

Identity politics and public disputation: A Baha'i missionary as a Muslim modernist in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the Arabic Study Circle and the role of its most influential member Joseph Perdu. It shows how the public life of the organization could not continue to bear the ambiguity of the identity of Perdu. Ultimately, there were attempts to 'expose' the 'real' Perdu and therefore the 'real' Arabic Study Circle. This essay raises the question of public performances of identity and their relations to private pursuits of identity.

The *Arabic Study Circle* was founded in the early 1950s in the port city of Durban on South Africa's East Coast. It was formed by a group of mainly Gujurati-speaking men in their early thirties who believed that learning the Arabic language was the key to independent reading and study of the Quran and other foundational sources of Islamic thought. The main figure behind the group was a local medical doctor, Dr. Daoud Mall, who was educated at Fort Hare University College in the Eastern Cape and at Sheffield University in England. He died in 2003 while nominally still the President of what remains of the original organization.

No history of the Circle would be complete without attempting to narrate in some detail the period when a charismatic foreign visitor to the country was employed by it. During this time his public engagements captured many hearts and minds for the Circle, but also for his own hidden cause. He gave the group a boost but also created many lasting problems for them. His "national identity", citizenship or country of birth was known neither to members of the Circle nor to

others outside it who made contact with him. Moreover, members of the Circle assumed that he was an erudite and cosmopolitan Muslim intellectual and had no idea of his real or other religious identity. This was revealed only at the end of his service for the Circle, and for many, only after he had left the shores of South Africa. He was Joseph Perdu.

Once it was assumed by detractors of the Circle and communicated to Circle members that Perdu's private faith was revealed, the issue became "public", at least the issue was publicized in pamphlets, meetings were held in halls to address the question, and the news circulated orally in certain Muslim sections of the South African population. The so-called public sphere became a site for debate and contestation over what in other contexts may have remained a private matter.¹ The question of individual faith and public performance is of course very often entangled, although in western political philosophy there is conventionally a rather strict separation between the public and the private spheres. "The boundary between bedroom and market, home and meetinghouse can be challenged or violated, but it is at least clear enough to be spatially distinct," writes Michael Warner.² There was a very different sense of public-private distinctions in Muslim South Africa, as there was (and is) in many other Muslim (and other) societies. There was not exactly a collapsing of the two categories but there was a distinct blurring of the private and the public. But there is a particular context for this in the Perdu episode. Perdu was the pre-eminent public face of the Circle who had attracted a large public to the group through his lectures and publications in the name of the Circle. A disjuncture between his private faith and his public performance was therefore bound to create problems. So when his "cover was blown", as it were, it was done in

¹ The best-known discussion of public sphere is of course Jürgen Habermas. "By 'the public sphere' we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body." Jürgen Habermas "The public sphere: an encyclopedia article (1964)", *New German critique* 3, 1974 (Fall), p. 49.

² See discussion in Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: New York, 2002), Chapter One.

public. It was also an attempt to reveal the “true” *Arabic Study Circle*. The Circle and Perdu were thus conflated. What is important to note is that the extent of the noise and contestation in the public sphere could have been much worse. Instead the Circle kept it to a minimum while its detractors tried to attract as much attention as possible to the issue.

There are many contradictory stories about Perdu. When and how exactly he arrived and when he departed South Africa remains uncertain. It is furthermore unclear whether he first arrived in Durban or Cape Town and also where he last lived. Oral memories of Perdu always mention him having come from outside a particular city. What is certain is that he travelled extensively up and down the country. He moved between the major cities frequently and also visited Johannesburg and smaller towns in some country areas.

