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Article

# Shedding Light on the Modalities of Authority in a Dar al-Uloom, or Religious Seminary, in Britain

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**Abstract:** ‘God is the Light of the heavens and the earth …’ (Quran, 24:35.) This article sheds light on the modalities of authority that exist in a traditional religious seminary or Dar al-Uloom (hereon abbreviated to DU) in modern Britain. (It is important to note that the meaning of words change with their context. In the nomenclature of modern Britain, the word madrasa refers broadly to supplementary schools that take place in the evening for younger children. The DU is the place for higher learning of Islamic education.) Based on unprecedented insider access and detailed ethnography, the paper considers how two groups of teachers, the senior and the younger generation, acquire and shine their authoritative light in unique ways. The article asserts that within the senior teachers an elect group of ‘luminaries’ exemplify a deep level of learning combined with practice and embodiment, while the remaining teachers are granted authority by virtue of the Prophetic light, or Hadith, they radiate. The younger generation of British-born teachers, however, are the torchbearers at the leading edge of directing the DU. While it may take time for them to acquire the social and symbolic capital of the senior teachers, operationally, they are the ones illuminating the way forward. The paper discusses the implications of the changing nature of authority within the DU is likely to have for Muslims in Britain.

**Keywords:** Dar al-Uloom; Islam in Britain; Deoband; ulama; tradition; authority

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## 1. Introduction

During research undertaken for my PhD thesis, authority emerged as a significant analytical category and became one of the lenses through which I examined the Dar al-Uloom (DU). Its relationship with the Islamic tradition, that of being anchored in an authentic past, results in intense competition among British Muslims who vie to present themselves as heirs of an authentic interpretation and practice of Islam (Gilliat-Ray 2010). It is the DU that becomes implicated as the institution par excellence for the dissemination and imparting of religious knowledge in Islam. Hence, there has been an interest in madrasas globally (Metcalf 1978; Moosa 2015; Bano 2012) and more recently this significance has grown in the West (Bano 2018; Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2017). However, no detailed ethnographic study of a DU in Britain has emerged to date. (Geaves 2015a) did spend a short period in a British DU, but his work was limited to the exploration of pedagogy.

My research, therefore, provides a unique detailed “insider” ethnographic account based on immersion in a DU over one year for the very first time. There are increasing numbers of young, educated British-born Muslims looking to religious scholars (*ulama*) and imams for religious guidance.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In a separate paper, I want to argue that both the imam and the *ulama* have distinct yet overlapping roles in modern Britain. For example, when it comes to religious guidance and questions, the Muslim public is more likely to go to an *alim* (singular of *ulama*) than to an imam. The imam leads the prayer and delivers the sermon (*khutba*), but may not be sought for questions regarding everyday Muslim concerns. This division of labour is significant and underappreciated.

In parallel, there has been an interest in DUs from many stakeholder groups from both within and outside Muslim communities. This paper, however, describes the various modalities of authority and their interdependency in the DU. Reflective of the broader Asadian notion of a discursive tradition (Asad 1986), it argues that the nature of authority is undergoing change, adaptation and contestation.

The first section provides a brief background and history of DUs in Britain. This is then followed by a section that explores how scholarship has understood Islamic authority and its relationship with tradition. This relationship is tied to the importance of possessing a living intellectual lineage or chain (*isnaad*) back to the Prophet himself with the notion of a close apprenticeship (*suhba*) with teachers. Before using this as a theoretical base upon which to elucidate the ways in which modalities of authority operate in the DU, I will provide a summary of my methodology. Finally, the implications of the findings for the broader field of the study of religion and authority in modern Britain will follow. What emerges is that despite the concern over the ability of the traditional religious authority to address concerns Muslims are facing, the *ulama* remain relevant thanks largely to their ability to engage in a tradition where they are constantly reflecting upon inherited practices in relation to modern circumstances.

## 2. Background to *Dar al-Uloom* in Britain

Given the centrality of this institution in the preservation and production of knowledge as well as in the formation of the religious elite, the madrasa is crucial to the construction of religious authority. (Zaman 1999, p. 294)

Zaman's comment points towards the significance of the DU. Knowledge during the formative period of Islam evolved from informal settings to become reified and institutionalised in the madrasa (Berkey 2014; Chamberlain 2002; Zaman 2012). Over time, it became the primary institution for the systematic dissemination of knowledge and remains central to the Islamic tradition today. The DU, following this tradition, emerged in a milieu of waning Mughal power and rising British rule. This brought with it structural secularisation, that is the removal of religion from the institutions of society and, subjective secularisation, which is the removal of the religious consciousness (Berger 1973). In response, a group of reformist *ulama* sought to revive Islam by training well-educated believers to instruct the community in the true practice of Islam by founding a seminary in the city of Deoband in North India in 1867 (Metcalf 1978).<sup>2</sup> Within a short period, Deoband became a particular tradition, or *maslak*, of Indian Islam, that is:

A virtuous temperament embedded in an elaborate narrative, one that etched on their madrasa franchise a distinctive blend of theological convictions, intellectual style, and ascetic pious practice derived from eighteenth and nineteenth century predecessors. (Moosa 2015, p. 104)

