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## Perspectives from the Field: Interviews with the *Alima* of Ladakh

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# Perspectives from the Field: Interviews with the *Alima* of Ladakh

Jacqueline H. Fewkes

This article is based on a series of interviews with a group of female Islamic scholars—*alima*—in Leh, Ladakh, who were the first four women from the region to receive a religious education in a formal madrassa (religious school). The women interviewed attended Jamiatus Salehat, a Deobandi religious boarding school located in Malageon Maharashtra (India), in the late 1980s. They graduated in 1991, returning to Ladakh to teach religion in the area. Today, these four women conduct public religious teachings for women in both Leh and Nubra valleys, and educate their family members about Islam as well. Segments of interviews conducted in 2012 with three of these *alima* of Ladakh are provided here to create portraits of the women that reflect their thoughts and experiences in their own voices. While these interviews illustrate the ways that local and global practices of ‘being Muslim’

are mutually constitutive, they suggest many other narratives as well. Unedited interview transcripts are therefore the focal points of this perspective piece to provide readers with a sense of other possibilities of interpretation and resist the formation of a dominating unified narrative.

**Keywords:** Islam, gender, education, Ladakh.

This article is based on a series of interviews with a group of female Islamic scholars—*alima*<sup>1</sup>—in Leh, Ladakh, who were the first four women from the region to receive a religious education in a formal madrassa (religious school). I began this project with the *alima* of Ladakh in 2012, with an interest in exploring women’s religious authority and how the embodiment of religious practice shapes gendered notions of being Muslim in the north Indian Himalayan region of Ladakh. At that time, I was particularly interested in considering this issue to explore how local practices of ‘being Muslim’ are shaped by global Islamic forces, and to discover how, if at all, local practices may in turn shape the *ummah*, the imagined global Islamic community.<sup>2</sup> I use ‘imagined’ here in Benedict Anderson’s sense of the term; that is, not to claim that the *ummah* is imaginary, but rather to draw attention to the ways in which it is conceptualized, and how that conceptualization process creates the community (Anderson 1983).

These four *alima*—Alima Bilquis, Alima Parveen, Alima Shakeela, and Alima Shaheeda—provided an interesting starting point for such inquiry. They had all attended an all-women’s madrassa called Jamiatus Salehat, located in Malageon (Maharashtra, India) in the late 1980s, and completed advanced theological degrees in 1991. Jamiatus Salehat is a Deobandi religious boarding school for young women established in the 1950s, and is reportedly the oldest religious schools for girls in India. Its establishment marked a significant step in women’s religious education in post-independence India, as previously young women received only private home-based religious instruction, without a formal institutional setting or degree. The madrassa teaches a variety of subjects including languages such as Urdu, Persian, English, and of course Arabic, as well as religious studies on the Quran and Hadith. Jamiatus’ classic *Dars-e-Nizami* curriculum includes a final year capstone course in Hadith that is characteristic of Deobandi madrassas (Zaman 2002). The degree is completed after five years of coursework. The materials studied are similar to that in men’s madrassas, although the women are also taught *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) which are related directly to women and what are considered to be women’s issues (Winkelman 2005). In interviews, the women who attend Jamiatus Salehat mentioned that they were also taught cooking and sewing. The Ladakhi *alima* recalled that while they were at school there were approximately 3,000 students in the madrassa, most from Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, and Manipur. They were the first students from Jammu and Kashmir, and there were also some international students from France, England, and Canada. In 2005 Jamiatus Salehat housed and educated approximately 1,500 students, 50% of which

were foreign students from Southeast Asia and “children of NRIs from the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States” (Winkelman 2005: 163). The faculty of the school is comprised of all women, as is the staff. Men are only employed in administrative positions in the school’s main office.

The four young women from Ladakh who attended this school graduated in 1991, returning to Ladakh to teach in the area. Today, these four women use their degrees in a variety of ways. Two of them are teaching religion in Islamia Public School (Leh), one is teaching Arabic classes at a local government school, and one is a housewife. They conduct public religious teachings for women in both the Leh and Nubra valleys, and educate their family members about Islam as well. One woman also offers religious instruction to children in her home. Since these four women have earned their religious degrees, they have instructed thousands of Ladakhis in religious topics, and inspired some younger women of their community to receive religious degrees from madrassas outside of Ladakh.