In the mid-1950s Joseph Perdu was living in Cape Town when Ahmed Meer, a distant relative of Dr. Daoud Mall, informed the doctor about this interesting foreigner who had taken up residence in the city. He had apparently already visited Durban but found somewhat better prospects in Cape Town where he operated a small store near the working-class neighbourhood of District Six. More than a mere trader he had devoted much of his time to lecturing on religion.³ Indeed, teaching was his real calling. The closely-knit congregation at the nearby Azzavia Mosque had heard him speak. Particularly memorable were his impressive interpretations of *Surat al-Shams* (The Sun, XCI). That this mosque's leadership allowed him to lecture there was a sign of his acceptance into the Muslim community for they were known as an elitist group. Apparently, the imams at this mosque entertained Perdu without questioning him.⁴

Ahmad Meer successfully persuaded Mall to invite Perdu to Durban. ‘I paid no attention to him but when he repeatedly came to me and drew my attention, our attention, I said, “look, get him down, we’ll have a look at him.”’⁵ The Circle was then hardly two years old and was operating

³ Telephonic interview with Mr. ‘Mike’ Allie, 2 July 1997. It is reported that Perdu’s store in Woodstock-District Six was called ‘Snappy Snacks’.

⁴ Telephonic interview with Mr. Ganief Allie, 26 October 1998.

⁵ Mall interview transcript, p.18.

⁶ Mall’s notes ii, p.2.

on a shoestring budget. But funding was found to sponsor Perdu's trip to Durban and cover his expenses while he was a guest of the Circle.

When Mall met Perdu he saw a young white man in western dress – suit and tie - who looked 'very French' but spoke English quite well. He may have affected a French accented style of English speech. Perdu claimed that he only had a very limited English vocabulary. He was about 40 years old at the time. He was 'slightly built, clean-shaven and suave' according to Mall.⁶ Mall says he 'did not behave like a Muslim (but) he spoke with authority on Islam, on the Quran and Hadith and everything.'⁷ Mall recalls that *Monsieur* Perdu, as he was apparently formally addressed, possessed the following qualities: 'He was a professional, he was multifaceted. I would say as a speaker a genius, a gifted speaker who spoke with authority quoting the Quran, quoting Hadith, quoting Farsi, French, everything.' Mall refers to Farsi but never once thought that this, instead of French, was his mother tongue.

He was invited by the Circle in 1954 and employed by them, for a modest honorarium, to deliver a series of lectures on the Quran. Understanding what lies buried in the Quran was the Circle's passion and so it was obvious that this was where they had Perdu focus his teaching. The Circle had started a series of Sunday morning public lectures in a Hall in the heart of Durban and Perdu was billed for this series. His programme on Sunday mornings drew large crowds every week. Numbers swelled once word was out about his command of a wide range of Islamic topics and his effective style. Sources report figures ranging from one hundred to two and even three hundred young people filling the main hall in the Pine Street Madrassah every week. The Circle calculated that Perdu was a good investment since he brought in the crowds. His popularity grew and the Circle had to organize additional sessions for him. He started conducting separate *tafsir* (exegesis) classes during the week for women and two more sessions for men.⁸ He was without doubt a great stimulus to the Muslim youth of Durban who at

⁷ Mall, p.18.

⁸ See *Annual Report for 1954-55*.

the time were alienated from Islamic traditions by south Asian trained Mawlanas steeped in another age and place, according to Circle members. Circle members repeatedly stress the huge gap that existed between young educated people like themselves and the Mawlanas who were very often incapable of speaking English or at least articulating themselves in terms understandable to young urban dwellers. One of the reasons for the establishment of the Circle was to redress this situation and Perdu was now their main means of achieving this.