Following significant numbers of South Asian Muslims migrating to the UK in the 1960s and 1970s, it was the Deobandis as they became referred to, who were the most active in the 'transplanting' of DUs. Two of the earliest Deobandi seminaries were established at Bury in 1975 and Dewsbury in 1982 (Geaves 1996; Gilliat-Ray 2005). They came to dominate the so-called imam-training field in Britain, producing around eighty per cent of British-trained imams (Birt and Lewis 2011).<sup>3</sup> However, it is inaccurate to view DUs as solely engaged in producing imams. While students who complete the full course graduate as *ulama* (not imams), there are alternative ways in which their religious leadership is embodied. In any case, despite the prominence of DUs in Britain, they are arguably

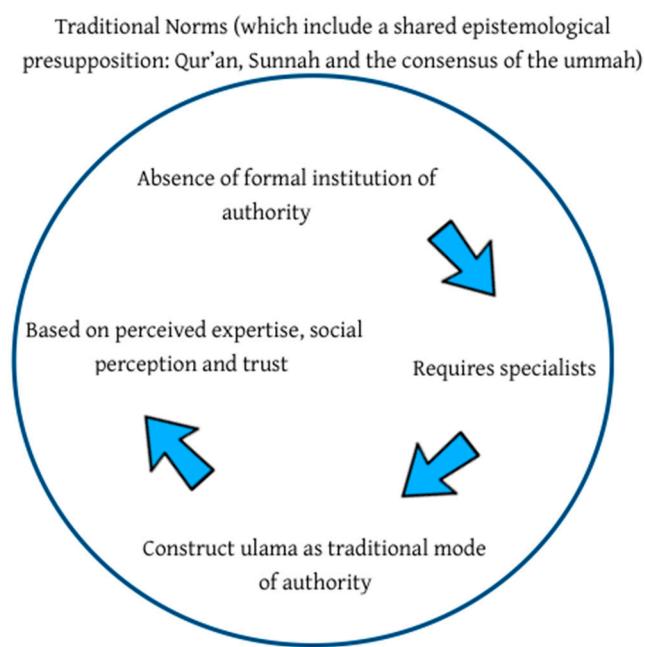
<sup>2</sup> The Deoband madrasa was designated as a Dar al-Uloom in 1879.

<sup>3</sup> The figure is likely to be much bigger since those that provide formal education to over 16's are not required to register. There are also increasing numbers of part-time courses being run on weekends, evenings and online that are not accounted for.

the least researched from among the various organisations that serve the religious needs of Muslims in Britain.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Religious Authority in Islam

Weber (1947) distinguishes between three types of authority in modern societies: Charismatic, traditional and rational-legal. They are in turn legitimated by another typology of norms or legitimate normative orders which include tradition, effectual attitudes, a rational belief in some form of absolute value, and assent to some form of legal enforceability (Spencer 1970). Both norms and authority are present in a symbiotic relationship in any institutional structure. Relevant to this study is the traditional authority which emerged after the charismatic authority of the Prophet (Dabashi 1993). This was in turn legitimated and circumscribed broadly by the Quran and the Prophetic way, his Sunnah, and synthesised formally through the various legal schools (*madhabs*). Its interpretation passed into the hands of the *ulama* who emerged in the absence of a formal institution of authority in Islam (Berkey 2001; Crone and Hinds 2003). Following Abou El Fadl (2013), who distinguishes between “being *in* authority” and “being *an* authority”, the *ulama* acquire their authority by virtue of the perceived competence they possess to understand God’s law. Authority, then, is based on social perception and trust, while it is circumscribed by a normative tradition (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Depiction of how authority emerged in Islam.

As for contemporary trends in modern Europe, Cesari (2003) argues that second generation Muslims are seeking an ‘individualised’ private Islam, which grants them more autonomy (Peter 2006). Mandaville (2001) points towards the effects of travel and migration. This develops a “critical Islam” where Muslims, in a translocal space, neither completely embrace the host community nor reject their heritage, but form a hybrid outlook. Roy (2004) looks at the influence of the West and towards the perceived inability and social inadequacy which results in Muslims having a greater awareness to deeply reflect on their faith. Media combined with what Eickelman and Anderson (2003) call the ‘reintellectualisation of the Islamic doctrine’, has led to new challenges for the traditionally trained

<sup>4</sup> Gaining access to DUs in Britain has been fraught with many challenges; see (Gilliat-Ray 2005). A handful of authors have written on DUs in Britain (Birt 2006; Birt and Lewis 2011; Geaves 1996; Lewis 2004), but none of them provides a detailed ethnographic account of the DU and young British Muslim experiences first-hand.

*ulama*. Finally, as [Robinson \(2009\)](#) and [Hamid \(2018\)](#) argue, thanks to mass education and literacy, especially in the context of modern Britain, imams, mosques and traditionally trained *ulama* and institutions may become less significant. According to these scholars, the result will be democratisation of Islamic knowledge (not dogma), though not a complete disconnect where a believer constructs their faith anew.

However, [Amir-Moazami and Salvatore \(2003\)](#) see the current trend among young Muslims as a continuation of reform discourses as they emerged in the nineteenth century. They use the notion of Islam as a discursive tradition to argue that any change will occur through “internal interventions” (p. 71), and thus, the role of tradition and the *ulama* will remain significant. My findings support this view. In essence, this has overturned the “emplotment strategy” ([Peter 2006](#), p. 109) which holds that following large-scale migration of Muslims to Europe successive generations will enable the flourishing of an Islam that is compatible with Europe. A key characteristic of this form of emergent Islam, it is claimed, is an individualised form of religiosity. However, the key arena where the shaping of Muslim religiosity is being welded is within a discursive tradition with religious authorities maintaining an important role.

