablighi Jama'at'. In *The Transmission of knowledge in South Asia*, ed. Nigel Crook. London: SOAS, 1996 49-61.
- Metcalf, Barbara D. *Perfecting women: Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar: a partial translation with commentary*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- Metcalf, Barbara D. and Thomas R. Metcalf. *A concise history of India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Metcalf, Peter and Richard Huntington. *Celebrations of Death: the anthropology of mortuary ritual* (2nd Edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Metcalf, Peter. *A Borneo journey into death*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1982.
- Musa, Aisha Y. *Hadith as scripture: discussions on the authority of prophetic traditions in Islam*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008.
- Musk, Bill A. 'Popular Islam: an investigation into the phenomenology and ethnotheological bases of popular Islamic belief and practice'. Ph.D. Thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 1984.
- O'Shaughnessy, Thomas. *Muhammad's thoughts on death: a thematic study of the Qur'anic data*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969.
- O'Connell, Joseph T. 'Dilemmas of secularism in Bangladesh', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 11:1-2 (1976), 64-82.
- Osella, Filippo and Caroline Osella. 'Introduction: Islamic reformism in South Asia'. *Modern Asian Studies*, 42, 2/3 (2008), 247-258.
- Osella, Filippo and Caroline Osella. 'Islamism and social reform in Kerala, South India'. *Modern Asian Studies*, 42, 2/3 (2008), 317-346.

- Openshaw, Jeanne. *Seeking Bauls of Bengal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Pals, Daniel L. *Seven theories of religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Parkes, Colin. *Death and bereavement across cultures*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Rahman, Fazlur. *Islam* (2nd Edition). Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1979 (first edition, 1966).
- Redfield, Robert. *Peasant society and culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956.
- Riaz, Ali. *God willing: the politics of Islamism in Bangladesh*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004.
- Robben, Antonius C. G. M., ed. *Death, mourning and burial: a cross-cultural reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2004.
- Robinson, Francis. *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Robinson, Francis. *Islam, South Asia and the West*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Robinson, Francis. 'Islamic reform and modernities in South Asia'. *Modern Asian Studies*, 42, 2/3 (2008), 259-281.
- Robinson, Francis. °*Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic culture of South Asia*. London: C. Hurst, 2001.
- Robson, J. 'Hadith'. In *Encyclopedia of Islam*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960.
- Roff, William R. 'Editor's Introduction'. In *Islam and the political economy of meaning*, ed. William R. Roff. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
- Roff, William R. 'Islam obscured? Some reflections on studies of Islam and society in Southeast Asia', *Archipel*, 29(I) (1985), 7-34.
- Roff, William R. 'Islamic movements: one or many?' In *Islam and the political economy of meaning*, ed. William R. Roff. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
- Roff, William R. 'Whence cometh the Law? Dog saliva in Kelantan, 1937'. In *Shari'at and ambiguity in south Asian Islam*, ed. Katherine P. Ewing. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
- Roy, Asim. *Islam in history and politics: perspectives from South Asia*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Roy, Asim. *Islam in South Asia: a regional perspective*. Denver: iAcademicBooks, 2001.
- Roy, Asim. *The Islamic syncretistic tradition in Bengal*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- Saeedullah. *The life and works of Muhammad Siddiq Hasan Khan, Nawab of Bhopal*. Lahore: 1973.
- Sanyal, Usha. *Devotional Islam and politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Bareilwi and his movement, 1870-1920*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, 1978.
- Schimmel, Annemarie. *Mystical dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975.
- Schimmel, Annemarie. *And Muhammad is his messenger*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.
- Sharif, Ja'far and G. A. Herklots, M.D. *Islam in India or Qanun-i-Islam: the customs of the musulmans of India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1921.
- Siddiqui, Ashraf, ed. *Bangladesh District Gazetteers: Rajshahi*. Dhaka: Bangladesh Government Press, 1976.
- Siddiqi, Muhammad Zubayr. *Hadith literature: its origin, development and special features*. Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993.
- Sijapati, Megan Adamson. 'Shaping Muslim Identities: Alterity, Conflict and Islamic Revival in Nepal'. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2007.

- Sikand, Yoginder. 'Arya Shuddhi and Muslim Tabligh: Muslim reactions to Arya Samaj proselytization (1923-1930)'. In *Religious conversion in India: modes, motivations and meanings*, ed. Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clarke. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Sikand, Yokinder. 'Shared Hindu-Muslim shrines in Karnataka: challenges to liminality.' In *Lived Islam in South Asia: adaptation, accommodation & conflict*, ed. Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld. Delhi: Social Science Press, 2004, 166-186.
- Smith, Bardwell. *Religion and conflict in South Asia*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976.
- Smith, Jane Idleman and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad. *The Islamic understanding of death and resurrection*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 [orig.1981].
- Spradley, James P. *Participant Observation*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1997.
- Spradley, James P. *The Ethnographic Interview*. Orlando: Harcourt, 1979.
- Tapper, Richard. 'Islamic anthropology and the anthropology of Islam', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 68:3 (1995), 185-193.
- Thorp, John Putnam. 'Masters of earth: conceptions of power among Muslims of rural Bangladesh'. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Chicago, 1978.
- Titus, Murray T. *Indian Islam: a religious history of Islam in India*. London: Oxford University Press, 1930.
- Tritton, Arthur Stanley. 'Muslim Funeral Customs', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, 9 (1939), 653-61.
- Uddin, Sufia M. *Constructing Bangladesh: religion, ethnicity, and language in an Islamic nation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006.
- van Gennep, Arnold. *The rites of passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.
- Watt, W. Montgomery. *Islamic philosophy and theology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1962.
- Watt, W. Montgomery. *Muhammad: prophet and statesman*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961.
- Westermarck, Edward Alexander. *Ritual and belief in Morocco*. London: Macmillan, 1926.
- Whittingham, Martin. *Al-Ghazali and the Qur'an: one book, many meanings*. London: Routledge, 2007.
- Woodward, Mark R. 'The slametan: textual knowledge and ritual performance in central Javanese Islam.' *History of Religions*, 28:1 (1988), 54-89.
- Woodward, Mark R. 'Textual exegesis as social commentary: religious, social, and political meanings of Indonesian translations of Arabic hadith texts.' In *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52(3) (1993), 565-583.
- Zahab, Mariam Abou. 'Salafism in Pakistan: the Ahl-e Hadith movement'. In *Global Salafism: Islam's new religious movement*, ed. Roel Meijer. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009, 126-142.
- Zaman, Muhammad Qasim. 'Death, funeral processions, and the articulation of religious authority in early Islam'. *Studia Islamica*, 93 (2001), 27-58.
- Zaman, Muhammad Qasim. 'Commentaries, print and patronage: hadith and the madrasas in modern South Asia'. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 62 (1999), 60-81.
- Zaman, Muhammad Qasim. 'Religious education and the rhetoric of reform: the madrasa in British India and Pakistan'. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 41 (1999), 294-323.