Prayer practices were initially the central focus of my interviews with these women, as *salat* (Islamic prayer) is a central feature of Islamic practice and considered by many to be central to notions of being Muslim. As anthropologist John Bowen has pointed out, however, while *salat* is a significant site of inquiry for studies of Islamic community—frequently iconic of belief, and a fundamental identifier of Muslim identity both in relation to other believers and to non-Muslims—the practice resists definition through a unified theory as it is “not structured around an intrinsic propositional or semantic core,” and therefore must be understood in relation to “particular spiritual, social, and political discourses” (Bowen 1989: 612–613, 615). If even such a fundamental, and seemingly orthodox, feature of Muslim practice is best understood as a collection of practices and experiences, the anthropological lived religion, then prayer provides a strong site for consideration of how the global *ummah* is comprised of practices located within individual Muslim communities. Bowen has also documented how what may initially seem like tensions between universal and locally specific concepts of Islam are actually part of multiple perspectives on historically formed tensions within international networks of knowledge and power (Bowen 2004). These are some of the issues and questions that initially drove my inquiry into the work of the *alima* of Ladakh.

At the same time, I was also interested in learning more about these women’s experiences as the first female scholars of Islam in Ladakh, and what their work meant for

thinking about gendered practices of religion in the region. Islam was historically introduced to Ladakh through a number of different methods. Pascale Dollfus has brought together many details of the political, military, and bureaucratic processes associated with the spread of Islam into Ladakh, pointing out the diverse cultural influences—Kashmiri, Balti, Turki, Tibetan, and more—that shaped the practice of Islam in the region (Dollfus 1995). Another major influence in the spread of Islam was trade in the Central Asia and the Himalayan region; as people traveled for profit, ideas travelled with them. International mercantile families involved with long distant trade in the Himalayas often sent male members of the household to areas such as Ladakh to establish their own branches of the family business, and many of these men married local women; even if kinship was not a deliberate strategy for optimizing regional trade participation, it was certainly an effective one (Fewkes 2008). Mir Syed Ali Hamadani, a fourteenth century Sufi scholar who is thought to have built the mosque in Shey, is commonly thought of as the first Muslim scholar to preach in Ladakh. However, as John Bray notes, while popular historical narratives of Islamic scholarship in Ladakh focus on Hamdani's role in the conversion of Ladakh, most recent scholarly works have suggested that Shams ud-Din 'Iraqi, a Nurbakshi from Kashmir who travelled to Ladakh via Baltistan, was probably the first scholar to gain converts in the region in the beginning of the 16th century (Bray 2013: 15). A majority of these historical Muslim traders, craftspeople, leaders, and scholars who would come to Ladakh were male, thus providing a masculine perspective on religion in the region, although a few Muslim women did come to the region through a system of international bride exchange among the ruling classes in Central Asia, Tibet, and parts of the Himalayas. Georgios Halkias has written about these Muslim queens, such as the Balti Gyal Khatun and Kelsang Drolma, and their influences on the practice of religion in Ladakh as patrons of Islamic culture, arts, and learning (Halkias 2011). Histories of Ladakhi Muslim communities and studies of Muslim institutions in the region have been predominantly male focused, with a few exceptions such as Halkias', and none have previously focused on Muslim women in the Leh district of Ladakh.

Such a study would have been difficult to undertake prior to the 1991 return of the *alima* from their schooling, as Muslim women in the Leh district had not usually gathered for primarily religious purposes. While Muslim women gathered as part of larger community celebrations such as weddings, and had significant roles in religious holiday celebrations within the household, they did not generally pray together. Women in Leh did not regularly attend

mosque, although the Leh Jamia Masjid would reportedly put up partitions to create a women's section for special occasions such as the observance of Laylat al-Qadr. In the absence of any religious collective, it is difficult to discuss the Muslim women of the Leh district as a religious community. As shown in these interviews, the presence of the *alima* in the Leh district prompted the formation of new groups, allowing for religious activities that had never before taken place, and thus was integral in forming a new public: the Muslim women of Leh district as a religious collective.