#### 4. Authority Through a Living *Isnaad* and *Suhba*

Reflective of the less formal system of education of the past, DU Deoband promoted a close relationship between the teacher and the student ([Metcalf 1982](#)). A religious edict (*fatwa*) issued by the Deoband DU clarified that one could only be called a Maulana, an honorific title signifying that someone had become a religious scholar, if he has studied with a teacher ([Metcalfe 1984](#)). Here we see how the tradition of *suhba*, through an apprentice-based system, grants a graduate authority.<sup>5</sup> Books are insufficient of themselves to transmit the tradition. In other words, the *ulama* sought to maintain a focus on an anthropocentric worldview in a world that was increasingly becoming bibliocentric ([Ingram 2018](#)). [Carroll et al. \(1997\)](#) describe a similar challenge that Christian seminaries face, in forming the hearts and minds of students towards a pious outlook. The authors conclude that two key factors are important in achieving this: The teachers and the time period the student is exposed to the school’s culture. Against the trend to study online or distance-based learning, they thus argue that in seminary training, students’ physical presence is essential in shaping them along with the culture of the seminary. In both Christian and Muslims traditions; therefore, spending time with teachers is considered an essential part of the student’s learning experience.

The link between knowledge and practice, and the notion of embodiment, combined with an affiliation with the schools of Sufism (the Islamic mystical tradition) helps to explain why there continues to be a great emphasis on developing a deep bond between the teacher and student. The DU Deoband was set up in response to a suggestion by Hajji Imdad Allah (d.1899) who was affiliated with the Chishtiyya-Sabriyya Sufi Order. Its Sufism, however, was closely integrated with Hadith scholarship and legal practices in Islam ([Naeem 2004](#)). This “ascetic counterculture” ([Moj 2015](#), p. 59) is important because, with very few exceptions ([Geaves 2015b](#)), much recent literature fails to sufficiently acknowledge the important role Sufism played in Deoband. The Deoband seminary was reflective of a broader tradition of authoritative knowledge being transferred from person to person. Others, like [Messick \(1993\)](#) in his study in Yemen, and [Berkey \(2014\)](#) in his study of Cairo under Mamluk rule, argue that the transmission of religious knowledge is a highly personal process: Teachers were responsible for the moral behaviour of their students. The notion of studying at the feet of a teacher still remains a central tenet of learning in Islam, possessing a notion of authenticity and resulting in an individual being recognised as an authority in Islam. This helps to explain why places like the DUs in Britain endure.

<sup>5</sup> As [Ingram \(2018\)](#) states “Deobandis believe that the reliability of knowledge itself is inseparable from the embodied ethics of the persons who transmit it” (p. 21).

## 5. Methodology

Through the ethnographic method of participant observation, I was able to gather rich data about the lived reality within a DU in Britain. This method was complemented with interviews that took place predominantly towards the end of my fieldwork. This helped in crafting my questions based on inferences made during observations. This method is broadly referred to as “grounded theory” (Glaser et al. 1967) where theories and questions emerge inductively from the field and data. Secondly, they were informed by the literature review and the particular research questions that emerged as a result. All three methods, that of the literature review, piloting and inductive data analysis helped refine the interview schedule. The questions were based broadly around collating personal biographical data, exploring motivations and experiences at the DU, pedagogy, identity formation, and questions regarding the nature of knowledge. In the DU, the formality of interviews can cause consternation and unease, and this was something that I wanted to avoid. Having said that, interviews were conducted in a sensitive manner. By including a variety of qualitative methods, methodological triangulation is a way to cancel out the biases of any one method with others (Carter et al. 2014). In total, 41 interviews were conducted—of which 24 were formal, recorded and transcribed. The entire project went through a stringent ethical approval process. The formal interviews lasted on average for 2 h. As for the informal interviews, they all took place in the DU during break and lunchtimes.

My interviewees included students, teachers, management staff and the Principal of the DU and Principals of other DUs in Britain. The first group included students. In order to document their “anticipatory socialisation” (Welland 2000) a number of students who had recently enrolled were interviewed. Other groups of students included those who were progressing through the DU and those who were about to graduate. Students who had graduated were also interviewed. As for the teachers, this included three junior teachers and three senior teachers, including a staff member who had recently left the DU. Given their intimate knowledge of the practical side of the DU, members of management were also included.

The fieldwork took place over 14 months, and it was my identity as a ‘trusted’ graduate that paved the way for access to the fieldsite (Ahmed 2017). This is because being a graduate of the DU is insufficient in gaining access. The ‘trusted’ graduate embodies certain acquired characteristics that facilitate and ease access to the DU. Despite graduating in 2006, I have continued to maintain a relationship with the Principal and the teachers at the DU. This includes meeting with them regularly to seek answers to questions from the public, seeking their counsel when it comes to decisions regarding my own personal and spiritual development, and offering to help them whenever I am able to do so. This last point was significant. In 2014, an opportunity arose to pioneer a partnership between the DU and a British University in offering the first two years of a new BA in Islamic Studies. Despite my work commitments at the time, I took on the role of managing this partnership. At the time, I saw this project as the beginning of a broader ambition to address the educational needs of future Muslim scholars in Britain. Despite attempts to compensate for my time and effort by the Principal, I did not accept any financial rewards for my work. The Principal viewed this as sincere on my part, and it ultimately played a significant role in gaining his trust, and thus, access for my doctoral research. As for the senior teachers, being a former student and a fellow imam, I possessed the right cultural capital to gain their trust. Finally, my *suhba*, that is my ongoing association with some of the senior teachers allowed them to see me as someone who could be trusted. As one teacher stated:

The important thing is that you have an association (*nisbat*) with the elders. A lot of students don’t maintain relationships once they leave. But you have been able to do that which is why we know we can trust you.

