

BUT ‘YOU CAN’T RETIRE AS A ḤĀFĪZ’: FIELDWORK WITHIN A BRITISH ḤIFẒ CLASS

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Introduction

As outlined in his previous article (*MEQ*, vol. 23, No. 3 & 4, pp. 33-42), the author’s work as an education adviser within an Outer London borough with a large Muslim population gave him the opportunity to carry out research into Islamic education in general, mosque supplementary schooling in particular. Whilst the previous article focused on the former, this article will focus on the latter.

In order to find out more about mosque supplementary schooling for Muslim children, the author was welcomed into a large mosque which was used largely by a Gujarati-heritage community and followed Deobandi lines (see e.g. Ansari 2004, 346f). During a general fact-finding visit to twilight supplementary classes, he was led into two classrooms within which groups of boys were engaged in *ḥifẓ*, that is, committing the words of the entire Qur’ān to heart. At a later stage, he decided to focus upon one of these two *ḥifẓ* classes as a specific piece of research in its own right.

***Ḥifẓ* within the Muslim tradition**

Given core beliefs about the nature of the Qur’ānic revelation, Muslims have from the earliest days placed great store on remembering with total accuracy the Arabic words of the Qur’ān (as revealed to and passed on by the Prophet himself). These words were transmitted orally from one person to another, a process that has been likened to an apprenticeship mode of learning (Boyle 2004). Within Islamic history, the chain of transmission became of great value in that it substantiated and validated the accuracy of the process through which the original Qur’ānic revelation was passed on from one generation to the next (Mattson 2008).

Within this process, there were always some who, because of exceptional capacity to memorise and/or zeal, demonstrated that they were able to commit the whole text of the Qur’ān to memory. Such a person came to be known as a *ḥāfiẓ* (an Arabic word the root meaning of which is related to ‘preserving’) and, as ‘living Qur’ans’, achieved an honoured place within Muslim society.

Within contemporary Muslims societies, there are still many who achieve the title of *ḥāfiẓ*, some at remarkably young or old ages. There are also many who have embarked on the road of *ḥifẓ* but, for one reason or another, have not completed it. Though it is impossible to compute the exact number of living *ḥuffāẓ* (pl. of *ḥāfiẓ*) worldwide, this does not prevent some from hazarding a guess—such as seven

million.¹ But why does a (usually) young Muslim boy or girl want to take the arduous and difficult route to becoming *hāfiẓ* and how do they accomplish it? It was to answer such questions that the piece of fieldwork outlined in this article was constructed.

The nature of the research

Building on background reading and discussions with members of the Muslim community, the specific fieldwork took place in June-July 2004. The research question was 'what is the educational significance of their experiences in *hifẓ* class of a group of north-east London Muslim boys in mid-2004?'

Two methods of data collection were used during the research: general observations of the *hifẓ* class at work (using both a checklist and a ground plan to ensure focus) and semi-structured interviews with individuals or small groups of *hifẓ* class members. Some photographs of the *hifẓ* class at work were also used as prompts during these interviews (Nesbitt 2001, Norman 1991). A research diary was maintained in order to encourage reflexivity and reflection. An information sheet was also compiled on each student.

The outcome of the research was a substantial quantity of material: background notes from various sources (including Eickelman 1985), annotated ground plans (indicating both timings and movements), observation notes, interview records, information sheets, photographs and research diary jottings.

During the course of sifting, ordering and analysing this material, it was decided that clarity would be best served by grouping the findings under five themes: routes to the *hifẓ* class; the routines and rhythms of the *hifẓ* class; the students' perceptions of what they were doing; the sacrifice of becoming a *hāfiẓ*; and, *hifẓ* class and the rest of the students' lives.

The make-up of the target group

The number of students attending the *hifẓ* class during observation sessions varied from 10 to 17. In all, the researcher met with 13 students during the course of the observations, in some cases on two occasions, in order to obtain background information and response to a series of questions.

The students' ages varied from 8 years 1 month to 17 years 11 months. The average age of the group was slightly over 13½, the median age exactly 13. Three of the students were at a local authority primary school, nine were at local authority secondary schools, and one was undertaking a two-year apprenticeship.

The family backgrounds of the students not only reflected the historical development of the British Muslim community, but also the Gujarati roots of many of the families associated with the mosque in question. The majority of the students' parents had roots in Gujarat, some having been born there, families making their way to the United Kingdom via African countries such as Zambia and Zimbabwe. Two students referred to the Pakistani heritage of their parents, a third the Bangladeshi. In the case of one student, though his father had Pakistani roots, his mother was English-born and had converted to Islam.