In addition to putting forward new voices that allow for a better understanding of gender and religion in Ladakh, this study of the *alima* in Ladakh has the potential to contribute to scholarly works about gender roles in Muslim practice outside of the region. As Jacqueline Armijo has noted, women in early Islam actively engaged with their communities as scholars and teachers, a phenomenon that lasted until the sixteenth century (Armijo 2009: 41). There is a long history of female scholars of Islam, one that has been most notably documented in Mohammad Akram Nadwi's forty volume biographical dictionary *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam*, which contains biographies of more than 9,000 female religious scholars (Nadwi 2013). The growing academic interest in these historical narratives and contemporary Muslim women's religious roles has meant increased discussion about female scholars of Islam and women's religious leadership roles in Muslim communities in the past two decades. The Ladakhi *alima* can offer a new perspective on women's mosques movements—reformist movements where women's piety reshapes religious thought and practice—that have been studied anthropologically around the world in works such as Saba Mahmood's study of the Egyptian women's mosque movement (Mahmood 2012) and Salma Nageeb's writing on women's mosque groups in Sudan (Nageeb 2007). These Ladakhi scholars provide a contrast to anthropological discussions of other Muslim women's scholarly roles in Asian Muslim communities that, unlike the *alima*, are based on traditional local roles, such as the *otinchalar* of Uzbekistan, the *pandei* of the Philippines, the *ahong* of China, and the *mudahim* of the Maldives (Peshkova 2009; Horvatic 1994; Jaschok 2000; Fewkes 2009). Thus, the Ladakhi *alima*'s work can also contribute to studies focused on producing broader understandings of women's roles in the global Muslim community and those interested in the gendered dimensions of revivalist movements in Islam.

The more I became engaged with the diverse potentials and nuances of these *alima*'s narratives, the more I realized that presenting them in the format of a traditional

research article simply did not do justice to the ideas presented. As you will read in the interviews below, these women spoke about more than just prayer practices or global movements; their stories were community oriented, yet also intensely personal. As religious scholars, the *alima* have specialized knowledge to support their own arguments. Choosing one particular strand of their narratives for the purposes of making my own argument about local-global relationships would omit several other strands, and perhaps even obscure the narratives significant to the scholars with whom I worked.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz pointed out in the 1980s that traditional ethnographic narratives commonly featured an intrepid anthropologist-hero who has risked all to present tidily organized facts to a homogenous group of readers interested in Others (Geertz 1988). These colonial narratives forwarded an Orientalist propagation of 'knowledge' as critiqued by Edward Said, coopting local voices and reshaping them into the utterances of dominating etic scholarly narratives (Said 1979; 1993). Taking seriously these critiques, and recognizing that my informants shared so much more than can (or should) be tidied into one (seemingly) coherent narrative of my own, I was challenged to rethink what I should do with these interviews. Ruth Behar's work provided guidance on producing well-written ethnographic descriptions, suggesting a focus on simply bringing forward voices from the field and shedding light on the dialogic nature of fieldwork (Behar 2007). To this end, I have attempted something new in this article; I have provided long segments of interviews with three of these *alima* of Ladakh in an attempt to foreground the perspectives of these women. These are meant to reflect their thoughts and experiences in their own voices with minimal anthropological interruptions that interpret, to avoid telling readers what each point or, even more problematically, what each woman, means. I have provided uninterrupted interview contents, offering only brief comments on some observed themes at the end.

Abdul Nasir Khan and I conducted these interviews to document these women's experiences in the summer of 2012 in Leh, Ladakh. We met with each woman separately, asking her questions about her work and experiences based on topics raised in earlier conversations. I present here sematic translations of the interviews, which were conducted in the Ladakhi language; every effort has been made to authentically reflect the ideas presented by the speakers. These excerpts have been selected to focus on two main themes in the interviews: the women's initial choices to attend a madrassa and the scope of their current work as religious scholars in the Ladakhi community.

I encourage readers to read these interview transcripts with attention towards any details of personal interest—a method that might help draw attention to questions that readers are already asking, or what types of questions arise while reading. These interviews can also be read critically, readers noting the gaps that appear when an omniscient narrator does not organize individual statements, and interrogating how the various types of narratives can and should be treated.

### Interview #1

[Fewkes]: *How did you become an alima?*

I attended Jamiatus Salehat. It is an international school in Maharashtra, in Malageon. This is how it happened. One day, Maulvi Omar Naqvi announced in the *masjid* [mosque] that there is a school for women in Maharashtra where girls can study religion. He said that if anyone is interested they should find out more about sending their daughter. Then my father came home and told me about it, that there is a school named Jamiatus Salehat, a madrassa for girls in Malageon. And he asked me: are you interested in going to this school? At that time, I was in tenth class, and I was really excited. Not just about studying religion perhaps, but about the opportunity to go outside of Ladakh for my studies. So, I decided that I would go.