Testimonies of Perdu's influence resound among Circle members. Ismail Manjra recalls how his attendance at Perdu's first lecture led him to an 'understanding of Islam in a rational way That was the beginning of my learning experience.'⁹ After this he was a regular at Perdu's talks, he began to read the Quran on his own and became a member – soon a very leading member - of the Circle. For the young Manjra, 'Joseph Perdu really opened the door of Islam for me.' M. S. Burke, also an early Circle member, was originally from Cape Town and also attended Perdu's talks. That 'really boosted me up,' he says. He remembers that, 'this was what I really wanted and Perdu to that extent was even better than what I got, what I received in Cape Town even with the high quality of (Islamic) education over there . . .'¹⁰ Burke seems to have been unaware that his highly regarded Cape Town teacher, Shaykh Ismail Edwards (Ganief), had become highly critical of Perdu when he was still in that city. The Circle's secretary, S.C. Seth, in his first report notes that the organization's guest 'awakened part of our people.' Furthermore:

His qualifications are many and to my mind, unequalled in South Africa. I am happy to state that he has made his home in Durban and his Quranic Tafsir classes are drawing appreciative audiences regularly. I hope the community will utilize to the fullest his abilities and talents.¹¹

⁹ *Manjra interview transcript*, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Burke interview transcript*, p. 3.

¹¹ *Annual Report for 1954-55*.

The leading members of the Circle grew rather close to Perdu on a personal level. 'He ingratiated himself so well with us that we regarded him as one of ourselves. We moved together wherever we went. He moved with us. But he kept his wife at a distance from us because she was an English woman'¹² The Circle trusted their foreign guest even though they were uncertain of his nationality and background. His English wife in the background must have unsettled some of the Circle leadership but they seem never to have articulated their discomfort with this fact of their teacher's life. We hear hardly anything about Perdu's children in oral testimonies about him.

Perdu's honorarium amounted to 25 Stirling Pounds for the first six months of 1955, and the Circle offered him a loan of 152 Stirling Pounds and 10 Shillings. It is unclear what the loan was intended for, whether it was to help him make ends meet during this period, or for other purposes.¹³ The loan could possibly have been to cover the publication costs of *al-Mu'minoon* (The Believers). This was a very well produced monthly magazine covering Islamic topics issued in the name of the Circle but actually not the product of Circle labours.

Perdu and his English wife seem to have had few worldly needs, living extremely frugal lives. Apart from M. Perdu's public profile Madame Perdu remained in the shadows and there were no or extremely little public or community life for the Perdu family. Perdu may have fostered growth and community among the Muslims but he could not have done the same for his wife and children. Mall likened them to gypsies with the absence of many material possessions in their rented apartment and the ability to easily pack-up and move on. Furthermore, Perdu was not ostentatious and always dressed in a very limited number of combinations of shirts and suits. About his travels he told members of

¹² Mall interview, p. 20.

¹³ *Statement of income and expenditure from January to June 1955, in Annual Report 1954-'55.*

¹⁴ Information confirmed by Perdu's son who was born in Durban - Nobel Perdu Honeyman. Email 28 October 1998.

the Circle that he had lived in Lebanon, Cyprus, Sudan and Madagascar before arriving in South Africa.¹⁴ Perdu was also at some point in Fiji and Australia, according to other reports.¹⁵ But definitive data about his travels elsewhere are not forthcoming. It was neither this itinerant lifestyle nor his nationality that brought adverse attention to, and created controversy, for the Circle.

The name Joseph Perdu has an obvious French ring to it; with Perdu itself a French word meaning, interestingly, lost. Many South Africans who met him thought he was a Frenchman. He probably promoted this image himself and therefore cultivated a particularly Gallic English accent. He had a French accent because his French was apparently better than his spoken English of which he knew only 500 words he used to say. Consequently, Circle members and his opponents all referred to him as a Frenchman. However, it could also be that Circle members misread a Farsi accent for a French one. His erstwhile friends thought he was a French Catholic convert. His detractors at more extreme moments cast him as 'sponsored by the French government as an anti-Islamic agent'.¹⁶ His choice of name is interesting. It is in fact a translation of a Farsi name that appears in a famous poem of the great Persian poet Hafez.¹⁷

In South Africa Perdu was considered a white man and as such must have had some attraction to his hosts. The 1950s was the decade of the rigorous implementation of a battery of Apartheid laws. The racist nationalist party had only come to power in 1948 and the government was fresh and ambitious in its pursuit of its programme of white supremacy and racial discrimination. White was the colour of power. All non-white groups suffered in the process of Apartheid's implementation and practice. The middle class 'Indian' communities of Durban were also dispossessed of lands and suffered discrimination. There was also

¹⁵ Email correspondence from Tracey Bryant, Australia, 28 September 2004.