It is the relationships maintained, and services rendered post-graduation that are key factors in constructing the ‘trusted’ graduate. This brief account will be of use to scholars attempting to study communities that can be hard to gain access to and more broadly to those interested in British Muslim studies specifically.

However, my positionality can carry the risk of over-rapport, while being less critical of the DU leading to what Hodkinson (2005) refers to a becoming a “subcultural spokesperson”.<sup>6</sup> This meant I had to engage in long periods of reflexivity whilst ensuring procedural objectivity (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Abbas 2010).<sup>7</sup> This was achieved by providing a personal narrative with the inclusion of the ethnographic self, alongside a decade of “distancing” where I had undertaken various career trajectories post-graduation from the seminary. The experiences I have gained in a variety of fields after graduating from the DU have created sufficient distance between myself and the field site, further complicating the claim I am purely an “insider” (Chryssides and Gregg 2019). Bauman (2000) notion of “liquid identities” of the complexity of simultaneous sameness (being an alumnus in my case) and differences (researcher) led me to consider that my identity is not dialogic, but fluid. Therefore, I was able to achieve both familiarity and strangeness (Coffey 1999; Sara et al. 2010; Collins and Gallinat 2010). Clearly, my work has been conducted within an all-male environment, and so my claims and findings, of course, exclude a ‘female’ perspective. However, my research will hopefully contribute to methodological discussions about conducting research in these educational environments and may stimulate a subsequent female-led study of a girl’s DU in the future. Finally, because this is a community that has generally borne the brunt of sensationalist media reports and conflation with issues to do with securitisation, I struck a delicate balance between robust data collection and a deep sensitivity towards my participants. I have been able to maintain analytical rigour throughout my research by making sure my methods and analysis are transparent.

## 6. Modalities of Authority in the *Dar al-Uloom*

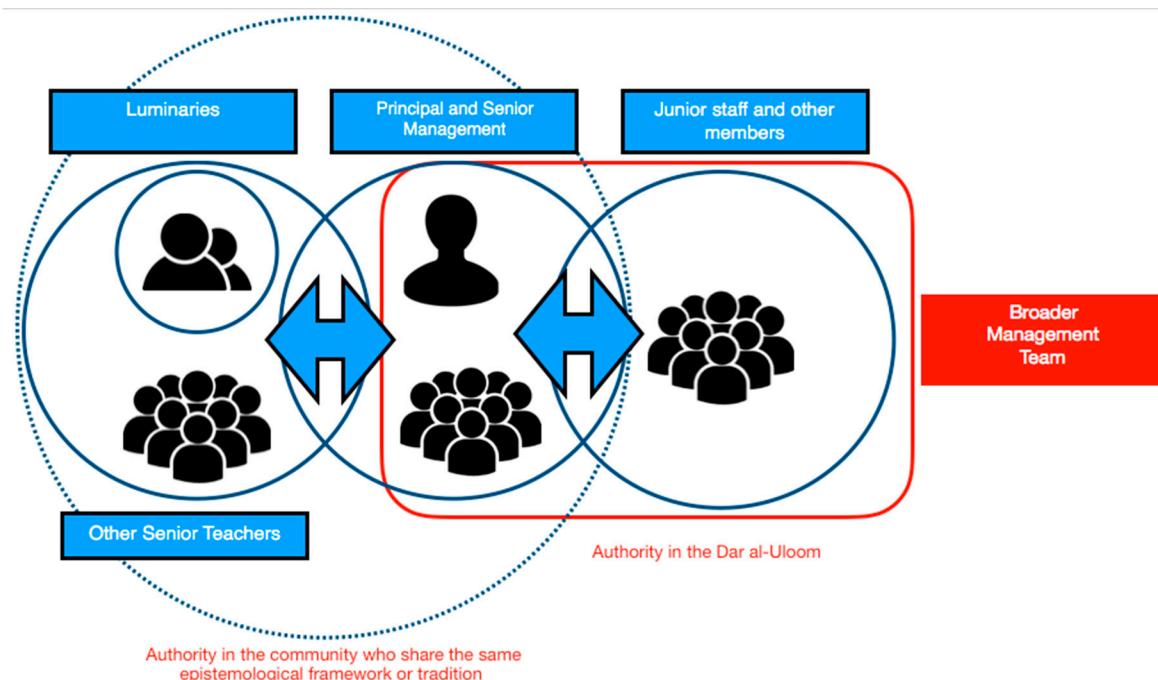
The teaching staff of the DU can be broadly broken down into two groups: The senior and the junior teachers.<sup>8</sup> The senior teachers, all of whom are above the age of fifty, have received their religious training in South Asia before migrating to the UK. Alongside this, it is well known—among the *ulama* and Muslims, they serve more generally—that they have spent significant time in the *suhba* of well-known and respected scholars in India. They have not only benefitted from them intellectually, but also spiritually. The acquisition of traditional knowledge comes from studying in the company of teachers who possess a living intellectual lineage or chain (*isnaad*) back to the Prophet himself. This tradition of discipleship and an uninterrupted chain of pious individuals back to the Prophet remains central in granting a graduate authority. The senior teachers possess a form of charismatic leadership which is likely to be the case for other DUs around Britain. However, since their training and experiences have been formed in a very different socio-cultural setting, this raises questions around whether they are sufficiently familiar with the changing mores of contemporary Britain.<sup>9</sup> The junior teachers, while not possessing the same level of leadership qualities, are born, raised and trained in Britain. In addition, they are exposed to current debates and challenges facing Muslims thanks largely to social media, which nearly all of them access in various ways. They are more aware of the challenges and context of life here in Britain and share experiences that make them ideally suited to implement considered changes to the way the DU operates. While junior teachers can relate to the contemporary world, some of the senior teachers had more to share in terms of real-life work within their comfort zones, such as their experiences as imams working within Muslim communities, something that has been recognised by others (Lewis and Hamid 2018).