Actually, I had been very interested in religion since childhood too, thinking that women should have a voice in religion, that we should have an understanding of our beliefs too, such as how to wear hijab, how to wear hijab in certain ways... so once I heard of this school I just thought that this is the right moment. I should go to pursue my education.

We were the first batch of girls from Ladakh to study in the madrassa. In fact, we were the first girls there from all of Jammu and Kashmir. We found that we were lacking in a great deal of knowledge. The students from the other parts of India had already been raised in an Islamic environment, so they were already knowledgeable. They were already covering, while we had never seen burqas before. Additionally, in our school people had never heard of Ladakh—they weren't even sure that it was a part of Jammu and Kashmir! It wasn't like today, when Ladakh is a fairly well-known place in India.

We studied at the school for five years, and then received our *alima* degree. After we finished, we came back to Ladakh and started teaching in Leh and Nubra. Some other people then started sending their daughters from Leh to the madrassa, and some other girls from Nubra went too

for education. But, we were the first ones, we four: Alima Bilquis, Alima Parveen, Almina Shakeela, and Alima Shaheeda.

*I'm interested in how communities benefit from having women scholars. What types of activities do you do in the community as a woman scholar?*

First of all, women have complex issues that they cannot talk about with men, so that is where we are really helping. Topics about the details of marriage, for example, they might not want to ask a man about this, but we can tell women what the Quran and Hadith say about it. Whenever we meet with a congregation of women we tell them: "If you have any issues to discuss please tell us, we are all women and can openly talk here."

Second, whenever there is a scholar in the family it benefits, as the scholar educates the whole family. The children, the family, the whole system in the house can be affected if there is a scholar present. We all benefit from Islamic knowledge in the family. So, women scholars can be better mothers. When a woman is educated in Islam it benefits everyone around her too. They educate the children, the husband, the neighbors, and the relatives of the whole house. So, we teach both in our families, and in the community. We can teach women how to pray namaz [Islamic prayer], how to do it properly. It is hard for a man to explain to women how to do this, and there are two different ways to pray, men's and women's. Wherever we go, we talk about prayer with the women we meet.

In 1991, we finished our studies and came back to Ladakh. In 1992, we began teaching here. In those times, at first, we actually began by teaching the other women how to dress. We would tell them how, for pray, women should cover all over. They should only show their hands and at their ankles, and cover their heads. In the old times women didn't really know this; they thought they could just bring a scarf to cover their heads to pray. We gave them the actual way of dressing for prayer, the real teachings.

*Do you work with the mosque or community organizations here?*

We are not members of the *anjuman* [local Islamic association], but whenever we have any issues or questions we call Maulvi Omar, or whoever is the imam now. We can call them, or sometimes they call us to ask us if we could work with a congregation at a certain place. During the month of Ramzan we run a congregation for women in the Tsa Soma mosque, meetings for the women. Every Sunday in the month of Ramzan we gather for afternoon prayers, and the women in this neighborhood nearby gather for *tarawih* [night prayers performed during Ramadan] there too. There are mosques in other areas, but this is the only

specific mosque for women. In other mosques they have partitions, with sections for women. And, in the newer mosques they have separate rooms for women. For Laylat al-Qadr, only on that night will women go to the other mosques to pray *tarawih*...other nights they pray *tarawih* only in Tsa Soma. Otherwise there's no special mosque for women, and women will usually just pray at home. In fact, Tsa Soma is not specifically a women's mosque. Because the regular prayers are held in the main mosque it is usually empty, so women use it during Ramzan for prayers. It's a nice private, covered area so women feel comfortable going there.

*What should Muslim women know? What are the main requirements for Muslim women particularly?*

There are five fundamental concepts for every man and woman, both, in Islam. And *iman* [faith], *tawhid* [the oneness of Allah], *roza* [fasting], *zakat* [charity]... these things are for both men and women. Then, there are other ideas that are specific to women. For example, women should take care of the family, husband, and also, educate others. A woman can educate others well. There is a Hadith when the Prophet (*Sallallahu alayhi wasallam* [peace be upon him]) was asked why men have the benefit of going everywhere, to the mosque, and women are inside the house, the Prophet (*Sallallahu alayhi wasallam*) replied that all the things women are doing inside the home are equal benefit to what men do outside of the home.

## Interview #2

*Thank you for agreeing to meet with me.*

Of course. If there a message that I can share that benefits others, and you spread that then it is good.