All students were English native-speakers but family roots dictated what other language was used at home: Gujarati in most cases but also Bengali, Urdu and Panjabi. Eleven of the students had been born in north-east London, one had

been born in Lancashire and one in the United States before moving to London six years later.

The time that students had been members of the *ḥifẓ* class depended entirely on individual circumstances, there being no formal age for *ḥifẓ* class entry. The variation was between four months and a period of well over six years.

Theme 1: Routes into the *ḥifẓ* class

In conversing with the students, it became clear that there was no single route into the *ḥifẓ* class although there were two basic types: by 'self-selection' and 'teacher-selection'.

Typical of the former route was when a child showed interest in Qur'ānic recitation at home, this was noticed by parents who encouraged him further, the parents then approaching a mosque class teacher to ask whether the child could join the *ḥifẓ* class. There was then an 'interview' with the *ḥifẓ* class teacher, during which the child recited the Qur'ān. If the child's 'reading' was good enough, the child had a short trial period—often a week, but sometimes longer—before 'fully' joining the class.

There were variations on this theme, of course. Nasim (a pseudonym, like all other names used here), for example, said that he often heard tapes of Qur'ānic recitation at home, particularly on a Friday when 'Mum wouldn't let you watch TV'. This stimulated his interest, as did his older brother who was already in the *ḥifẓ* class and 'was enjoying it'. His father noticed his interest and suggested that he learn *Sūrah Yāsīn*² by heart. Nasim proceeded to do this both by referring to the text and by playing the recitation on tape. His father, impressed by this, spoke to one of the imams who arranged an interview with the *ḥifẓ* class teacher. Subsequently, Nasim attended the evening class, first for two hours, then for two-and-a-half and, finally, for the full three hours.

Jamil, on the other hand, had already had his interest stimulated by family tradition: 'A lot of my cousins have been *ḥāfīz* and had been sent abroad for further courses'. But a turning point came for him when he went on hajj in 1997 during which he had an auditory experience similar to that of many Muslims and others down the ages. Whilst in Makkah, he heard teams of reciters in Masjid al-Ḥaram (main mosque, lit. the Sacred Mosque). Some of them, he said, cried as they were reciting and it 'really touched my heart'. The result was that 'I wanted to copy them'. So, he told his father that he wanted to become a *ḥāfīz*, his father approached an imam at the mosque, and he joined the *ḥifẓ* class.

Typical of the latter route was when a child's aptitude and ability in 'reading' the Qur'ān was noticed at mosque school and the teacher then suggested to the parents that the child join the *ḥifẓ* class which he did after an interview with the *ḥifẓ* class teacher and a short trial period.

Tahir, for example, said that he was approached by the headteacher because 'he thought that my reading was good' and asked if he wanted to join the *ḥifẓ* class. He joined the class that same day.

In the case of Mukhtar, following his teacher's recommendation that he should try out the *ḥifẓ* class, he discussed it with his father who advised that he should. So, he had an interview with the *ḥifẓ* class teacher, because 'Before you start you have to be able to read it', and then joined the class.

In reality, of course, the two 'routes' into the *hifẓ* class often overlapped, as in the case of Kazim. Having read the whole Qur'ān in non-*hifẓ* classes at the mosque, he had already made up his mind to memorise the Qur'ān when his mosque teacher asked the students in Kazim's class who would like to 'go further into the *hifẓ* class'. Following recitation to the *hifẓ* class teacher, he then joined.

In talking with students about how they had come to join the *hifẓ* class, the issue of whether there had been pressure on them to do so was raised; this was important in the light of a view sometimes expressed by non-Muslim local authority school teachers and Muslims themselves that undue burdens are placed on their Muslim pupils who attend mosque classes. Without exception, however, the students were emphatic that there had been no pressure placed on them to join the *hifẓ* class. Indeed, they reported that the response of family members was usually cautious in that they checked with the boy to make sure that he realised the commitment that *hifẓ* class work would involve.

This is not to say, obviously, that families and friends were not proud of boys joining the *hifẓ* class (and thereby exerting implicit pressure), for this is clearly a thing of great family and community pride. Abdul, for instance, said that his grandmother had wanted one of her own sons to become a *ḥāfiẓ* but this had not happened. Consequently, she was delighted when her grandson decided on this course.

Theme 2: The routines and rhythms of the *hifẓ* class

For much of the year, *hifẓ* class students attend the mosque class for two sessions each Monday to Friday: an early morning session of about 45 minutes (6.30-7.15 am) and an evening session of three hours (5.00-8.00 pm). During the observation period, however, the early morning class was not in session because its timing clashed with dawn (*fajr*) prayers.