<sup>6</sup> While my primary role was of a participant-as-observer, my role was fluid, and I did move along a spectrum between the complete participant and complete observer.

<sup>7</sup> This means that I am a researcher who is conscious that biases and preconceptions can influence the understanding of events.

<sup>8</sup> In the actual thesis, I have a further two categories: The Principal and the senior management team (see Figure 2 below).

<sup>9</sup> The famous Damascene Hanafi jurist Ibn Abideen (d. 1836) emphasised in his epistle, *Nashr al-'arf fi bina' ba'd al-ahkam 'ala'l-'urf* (the wafting of perfume concerning building certain judgements on custom) and elsewhere that custom ('urf) and the needs of the people was an important consideration in dispensing religious guidance.



**Figure 2.** Depiction of how modalities of authority operate within the DU.

## 7. The 'Luminaries'

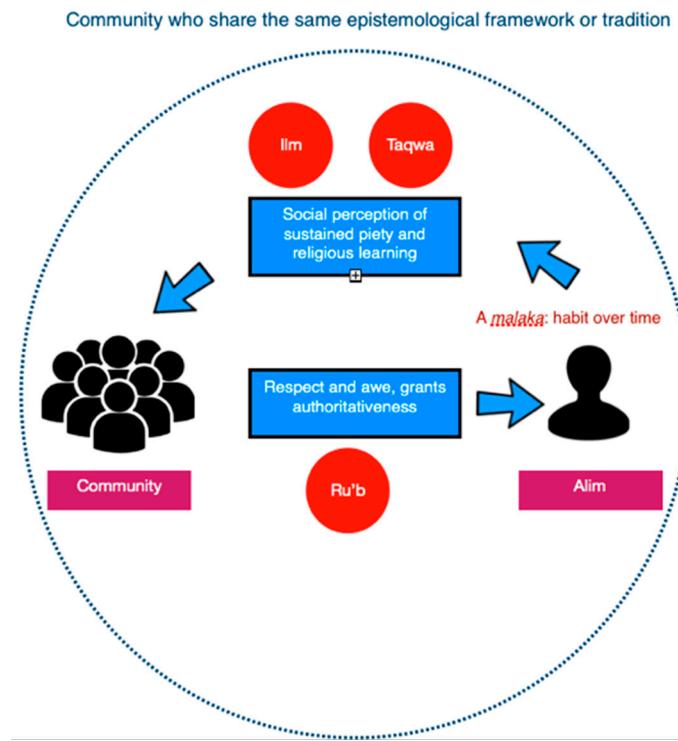
Within the group of senior teachers, there are two teachers who are significant. This can be seen by the fact that many of the other teachers in the DU refer to them for guidance and advice. They are part of a Chishti Sufi Order (*tariqah*) and have been granted permission (*ijazah*) to provide Sufi guidance to other Muslims. Hence, it is not only lay Muslims who seek them for guidance, but other *ulama*. However, there are other factors, as one of my participants commented:

Because they are very pious. There is *ru'b* (a sense of being enthralled). I mean you never see them wasting time and they are always engaged in teaching or praying. I have never seen them go out and socialise like other teachers. I'm not saying that's wrong, but we never see them socialising.

*Ru'b*, though difficult to translate, is used here to describe them in the effect or energy (*faiz*) which resonates beyond their discursive knowledge on others (Ingram 2018). It is not that they have a personality that is introvertive, but rather that their deep learning, long silences, and reputation for being men who seamlessly combine piety with practice affects and shapes the perception others have of them. Their personality entrals others. When I probed this further with another teacher he explained:

It's not like other teachers do not have God-consciousness or piety (*taqwa*) or are less knowledgeable. When you look at the lives of certain teachers you can see very clearly that they are focused on teaching and praying. Nothing else. This means they have a greater level of *ru'b* and I think this is why people have more respect for them.