*How did you decide to go to the school in Malageon?*

In the beginning formal religious education wasn't offered in Ladakh. However, one day Maulvi Omar announced in the Leh Jamia Masjid that there is a religious college for women, and anyone who was considering sending their daughters should get the information from him. So, our fathers, including my father, went to find out more. I didn't know anything about it at first. My father was a *muezzin* [individual who performs the call to prayer] at the Jamia Masjid in Leh for five to seven years. He is knowledgeable about religion, although he wasn't able to get any formal religious education. He thought that he never had the chance to go to a religious school, although he had wanted to, so he sent me instead. He was thinking that after he died, at *quiyamah* [the Day of Judgment], Allah might give him a reward for this.

Once we arrived at the school we found that we were really quite ignorant about our religion. And, I came to appreciate how hard the Prophet Mohammed (*Sallallahu alayhi wasallam*) worked to spread this perfect message. Before I went to the college though I didn't have a particular idea about what these studies would be, I hadn't really studied religion. When I got there though, I became very interested in all the religious issues; I had never heard about some of the topics before.

When I was younger, before we went to the college, I was going to Islamia Public School in Leh. Baba Abdul Rahman, from the Khwaja family was teaching us Quran in school. At that time there were no women teaching Quran, but I was also studying it at home with my father. Back then we were reading the Quran just like everyone, just reading the Arabic. We didn't fully understand it. However, once we went to school we started reading the Quran and learned to understand the meanings of what we were reading. When you study Surah Fatiha—*Bismillaah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim. Al hamdu lillaahi rabbil 'alameen...* [continues to recite a few lines]—studying about the meanings of these really inspired my interests. After that, I wanted to understand the Quran in more depth.

*What types of work do you do now as an alima in the community?*

First, let me start from the beginning. After we finished our studies, when we came back to Leh from our schooling, we found that many people were ignorant about *purdah*, the covering of the head, the niqab, and burqa. People used to tease us, even grab us on the street, and say: "Oh look at them!" People would see us on the street and say to their family members: "Look at them, they look like ghosts." We were really heart-broken and upset about their attitudes. Then we started talking to each other and we said: "OK, look, Allah will give us some benefit, a reward, because we are making someone laugh and smile. At least if someone is looking at us and smiling we are doing some good by making them happy." In the beginning we faced a lot of hardships this way, especially from people who had never seen someone wearing a burqa with their hijab. There were some people who had already seen this, in Delhi and the cities, so they were fine, but going to the villages was sometime quite difficult for us.

Listen, we were saying to each other though: "the Prophet Mohammed (*Sallallahu alayhi wasallam*) faced great hardship straight on, and we are facing nothing compared to him." Thinking this way really gave us strength in our hearts. And, later slowly people started to understand that the niqab is worn by Muslims and what it is, what is *purdah*.

So, after we finished school for three years we began to continuously teach about Islam in different places, in the villages around Leh. We went to so many villages around Leh giving free religious instruction. We were going in groups into the villages, teaching women only about religion.

You know there is a Hadith that Allah told the Prophet Mohammed (*Sallallahu alayhi wasallam*) that you have a duty to share your knowledge: "whatever you have learned you have to teach." So, we have tried to do that. Whatever we have learned we went and taught in the villages. Before we were providing these teachings, Maulvi Omar used to teach both to men and women, but there were some personal issues for women that are hard for a woman to discuss with a man. Women can only express to another woman some things... about how to pray namaz, for example. Because before we taught, when only the men had taught Ladakhi women how to pray, Ladakhi women used to pray like men. There are certain ways you can arrange your body while you pray, ways of holding your legs for example, so they used to do it like that.

For example, when praying men bring their hands up to their earlobes, while women take them up to their shoulders. Or, for women, when you go to *ruku* [bowing down from the standing position during prayer] or *sajda* [prostrations], you arrange your body in such a way that it covers you. The women in Ladakh weren't familiar with these ideas, perhaps because they hadn't been taught this way. But now, because we have taught them, now women are praying in the right way.

It is up to the individual. If a person really has a genuine intention to learn, she will come and ask us. When we first came back from school there were older women who came to us to learn Quran, and some of them finished the Quran completely. But you know, there were some women even at that time who had religious knowledge, because they had that type of atmosphere in their houses; they had access to books and knowledge. There was actually a mixture of responses to our presence. It wasn't like everyone started flocking to us; it was just that there were some people who began to come to us to learn the Quran and ask questions.