There was a measure of flexibility about which sessions particular students attended and for how long. Some did not attend the early morning session because of the distance of travel from home. As we have already seen above, new students usually staggered their entry into the evening class. Some students left the evening session early because of other commitments such as school work or, in the case of Jawad, because of a mid-week football practice. The rule, in each case, was that consent had to be obtained from the *hifẓ* class teacher.

The *hifẓ* class met in an upstairs room in the converted residential building on to which the purpose-built mosque prayer hall had been constructed. The small room was rectangular in shape with two windows, overlooking a residential street, on one side. Furnishings were, from a non-Muslim Western perspective, sparse; there was wall-to-wall carpeting with a smaller rug laid on top, touching the wall at the end that the teacher sat, but leaving a border on the other three sides. Of the three types of furniture in the room, one type was more significant than the others: the six wooden 'benches' used by both students and teacher, sitting alongside on the carpet, to rest their copies of the Qur'ān on. Except for a blackboard on the wall against which the teacher sat (and which was not used during the period of observation), the walls of the room were bare.

The physical positioning of the teacher and students was both significant and functional. The significance lay in the positioning of the teacher in relation to the

students. Only the teacher, who was addressed as Moulvi Sahib by the students (but sounding, to the untutored ear, more like Mow Saab), remained in the one place during classes, sitting on the rug with his back against one of the walls, with a single wooden bench in front of him, so that he could easily see all students. This both established his position of authority within the group but also meant that he could keep a watchful eye on students, intervening, coaxing or chiding when he thought it necessary.

To understand the functional aspect of the positioning of students, it is necessary to understand something of the 'rhythm' of learning that shaped the life of *ḥifẓ* class students.

Each student, at his own pace, was working through the 30 *sipārah* (Urdu; Arabic *juz'*) into which the Qur'ān is divided. The ideal is both sequential and cumulative. So, for example, a student might memorise a sequence of verses in the *sipārah* he had 'reached' during the early morning session: 'It's easier to learn in the morning', Umran said, expressing a traditional view. Then, arriving at the evening session, he would spend the first part of class going over those 'new' verses, reciting them out loud to himself to make sure that they had been remembered. At this point, he would be sitting 'off' the rug, facing one of the side walls with a bench in front of him. When he felt he was ready, he would then go to the teacher, handing him his copy of the Qur'ān open at the section he had learned, and recite the verses. In that there were other students also waiting to recite to the teacher, a 'queue' formed on the mat in front of the teacher's bench. Whilst they were waiting to be heard, students would continue reciting their memorised verses, using the Qur'ān as a check and a guide.

Once a student had been heard for the first time, with or without verbal corrections by the teacher, he would then return to sit in front of one of the side benches in order to 'revise' the section of the *sipārah* immediately preceding the new verses that he had just recited. When he was once again confident that he had remembered these, he would then either go directly to recite to the teacher or form part of the queue of students waiting to be heard.

Once the second visit was complete, the student would then revise a part of the Qur'ān that had been memorised at an earlier date, the 'completed' (that is, already memorised) sections of the Qur'ān being worked through section by section. Again, he would recite these verses to the teacher. Thus, in terms of the student's experience, each evening session was divided into three parts, each part consisting of oral revision followed by recitation to the teacher.

That this is an ideal can be shown in the case of Nasim, however. Like many of the students, Nasim maintained a written record of his progress on specially provided 'Notes' pages in his South African-printed copy of the Qur'ān. A review of these notes showed that he had started in the *ḥifẓ* class on 9 December 2002. He had completed the first *sipārah* by 24 February 2003, had completed the first half of second *sipārah* by 4 April, and the whole of the second *sipārah* by 19 May. But then the list showed that on 30 September, by which time Nasim had completed three and a half *sipārah*, he had 'stopped for dhur for two months'. One of the imams explained that, if a student was beginning to forget sections of the Qur'ān learned at an earlier stage, the teacher would halt his progress for a period in order for him to go back through those earlier sections so as to consolidate his memory.

Theme 3: The students' perceptions of what they were doing

As can be inferred from the above, membership of the *hifẓ* class involved an extraordinary degree of commitment from students. But why did the students want to become a *hāfiẓ* in the first place? This central question occupied a major part of discussion with the students.

Considering the age range in the class and the subtlety of the question, it is not surprising that student responses varied in terms of depth, breadth and detail. It proved useful, nonetheless, to categorise their responses in terms of 'religious', 'social', 'educational' and 'personal' reasons.