In essence, they personify for many what knowledge (*ilm*) is about: It must be practised to be fruitful, while its carriers ought to be disinterested with superficial worldly distractions. The former, referred to as *malaka* in Arabic, is the enduring ethical disposition or habit that emerges as a result of nurturing and discipline. Therefore, the social perception of sustained piety and religious learning and its embodiment leads to a greater level of public respect from a community who share the same "epistemological framework" (Friedman 1973, p. 83). Social perception is, therefore, a critical ingredient in attributing a higher level of authoritativeness to an *alim*. It is these luminaries who shine the light on the way for others. The diagram below (Figure 3) theorises the findings, thus far:



**Figure 3.** The theorisation of how certain *ulama* acquire their authority.

## 8. Prophetic Traditions (Hadith) as a Guiding Light

The remaining senior teachers acquire their authority by virtue of the type of texts they teach. Generally, the higher, or the more complex, the level of text they teach, the greater their perceived level of authority. The syllabus, a six-year course, moves from auxiliary sciences, including grammar, syntax, logic and rhetoric through advanced texts in Islamic law (*fiqh*) to Hadith, or collections of Prophetic statements and his actions in the capstone year (*dawra*). In this light, a senior teacher summarises what matters most is the teaching of Hadith:

It all comes down to the [H]adith text you teach. Teaching *fiqh* is important but it is teaching [H]adith that matters and makes the difference.

The text of the Hadith taught by a teacher possessing an *isnad* is essentially the blueprint through which to embody the Prophet. Text, teacher and the Prophet form the essential building blocks for the construction of authority. This is enhanced by a combination of teaching a greater number of Hadith and *fiqh* texts in the latter years *and* a lower range of classes in the auxiliary sciences in the earlier years within the syllabus. Beyond the texts, authority is complemented by the fact that having acquired their learning in South Asia, this group of teachers are uniquely positioned to act as the ‘authoritative bridge’ that are connected to particular tradition—the *maslak*—both geographically and intellectually. They possess a form of symbolic capital. In the authority of senior teachers, we see how the bibliocentric and the anthropocentric tradition are wedded together. Knowledge is inseparable from the bodies that inhabit that knowledge.

Finally, many of the teachers serve as imams, so they possess a form of social capital. Being well respected and trusted in their communities is a form of capital which in turn legitimises the very institution in the eyes of those they serve. A senior member of management had this insight to share:

The senior teachers are well respected and known. When parents choose to send their children here, or when people send their questions to us, they look at the teachers we have. Lots of time students join here because their parents have relationships with them; they are well-known local imams, and teachers.

## 9. Junior Teachers as Torchbearers

The junior teachers, under the age of thirty, are all British-born graduates from the same DU. They all teach in the earlier years, but unlike their senior counterparts, have roles beyond teaching. It is this function, that of being intimately engaged with the DU that grants them an alternative form of authority. For example, all of them are school teachers at the secondary school being run at the seminary. Furthermore, their roles can range from administrative tasks involving tracking absenteeism and record-keeping to oversight of the various operational functions in the DU. For example, one teacher is responsible for overseeing the Quran memorisation (*hifz*) arrangements. This includes regularly monitoring and target setting for portions of the Quran to be memorised and ensuring correct recitation (*tajweed*) among the students. Despite his young age, he has overall responsibility and manages teachers who are much older than him. However, he does not view this as being problematic. When asked how he manages the relationship with someone who was once his teacher, this is what he had to say:

It is a relationship based on respect. We both agree what matters most is improvement and that students learn. So based on this shared understanding we are able to work together.

As for what he particularly enjoys about the DU, it is to see the students' progress:

I like to see progress. I don't want to waste time. If I waste time I am wasting their time. They should all progress whether they're weak or clever, whatever. They all have to be challenged and I try and get the best out of them.

The same teacher has a pastoral role where he uses any free time in the morning to deal with complaints and other issues:

I go down to the office after teaching and if they want me to speak to a student because of some issues I shall go and find him. I'll try and find out how he's feeling. I don't like to tell them off or anything, just a few good words that make a difference so that's it. I love it. Everyday is a different day.

Another teacher, who has a degree and regularly publishes articles for the public, feels that his responsibilities at the DU have evolved and that he has a greater level of influence in the way things are run. When asked what had been his best experience at the DU, he replied that his influence has increased over the years. This view was echoed by another teacher who has overall responsibility for the syllabus, which means setting targets and exam and lesson planning. He has spearheaded a number of innovative changes primarily focused on facilitating student learning and engagement. This included translating into English and simplifying some of the more technical texts. His reflection on the impact of this particular 'translation movement' shows that this has led to significant improvements in the teaching and learning of students. I asked him what the response has been to changes in language and target setting from the senior staff:

There was some resistance from a handful of teachers who were concerned about being taught in English but once they started seeing the fruits and benefits of it, I think they were okay with it. They saw that we could cover more topics if we arrange things better.

There are other reasons why junior teachers have a greater operational influence. Among them were that they spend most of their day at the DU and being former graduates, are familiar with the values and ethos of the DU. As for the Principal, he feels that the younger generation of teachers brings in ideas to move the DU forward:

The young teachers are born here. They speak English and are educated here. They are completing further education so they bring new ideas that we can use. They are very dedicated and work really hard to help make the Dar al-Uloom a success.

All of these factors combine to ensure that the younger generation of teachers influences the DU operationally. However, this does not mean that senior teachers are less invested in the DU. As one teacher is quick to remind me:

It's because they're not familiar with the way things work and their time is used better elsewhere. They have other commitments, so they only come, teach and go back to their communities.