When we taught the women Quran, they were really engaged and interested. It's important to understand that people here were not totally ignorant before, of course. In the old times people had that passion; they really wanted to understand more about Islam. You know, you can see that people already had the desire to do *purdah*, and were doing so in their own way. For example, there used to be

marriage ceremonies, and it was a custom that the women would only go from their houses with the marriage party after dark, so as to not to display themselves. They would go in the dark with someone carrying a lantern to light their way. Thus, they were concerned about their *purdah*. It's not that we transformed them; the people here were doing the best that they knew. But, they weren't always performing religious acts the right way, the way they were supposed to do them.

Today what happens is that the *maulvis* will tell us: "You have to go to Choglamsar or Leh." When they ask us to travel to these places then we go and teach women there. There is cooperation this way between the *alima* and the male scholars. During Ramazan we teach women at the Tsa Soma Mosque in Leh, and then everyone reads namaz.

*Do you lead the women in prayer there?*

No, everyone prays her afternoon prayers individually. The reason we pray separately is that there is no formal group prayer for a congregation of women. However, there is one condition that would allow for group prayer: if you are supposed to teach a group of women how to pray then you can do the *jamat* [praying in congregation, with a person leading] together. This is only for teaching them how to pray. Otherwise no, you don't have groups of women praying namaz.

*What should Muslim women know? What are the main requirements for Muslim women particularly?*

First, every Muslim should understand the need for prayer. That is the most important aspect of our religion because it keeps us from all other sins. When you pray namaz you are praying for Allah, nobody else. You have to understand that you are only praying for Allah, not simply for the sake of praying five times a day. Praying keeps you from negative things because you are always thinking about Allah. So, prayer is key, and therefore Muslim women should know this.

Also, for women... I have seen that people in Leh spend so much money on private tuition for their children, in science and other subjects. However, when it comes to *deen* [religion], they don't spend that much; they are not that much interested. If we find our children are lacking in science we get so worried and will find a science tutor anywhere we can. But, for the *deen* we don't do that much effort. But Allah says that if you learn the *deen* the rest will come easy. They don't understand this, and in the end if something happens then people tell us "Oh, why didn't you teach us that," or "If I had understood that before I

wouldn't have done that." Once you know the *deen* Allah also gives you the *duniya* [world], helps you in all things. And then you also know how to treat people properly, what are your own rights in dealing with others, and so on. In this way anyone who has learned the *deen* in the true meaning of the word will be a good person. That person will know their obligations towards others. For example, if they truly know the *deen* they would give their parents their due.

### Interview #3

*How did you decide to go to the school to become an alima?*

I went six months after the other three women from Ladakh who trained there. I was only in ninth class when the first three girls went, and I heard that they had gone to Maharashtra to get the *deeni taleem* [religious education]. It sounded very exciting. My father had heard about it, too, and we thought it sounded really interesting; there wasn't anything else like that available for girls at the time. I thought that if I went then I would learn more about religion, and I really wanted to know more about my religion. In Ladakh there wasn't any formal religious education at that time. But, in my home we had an Islamic environment, and I learned from my grandfather. I went to the Islamia School and studied the Quran there, that was it; there wasn't anything else available here.

So, I went with two other girls to attend the school in Maharashtra; we three followed the first three. But, the school was difficult, and the other two girls went home after a few months. Because we missed the first six months of school the teachers taught us separately at first, in separate rooms; we had to study double to catch up. But, later I caught up with the others and we were all together in all of our studies.

*What types of work are you doing in the community now?*

I stay at home. I give some teaching to children, who come to my house for instruction. In winter when there is vacation, then we go to *tabligh* [preaching or teaching] to different places; we get a request and I go with the other *alima* to give *tabligh*. But, I mostly stay at home.

*What types of things do you do when you go to give tabligh?*

We are teaching about namaz, *roza*, *zakat*—all of the fundamentals about Islam. We teach these things to the women. We also teach the women about how religion should impact their lives in topics such as marriage, raising children, and such.

*What is the benefit of having women as religious scholars in the community?*

Before people were really not praying namaz properly. They didn't know that it was very important, one of the most required actions for Muslims. But, now as we teach there is a culture, an atmosphere; in most of the houses now women are praying. And, whenever they have issues, they come to us and ask us about their problems, and ask what is the answer or solution in religion for that.