'Religious' reasons, those in which explicit reference was made to Islamic doctrine or beliefs, predominated and were usually the most substantial. At its most general, there was reference to the 'blessings' that accrued to both self and others from learning the Qur'ān by heart. There were, however, a number of specific references to the Hereafter. Kazim, for example, stated that 'We believe that if you become a *hāfiẓ*, you go to Paradise'. Some other students developed this further by stating that entry to Paradise was not only assured for oneself but also for others.

Another particular reference made by several students was to preserving the Qur'ān. Rafiq, for instance, made a reference to a story about an attempt to destroy all copies of the Qur'ān but this had been impossible because, in the case of those who had memorised it, it was 'in people's hearts'. A variation on this theme was the focus on preserving the text/sound of the Qur'ān as in, for example, Jamil's assertion that 'There will always be at least one person who can read the Qur'ān. This will prevent those people who want to change it'. Another more personal religious reason included Tahir's 'It is better for you as a person because you know the whole religion. When you become a *hāfiẓ* you remember God more'.

Social reasons for becoming a *hāfiẓ* were all related to the esteem in which the *hāfiẓ* is traditionally held within Muslim communities. Thus, the 'respect' and 'status' that would come with achieving the position of *hāfiẓ* were referred to as were the pride that parents and family would take, even more so in the case of Hassan, because 'There is no one in my family who is a *hāfiẓ*'.

Several students offered reasons relating to education and learning. At its most general, Umran expressed his response as a truism: 'It's better to push your education further, isn't it?' But other responses were cast within an Islamic mindset. Jamil, for example, said that 'You don't just do it for yourself ... someone who doesn't know how to read, you can help them to do this stage'. The reference to 'stage' here is explicable in terms of the immediately preceding focus of our conversation in which Jamil had explained that becoming a *hāfiẓ* was a kind of 'bridge' between learning how to read the Qur'ān and going on to higher Islamic studies. This simile had apparently been introduced to him by his cousin, himself a *hāfiẓ*.

Finally, several students responded in terms of personal factors. Abdul, for instance, said that becoming a *hāfiẓ* affected him as a person through making him feel 'clean inside', giving him 'a sense of peace' and by making him 'stronger inside'. Mukhtar, by contrast, said that it 'feels like you're achieving something'.

But, if these were the kinds of reason that students themselves gave in trying to explain what they were doing, both their language and their physical appearance were indicative too.

That memorising and reciting the Qur'ān is seen as a devotional activity was indicated by the use of the concept of 'prayer' by a number of students. In talking about what happens at both morning and evening sessions, for example, Rafiq said that he would 'pray a new page' in the former and 'pray one quarter of a *juz*', including the passage learned in the morning, in the latter. On being shown a photograph of a student reciting to the teacher and asked to explain what was happening, Maruf said he 'was praying to him and had to think quite a lot—to pray what [he had] learned before'. On being asked directly about the use of the word 'praying' in this context, Abdul's explanation could not have been clearer: 'When we're reading the Qur'ān we're praying—it's worship'.

The devotional dimension of what was taking place in the *hifẓ* class was also shown by the dress worn by students: the *topi* (cap) and the *thobe* (tunic). But, at a slightly more subtle level, it was also shown by the physical position that students adopted whilst reciting the Qur'ān: the kneeling position that is also one of the three basic positions of *ṣalāh* (prayer). The extent to which the rocking motion that both teacher and students adopted was a devotional as well as a mnemonic device is a tantalising one.

Theme 4: The 'sacrifice' of becoming a ḥāfiẓ

For a young Muslim to aim at becoming a ḥāfiẓ is no mean decision; not only will this involve years of attendance at classes and practice outside class hours, but also the continuous intensity of the work is highly demanding and requires extraordinary personal discipline.

The students in the target group, however, were fully aware of the demands of the path that they had chosen. When asked which kind of work was hardest—school or *hifẓ* class—Mukhtar had no doubt: '*Hifẓ*, but sacrifices have to be made'. Kazim also used the language of 'sacrifice' in saying that, even when you were tired after school, 'you have to sacrifice in coming to the mosque'.

Several students said, however, that once a person got used to the routine, it became easier. But that there were still difficulties to be encountered was illustrated by each of the two students who had recently become *ḥuffāẓ*. Bilal said that he had sometimes felt very low — 'I never thought that I would finish' — but that he had been 'encouraged to stick at it'. Abdul, on the other hand, stated that 'It's easy to learn it but it's hard to remember it'.

That there was also a different kind of demand placed on people aiming to become *ḥuffāẓ*, the demand of becoming a certain sort of person, was also referred to by a number of students in response to the question, 'What are the qualities of a good *hifẓ* student?' Though there were references to such things as having a good memory and 'reading' regularly, by far the greatest number of references was to spiritual qualities such as commitment and dedication (a group of students saying that, of the two qualities will and memory, the will was the most important), intention (a rich concept in terms of the key importance for Islamic devotion of *niyyah*) and respect for Islam. There were also references to moral and social qualities, such as: acting as a role model for others, including younger children; acting in a respectable manner; showing respect for elders; avoiding bad influences; and using no bad language.