Outside of the four walls of the DU, it is the junior teachers with the Principal who are shaping its engagement and relationship with the wider world. This includes working with the local hospital, the Salvation Army, feeding the homeless, inter-faith relations, and liaising with the local police. The inclusion of and the encouragement by the Principal for students to study A-levels and pursue further education is reflective of a broader ethos of the DU. Significantly, the DU has been seeking out opportunities to work with universities. For example, as mentioned above, it has been involved in a pioneering partnership with a British University in offering the first two years of a new BA in Islamic Studies. At the time, this sparked great interest from other DUs and academic researchers. The course being delivered at the DU was oversubscribed, showing that there is certainly an appetite for DUs to work with universities. Students are interested in gaining qualifications that will help them acquire careers post-graduation. The teachers view this engagement as the beginning of a broader project to address the educational needs of future Muslim scholars in Britain. Moreover, many of the younger teachers already have or are acquiring university qualifications and are pushing for accreditation.

This broad shift has been recognised by (Geaves 2015a) and more recently by (Lewis and Hamid 2018) who notes diversity and more openness from some DUs and their graduates. For example, the latter cites the work of Dr Mansur Ali, an academic at Cardiff University and an alumnus of a DU, for his ground-breaking research on the impact of Muslim chaplains. Another example is of Shams Ad Duha who is also a DU graduate and Principal of a madrasa in London, having a more cosmopolitan and inclusive outlook.<sup>10</sup> (Gilliat-Ray 2018) has recently updated her 2005 paper with a new publication that charts a more promising shift taking place in some DUs towards more outward-facing forms of engagement.

From my research, it was clear that there are not many imam positions available (and may not be an attractive career choice, given the pay and conditions) and careers in publicly funded chaplaincy are very competitive. As a result, students who want to study further and gain qualifications often explore university degree courses. The DU for their part, recognise that the syllabus can benefit from being infused with contemporary realities and other pedagogical methods to enhance their teaching.<sup>11</sup> While significant strides have been made by certain DUs to partner with universities, it remains to be seen if the latter can display the same level of enthusiasm.

Ultimately, all the decisions in the DU will go through the Principal. He embodies a traditional form of leadership. While it relies on a dominant personality, it is legitimised by the particular tradition. This is because, as we have seen with the senior teachers, their legitimacy is endowed by being part of the Deobandi tradition—by “the belief in the inviolability of that which has existed from time out of mind” (Weber 1968, p. 1008). He is known for being visionary, and his authority is best described as paternalistic. This is because the Principal bases his authority on a form of loyalty. Weber recognised that this is one of the traditional forms of pre-bureaucratic power that is “based not on the official’s commitment to an impersonal purpose and not on obedience to abstract norms, but on a strictly

<sup>10</sup> In the same work, Lewis cites extensively from the work of Mufti Saiful Islam, who is a graduate of a DU, to draw wide conclusions from a small selection of evidence. Gilliat-Ray (2018) comments that this is “rather unhelpful when these examples are presented as indicative of opinions among a much wider group of ulama” (p. 144).

<sup>11</sup> More recently, a report by the Citizens Commission on Islam, Participation and Public life, entitled, The Missing Muslims: Unlocking British Muslim Potential for the Benefit of All, recommended that universities consider pairing with seminaries so that educational schemes for imams become accredited, allowing imams and graduates to receive both an educational qualification along with a religious qualification. See: [www.citizensuk.org/missing\\_muslims](http://www.citizensuk.org/missing_muslims) (last accessed 3 March 2019).

personal loyalty" ([Weber 1968](#), p. 1006). Students and teachers alike see the Principal as a father figure. For the younger generation of teachers, he is recognised as someone who maintains a strong relationship with subordinates through his dialogical and consultative form of decision-making.

From an Islamic perspective, this is known as the '*shura*' based model where a group of people effectively act as a consultative body in the decision-making process with the final decision being delegated to the *amir*, or group leader. The Quran also sanctions this form of leadership, "their affair being counsel among them".<sup>12</sup> As for being a visionary, this is because his *shura* members consist of young people who are driving change. This is what the Principal had to share:

I want to take this DU forward. And I want the young *ulama* to make decisions and decide what is best for us. Before our *maqsad* (purpose) was for students to learn in an Islamic environment and to make it easy to save their *imaan* [faith]. Now, we want to allow students to serve Muslims in Britain better and to learn how to engage with non-Muslims as well.

This is an acknowledgement of changing circumstances on the part of the Principal and a recognition that the people who will drive this change are the younger generation of teachers. His willingness to allow me to conduct my doctoral research within the DU is a signal of this outward-facing stance, the trust he is placing in younger scholars, and a willingness to see how the institution might benefit from academic research conducted in a university environment. Given the generally conservative character of the Deobandi movement, this makes his style of leadership distinctive. He has been able to balance the need to bring in change, while remaining within the normative system of the particular tradition (*maslak*). This also serves as a reminder that being conservative does not necessarily imply being impervious to change.