¹⁶ See Appendix in Adam Peerbhai (ed.), *Verdict on Perdu: a sensational exposure of the Frenchman* (Durban, no publisher, no date).

¹⁷ "Lost Yusuf (Yusuf gumgashteh = Joseph Perdu) shall return to Canaan land – despair not" is the famous line from Hafez and part of a widely memorized set of lines from Hafez' poetry. Thanks to Dr. Sholeh Quinn of Ohio University for this information; and to Prof. Asef Bayat of Leiden who, as an Iranian, was able to confirm and recite these lines instantaneously.

a measure of uncertainty among them for their South African citizenship was still to be decided upon by the white rulers of the country. To be a white Muslim, and a 'genuine' European at a time when *Europeanness* was the marker of superiority in the country was to have been very special. That a white Muslim was in the midst of the existing Muslim community could have been used to show that Islam was for everyone and that even members of the 'civilised' European world saw the truth and civilized nature of the religion.

Joseph Perdu was, however, Iranian. His name while in Iran has not been confirmed – it was not the original Farsi of his 'French' translated name. One suggestion based on reliable sources is that he was called Farhang Fazel.¹⁸ His father is said to have been a senior figure in the Baha'i community of Iran. His father probably came from Mazandaran - the place where Perdu could possibly have been born. He was raised in Teheran and both his parents were Persian, according to his divorced wife Joyce.¹⁹ There is no record of when and why Perdu left his homeland. Whether, for instance, repression of Baha'is in Iran forced his parents to flee the country and settle in French-controlled parts of the Ottoman Empire such as Syria or Lebanon or to France itself. Oral sources are scant and provide few details about him until the 1950s'.

He married a British citizen whom he met and married in Beirut, Lebanon. His wife, Joyce, was fluent in French and taught English as a second language in Beirut. Teaching English in the various cities they lived would become a means to sustain their young family. According to Perdu's son, Nabil/ Nobel, who was born in Durban in 1955 his parents had travelled through or lived in Cyprus, Lebanon, Sudan, and Madagascar before reaching South Africa.²⁰ The Perdus had two girls

¹⁸ Email correspondence from Prof. Houchang Chehabi, Boston University, 27 November 2001.

¹⁹ Joyce Honeyman, Cardiff Wales, telephone interview, 04 February 1999.

²⁰ Nabil Perdu, Madrid, Spain, email communication to author 28 October 1998.

²¹ Naomi Rasiet, Cape Town, telephone interview 02 January 1999.

(born in 1952 and 1953, in Sudan and Madagascar respectively) when they reached the shores of South Africa.

Perdu lived in Cape Town on the outskirts of the working-class part of the city, District Six. He operated a small take-away store called 'Snappy Snacks' in Woodstock that a Mr. Kathrada had helped him set-up.²¹ He befriended the Muslim clerisy and other Muslim inhabitants of the city. He came to know the respectable religious figures in the Muslim community such as Shaykh Ismail Edwards (Ganief), often called 'Professor Ganief', and Shaykh Shakier Gamielien both men who had spent years studying in the Al-Azhar system in Cairo. Among the laymen he knew well were Cassiem Davids and the Gallow brothers.²² Davids was a tailor and man respected for his devotion and knowledgeable in religious matters. In the small Muslim neighbourhoods of the city, families and friends kept in close touch with each other. The Imams and their followers were likewise in regular and informal contact all the time. Perdu's lay friends were companions of the shaykhs. Cassiem Davids, for instance was a friend and student of Shaykh Edwards.