*What should Muslim women know? What is the main requirement for Muslim women particularly?*

*Purdah.* *Purdah* is the most important thing. Having *purdah* helps in everything else for women. In fact, the meaning of the word 'woman' is *purdah*. It's like this: the meaning of the term woman is 'hidden thing.' *Aurat* in Arabic means 'hidden thing.' There is a misconception in non-Muslim communities about *purdah*. Because they see women are covering their faces or wearing hijab they think Muslim women are oppressed. In fact, it is not true. In Islam women have a very high status; they are the most precious. Women are like diamonds, and if you have a diamond where will you keep your diamond? You are not going to leave it out, showing it to the public; you will keep it in a special place. Additionally, the work that women do, taking care of our children, our families—this is so valuable. This is a high status that only women can have.

## Conclusions

Since these interviews conducted in 2012 the *alima* have continued to focus on connecting Muslim women in the Leh district, offering conferences for all Ladakhi women with scholars from other parts of India and organizing women in villages to create grassroots religious networks. More Ladakhi women have graduated from madrassas in other parts of India and joined this initial small group of *alima*. These recent developments are promising potential sites for future research.

Many of my own readings of these interviews continue to be focused on how the *alima* demonstrate the local, regional, national, and global as intersecting systems of meaning that meet at particular crossroad sites such as women's prayer practices. The interviews suggest a number of processes that engender new meanings for being Muslim in Ladakhi communities. These include the development of alternative sacred spaces, as women's prayer congregations in the Tsa Soma mosque represent a significant shift in gendered prayer spaces in Ladakhi Muslim practice, as well as new forms of women's religious

leadership and authority through preaching and education. The *alima*'s activities in and around the Leh district represent the formation of a Muslim women's collective religious identity that did not previously exist. Yet, the narratives also highlight the role that various national and international institutional spaces have played in shaping the women's religious knowledge. The transformation of local bodies and spaces based on teachings of the *alima* are informed by the scholarly Deobandi movement, which is represented in their narratives as a global body of Muslims united through their engagement in a correct Islamic practice. The reformatory quality of the *alima*'s teachings in Ladakh is thus simultaneously validated by, and gives credence to, the concept of the global *ummah*. This is clearly signaled in the ways in which the scholars discuss *purdah*, which literally means a "screen" or "curtain," and more generally understood as the separation between the genders. The *alima*'s knowledge of *purdah* is informed by their globally oriented education at the Deobandi school in Maharashtra, yet also by their earlier upbringing and subsequent return to Ladakh. The epistemic divide between sites of local and global Muslim communities is shown to be porous at the very least, or perhaps even non-existent. To discuss the Ladakhi women scholars' practices as locally (or even regionally) informed is to obscure the ways in which they quite simply are not; to label them as part of a national or global movement would also omit segments of this narrative.

A number of other thematic strands are also woven into the narratives above; they offer views on the role of prayer in Muslim spiritual life, the significance of education, the symbol of the hijab, the development of gendered religious movements in Muslim communities, processes of socio-cultural change, alternative models of agency, and countless other themes. Considering the range of possible ways to read these interviews, I am reminded of Donna Haraway's warning that "the production of universal, totalizing theory is a major mistake that misses most of reality, probably always, but certainly now" (Haraway 1990: 223). Thus, I have attempted here to introduce some ideas of interest without forcing readings of one etic scholarly narrative, focusing instead on sharing the perspectives of the *alima* of Ladakh.

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## Endnotes

1. While the term “*alima*” is technically the feminine singular form of *ulama*, meaning scholars or learned ones, none of the *alima* that I worked with referred to themselves in the plural in this way. In general, during the conversations in Ladakh about these women, “*alima*” was used for both singular and plural forms or made plural with English influenced conjugation as “*alimas*”. I have chosen to preserve the colloquial use here, selecting the first version for consistency.

2. The term ‘*ummah*’ literally means ‘community’ in Arabic. In the Qu’ran it is used to refer specifically to a community that is religious in nature. The term existed in this sense in pre-Islamic Arab communities; Qur’anic usage of *ummah*, however, also emphasized the concept of oneness, or human unity, ideally unified by belief (Denny 1975: 37, 48-49). In spite of this etymology, many people today think of ‘*ummah*’ as having an intrinsically political meaning. While the role of the nation and international political movements are significant aspects of the contemporary discursive use of *ummah*, I focus here on *ummah* as a religious identity.

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