The notion of both self-discipline and sacrifice assume even higher relief with the realisation that becoming ḥāfiẓ is not only an end, but also a beginning. Bilal and Abdul had recently finished memorising the Qur'ān and, in mid-May 2004, had both

recited the final verses in front of the male congregation after Friday jumma (congregational) prayers. Following their recitation, there had been hugs, handshakes and the giving of money followed by a meal at the mosque. In the evening, there was a meal at Abdul's house for family and friends as well as mosque teachers. Later still, the boys were presented with framed certificates. But, in the midst of all this celebration and sense of achievement (described by Bilal as an 'amazing feeling'), Abdul recalled, 'Then I realised what I had taken on and what I have to do now'. For, he now saw clearly that he was faced with the responsibility, not only of being a *ḥāfiẓ*, but also of behaving like a *ḥāfiẓ*. And more than this; the Qur'ān had been memorised but, unless it was repeated ('read' or 'prayed') regularly, the memory would fade. As Bilal eloquently put it: 'The easiest thing is to finish but the hardest thing is to remember'.

For the non-Muslim, the commitment, effort and single-mindedness required of those setting out to memorise the Qur'ān by heart might be difficult to comprehend. In the non-Muslim world, a helpful analogy might be that of the marathon runner. Most *ḥifẓ* class students found it a helpful image although one student quickly identified its limits. Maruf said that the image was indeed helpful but reflected that the marathon runner is training for the 'big day' whereas, for the *ḥifẓ* student, 'in the mosque every day is a big day'. And then, he added sagely, 'You can't retire as a *ḥāfiẓ*'.

Theme 5: *Ḥifẓ* class and the rest of the students' lives

The results of some recent ethnographic research has suggested that, for some Muslim children, the time spent at the mosque might have marked effects on their capacity to make relationships with others during out of school hours (Smith 2005). However, none of the *ḥifẓ* students expressed concerns about the impact on the rest of their lives.

This might have been due to interview conditions but also, perhaps, because of the firm yet flexible stance that the *ḥifẓ* class teacher appeared to take, particularly with older students as secondary school coursework requirements began to impact on their time. With the latter, the rule seemed to be that, as long as they showed commitment and carried on with their 'reading', they could miss certain classes or leave early on occasions.

It must be said, of course, that in view of the close relationships between teachers, students and family networks, the opportunity for students to take advantage of the flexibility that there was would be somewhat limited. Rafiq said that the relationship between student and teacher was usually good because 'all three parties [that is, student, teacher and parents] are involved', Bilal saying that the teacher became like a 'third parent'.

But what, in the perception of the students, was the effect of this 'sacrifice' on the rest of their lives? Were they conscious of 'losing out', particularly in relation to non-Muslim school friends? There was ambivalence on the part of one or two students, but the overwhelming response to this latter question was that they were not. When asked if there was ever a conflict between *ḥifẓ* class and school work, for example, Iqbal's response was, 'No, there's time to do things for school too'. Umran made an interesting differentiation, saying that *ḥifẓ* class was different to school and that 'Praying gives you energy'.

Indeed, a number of students said that they had found that they could apply memorisation methods and recitation techniques developed at mosque to their school work. Maruf, for example, referred to school GCSE English speaking and listening

exercises and said that these were 'certainly easier than if I hadn't been in *ḥifẓ* class'. Several others spoke about how, in memorising things at school, they used the same kinds of repetition and visualisation techniques that they had learned at mosque.

Concluding thoughts

In preparing for this particular piece of fieldwork, the author was surprised to find that, though there was a growing range of material available in English on the theme of education and Islam (e.g. Coles 2008), there was very little on the specifics of contemporary British Muslim supplementary schooling and no ethnographic fieldwork that he could locate focusing on the actual experiences of Muslim children, British or otherwise. This is surely a gap in research that calls out to be filled, particularly within the context of greater interest in the work and impact of madrasahs both nationally and internationally (e.g. Tan 2009).

There are also a number of other investigations that work in this field can suggest, including: the Western non-Muslim perception of the Qur'ān as a text as opposed to an aural experience; the place of memorisation as a distinct mode of learning in its own right; and the impact of mosque school learning on Muslim children's learning in mainstream school (Rosowsky 2001, 2008).

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2. *Sūrah* 36, believed to be 'the heart of the Qur'ān'.