Once it became clear that Perdu was well versed in Islam, he was frequently requested or personally arranged to give lectures in the city. Opportunities for him were created in public halls, cinemas, and mosques. By all accounts his knowledge of Islam and Arabic was impressive. On occasion he threw in some poetry from his native Persian as well. The Muslims took it for granted that he was indeed a devoted, though foreign, member of the community. 'The Azzavia people loved him. They even preserved a lecture by him on sura al-Shams on tape!'²³ He taught an Arabic class in the basement of the Muir Street Mosque.

However, there were those who soon came to doubt him. They found his opinions unorthodox, if not heretical. One evening during an address at Cape Town's famous Drill Hall, with a stage filled with local shaykhs, Perdu had a confrontation with Shaykh 'Bhai' Booley over who would go to heaven.²⁴ Perdu espoused unpalatably liberal opinions

²² Rasiet interview, and Ishak Gallow, Cape Town, telephone interview 02 January 1999.

²³ Mohamed 'Mike' Allie, Cape Town, telephone interview 02 July 1997.

²⁴ Ganief Allie interview, Cape Town, 1998.

on this matter. He picked all sorts of tricky theological issues to argue about. Among the issues he raised were that the *miʿrāj* (ascension of Muhammad) was not physical at all, the nature of Adam, the validity of *ʿādāh* and many other questions that have for long been hotly debated among medieval theologians. But among the Cape Town shaykhs these debates were not necessary and indeed wasteful and the signs of a doubter. More learned men, such as Shaykh Najaar, challenged Perdu's views. Perdu could possibly have just been introducing doubt into the consensus and commonly accepted views of the community. It does not appear that he had a coherent logic to his questioning. But oral evidence is partial and uncertain so we do not know from the limited testimonies the pattern of his interrogation of local understandings of Islam.

What is relevant is that his motives were entirely unknown. Perhaps it makes a difference now that we know that he was a devoted Baha'i missionary, and possibly the 'greatest Baha'i missionary of the twentieth century'.²⁵ It is now clear that Perdu was surreptitiously promoting Baha'ism. Even when he was being vilified his detractors were not fully aware of his purpose. Baha'ism was unknown among the South African public at the time. In the city there was reportedly only one Baha'i believer at that time. Perdu attempted to bring this entirely new message to the country beginning with the Muslims. His approach was to directly address theological issues. He probably thought that the minority South African Muslim community was so cut off from the 'central Islamic lands' that their understanding of their religion was poor and their commitment slight. But this prejudice he had to correct in the face of opposition to him. He ran into deep trouble with the shaykhs. There was a literate Islamic clerisy – such as Shaykhs Edwards and Gamiendien – and there were basic Islamic educational institutions, many mosques, and social organizations to educate and inform the community about Islam. The levels of intellectual sophistication of the Muslim may have been wanting but their adherence to the fundamentals as taught by their shaykhs and Imams was firm.

Perdu would however at some point be suspected of being a Baha'i missionary sent to South Africa to win unsuspecting Muslims over to the

²⁵ This statement was made by a Baha'i at a panel where I read an earlier version of this paper at the Middle East Studies Association Conference in Washington, November 2003.

Baha'i faith. These suspicions had slowly emerged in Cape Town already but they did not transfer to Durban, when he arrived as the Circle's man. In the mother-city the learned Shaykhs Booley and Najaar spoke out against some of his pronouncements. It was a lecture in the Drill Hall at which Perdu's radical ecumenism surfaced that drew the shaykhs' ire. In time the accusations did follow him. Mall and the Circle came to hear these rumours. But Perdu was a highly successful educator, winning hundreds of youth to the cause of Islam. He was also very skilful as editor of the *al-Mu'minoon* magazine that appeared between mid-1955 and early 1957. Perdu seems to have had absolute control over the magazine with the Circle's name and resources simply supporting his venture. But there is no sectarian or even subtle Baha'i propaganda among any of its articles.