The sociologist Edward Shils ([Shils 1981](#)) defines tradition as something that is transmitted from the past to the present. However, in the DU there is much more than just handing down. It includes "a process of evaluation, amplification, suppression, refinement, and assessing the polarity between would-be tradition and indigenous innovations and/or non-indigenous ideas and practices" ([Jackson 2002](#), p. 26, *italics original*). This process of evaluation is taking place through the 'custodians of change' ([Zaman 2002](#)), in this case, the junior teachers. In this sense, they have authority as torchbearers maintaining the tradition. The key thing about tradition is whether the particular idea or practice receives an endorsement from the custodial generation. It is the junior teachers who will become senior teachers and will ultimately decide the future direction of the DU, and in many ways the practice of Islam within communities across Britain:

The future of Islam rests where it has rested in the past—on the insight of the orthodox leaders and their capacity to resolve the new tensions as they arise by positive doctrine which will face and master the forces making for disintegration. ([Gibb 1947](#), p. 122)

Tradition is not a simple act of transmission, but an ongoing living process: The receiving generation will decide what stays, what it modifies, and what it strips away. What is clear, however, is that this tradition is in transition, and it will have important implications for the production of future Muslim leaders in Britain.

## 10. Conclusions

My findings align with the broad thrust of [Amir-Moazami and Salvatore \(2003\)](#) argument that the current trajectory among young Muslims is part of a broader continuation of reform discourses. While there may be some truth in the individualisation thesis, it is far from conclusive. My findings indicate that change is taking place through "internal interventions" within the DU at least. The younger graduates and teachers are making significant changes and contributions to the way Islam is transmitted

<sup>12</sup> Quran, 42:38.

in Britain. This signifies that the younger *ulama* will continue to be relevant, if not important. With reference to [Mandaville \(2001\)](#), the transformation of Islam in a translocal space need not necessarily result in an alternative form of authority. Rather, it is this very translocal space—taken here to be the DU and its connected communities—where transformation is taking place among the young generation of *ulama* and graduates.

Moreover, the individualisation thesis needs to contend with issues around class and social mobility. Reflective of the general population of Muslims in Britain, most of the students that attend the DU are from a working class background where “one needs to be attentive to the fact that individuals have differing competences/capacities—according to class, gender, generation or, more generally, their socialisation—to engage in the eclectic construction of ‘their’ belief (*compétences bricolées*)” ([Peter 2006](#), p.110, italics original). Therefore, one of the challenges for the younger generation of *ulama* will be how to connect with an increasingly young generation of middle-class British Muslims.

Recently, ([Bano 2018](#)) deals with, among other things, the issue of class. Her five-year research project titled *Changing Structures of Islamic Authority and Consequences for Social Change—A Transnational Review* (CSIA), looks at how old and new centres of Islamic learning are adapting to the external environment, in particular, the West. Her broad argument is that the Islamic religious milieu in the West is fertile ground for producing an understanding of Islam that fosters a generation of confident young Muslims that are rooted in the Islamic tradition. She argues that ‘affluent’ Muslim communities will play a key role in transformative conceptualisations of Islam by reversing the isolation of Islamic and modern knowledge. Importantly, she concludes by stating that Islamic authority in the West lies in the ability “to be able to be reasonable and responsive to the demands of changing times, while respecting the core of the tradition” (p. 28). This, for her, and as my paper confirms, is reflective of the enduring feature of the Islamic scholarly tradition: Internal reform.

The DU in which my research was conducted is situated within a complex and changing nexus of institutional developments in Britain. The authority of the institution and its personnel needs to be appreciated within this broader religious landscape. While movements aligned with the South Asian diaspora remain influential in Britain, second and third generation Muslims are forming their subjectivities in relation to access to higher education, employment, and the broader social/cultural framework of British society. This, along with greater self-reflection among young Muslims, has spurred the growth of new Islamic initiatives in the West ([Janmohamed 2016](#)). While indigenising Islam in the West can come from above (for example, between the state and mosques) the most fascinating and productive arena for the study is the initiatives taking place from below.

Given the lacuna in relation to the study of DUs in Britain, this article began by illuminating this often-misunderstood tradition. By building on existing theories of authority in Islam, it enlightened the various modalities of authority within the DU. What emerges is that the authority of particular individuals or groups of teachers is largely consensual in that it is based on social perception, perceived expertise and trust. Tradition and authority are interdependent because the prescriptive informational content of the former is related to how the latter in the present is construed ([Klusmeyer 2014](#)). While tradition defines the terms through which such authority is framed: “[T]he past, to the extent that it is passed on as tradition, has authority; authority, to the extent that it presents itself as history, becomes tradition” ([Arendt 2005](#), p. 73).

We observed that the authority of ‘luminaries’ stemmed from the social perception of *sustained* piety and religious learning and its embodiment. The senior teachers’ authority is based on texts and the particular year groups that they teach, in this case shedding the Prophetic light. In addition, they are chronologically closer to the particular tradition (*maslak*) and possess social (and spiritual) capital in terms of being imams and senior *ulama* in the eyes of the wider public. While they may possess a greater level of authority externally, internally, it is the younger generation of teachers who possess operational authority and are the torchbearers of this tradition. Through physical proximity to the Principal and senior management, their background, and their day-to-day involvement in the running of the DU, they exert authority in the DU. However, this is mediated through the management staff

and the Principal. Their ability to steer the DU in its engagement with wider society, as in the case with universities and seeking accreditation, is likely to move the DU towards horizontal forms of indigenisation with secular institutions.

Despite challenges to traditional Islamic authority, due to wider social changes in the form of inter-generational shifts, an increasingly pluralistic and diverse intra-religious context and the impact of technology, tradition and the authority of the *ulama* endure. This is largely because it is the younger generation of *ulama* who are now driving change and are engaged critically in a rethinking of tradition. The evolving face of this tradition and authority will largely depend on how they embody them in modern Britain. The torch is firmly in their hands.

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