Many contributions in the magazine were of an esoteric or Sufi character, and all articles extolled the virtues of Islam and portrayed its early history in glowing terms. A number of the issues even came with supplements in Urdu, Zulu and Afrikaans. Later opponents of Perdu such as the Adam Peerbhai and I. M. Bawa also contributed articles to the early issues of the magazine.

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

Mall performed the *úajj* in 1956 (*al-Mu'minoon* publishes a report by him from the holy cities in the Sept/Oct. 1956 issue). On his way, he says, he decided to go to the Baha'i movement's headquarters in Bombay, India. There he learned that the Circle's guest and editor of its only publication was indeed a Baha'i and 'a very leading member and world scholar in their view.' He learned that Perdu was planted to work in the Natal province while other missionaries were in the Transvaal province and Swaziland.

On his return Mall informed all the members of the Circle. But instead

of an open confrontation with Perdu they delicately cut off ties with him. There was neither violence nor public disputation, simply a distancing between the erstwhile supporters and the charismatic, but suspect teacher. They were gentlemen and preferred the quiet approach to a press conference, press release or clamorous expulsion. It is worth noting that nobody withdrew from the Circle because of this error of judgment on its side.

The Circle would however come under attack for employing Perdu in the first place. In any case, Perdu got the message. He packed his bags and left South Africa. The next word of Perdu was that he was living in that other racially charged country on the other side of the Atlantic - Brazil. Last reports about him were that he had died in a car crash in Brazil around 1978.

The Circle would, as a result of the Perdu crisis, forever be tainted with suspicions as to its motives. This issue provided valuable ammunition for its conservative opponents. The *Muslim Digest*, a slim monthly magazine established in 1950 in Durban, under the editorship of Mohamed Makki was joined by Advocate I. M. Bawa in Natal, and Adam Peerbhai in Cape Town, in a tireless campaign against Dr. Mall, his colleagues in the Circle and every group associated with them. The campaign found further cause when, many years later, the Circle brought to South Africa another 'white Muslim'. Then they hosted Muhammad Asad, the Austrian convert whose translation of the Qur'an includes a number of views not acceptable to Makki Publications' view of Islam. The Baha'i accusation now gave way to the Qadiani one.

In its fifty-year history the Circle has had a few staunch members and many sympathisers. With a fuller appreciation of events and personalities, Circle members would now admit to their moments of immoderation, poor decisions, and absence of foresight. But what did the critics and opponents say and do to weaken and change the organization?

All associations are born, struggle, strive, survive and, either wither away - or are re-formed - through competition and contention with similar or antagonistic associations. Durban's Muslims, before the arrival of

the Circle, had its share of tensions. The Circle, however, through its innovations in the public sphere of Muslim life produced a number of opportunities for contentious engagement with other bodies seeking to address the same Muslim community.

The Circle's focus on Arabic and the Qur'an, and not Urdu and the Mawlanas, was itself a cause for continual criticism. This was soft and often unarticulated compared with other moments. The condemnation over their relationship with Perdu was something they could never shake off.

Three articulate and persistent men - Mohamed Makki, Adam Peerbhai and Advocate Ismail Bawa - led a concerted campaign against the Circle for hosting Perdu. This occurred within the first decade of the Circle's history. The group survived this crisis, but could well have disappeared so severe and thorough were the attacks on the Circle and especially on the President, Dr. Mall, himself.

In the 1960s' when the Perdu controversy was over the group was then under persistent pressure by the conservative Natal clerisy. The Perdu episode put the Circle on the defensive and opened the way for previously less vocal critics to come into the open. A small band of Circle members – Ismail Manjra, Abdullah Deedat and Suleiman Omar - asserted themselves against the older leadership of Dr. Mall. Their claim was that Dr. Mall and the older members were too tolerant of the Circle's critics and a counter-attack was necessary. They therefore freed themselves from organizational discipline and formed their own group. They issued a fortnightly broadsheet called *al-Mujaddid* in 1959. This newsletter was a collection of fiery and emotive articles all together calling for further and faster reform of the Muslim community locally and internationally. But these Young Turks and their mouthpiece soon disbanded and re-joined the fold of the Circle.

'There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his messenger,' is what every Muslim learns from childhood. It is a standard Islamic axiom

²⁶ On Baha'ism see article Baha'i in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition vol. 1 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986); and in M. Eliade (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Religion*

that no prophet will come after Muhammad who is the embodiment of goodness and mercy. Through his exegesis of the Qur'an, Perdu gradually led members of his audience to entertain ideas about the continuation of prophethood (*nubuwah*). The last Islamic prophet had fulfilled his purpose according to this perspective, another one had to come for the present epoch. Perdu's religious belief as a Baha'i is that a new revealed messenger is required for 'every age'.

The man to perform this function in the present historical era had already arrived and brought a message. He was the Persian notable Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri Baha'Allah (1817-1892), the founder of what became known as Baha'ism.²⁶ He announced this new faith in 1863 but had in 1844 already adopted or founded it. Exiled from Qajar Iran, first to Baghdad then to Istanbul and Edirne, but under severe repression wherever he went in the Ottoman Empire, Mirza Husayn Ali finally settled in Akka (Acre) on the coast of Ottoman Syria in 1868 where he remained until his death in 1892. His son Abbas Effendi inherited his father's place becoming 'Abd al-Baha. The site of his burial in Haifa would later become the site of the Universal House of Justice, the spiritual and administrative centre of the faith. A corpus of Persian and Arabic writings, ritual practices such as prayer and fasting, communal institutions, and religious personalities endowed with authority emerged in the lifetime and soon after the death of Baha'Allah. When Perdu visited South Africa the leader of the movement was the Oxford educated son of Abd al-Baha, and grandson of Mirza Husayn Ali, Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957). Under the latter numerous administrative innovations were introduced. During this time a body of primary sources – books by the founder, letters, and prayers - essential for understanding and practising the faith had already been translated into many languages but certain key texts such as the *Kitab al-Aqdas* was not yet available to English readers.

The Islamic and specifically millenarian Shi'ite context of nineteenth-century Iran marks the entire fabric of Baha'ism.²⁷ However, having

²⁷ See, for instance, Denis MacEoin, *Rituals in Babism and Baha'ism*, Pembroke Persian papers vol.2 (London: British Academic Press, 1994).

made an uncompromising break with Islam, Baha'ism is not an Islamic sect but an independent religion although patterned on an Islamic model.

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

Meanwhile, Perdu also fell out of favour with the Baha'i spiritual leadership. He was viewed as too egocentric and proved difficult to keep in line. Possibly, his covert missionary tactics were also not acceptable. There could be other additional factors that led to his expulsion but which have been suppressed. Shoghi Effendi expelled him from the movement just before his departure from South Africa. He was in Baha'i parlance a 'covenant breaker'.²⁸

As we showed, he became more daring in his public utterances but his views were challenged by the more Islamically educated members of his audiences. However, there was a small group whom he managed to convince. The Gallow brothers - Amien, Aziem and Toyer - Cassiem Davids, and Munier 'Michael' Noor were among the Muslims who had attended Perdu's lectures and whom he managed to convince of his interpretation of the Qur'an.

However, he did not convert them. He did not take them home and teach them the Baha'i covenant. Instead, he told them that if they wanted to follow the logical development of his ideas then they should write for more information to the Baha'i headquarters in Haifa, which in 1948 was made part of the Jewish state of Israel. These men then began a

²⁸ Jeffrey & Amy Marks, Cape Town, interview 29 December 1998.

correspondence with the Baha'i movement and were sent literature. At some point in the process they adopted the Baha'i faith. They changed their religious vision entirely. They sacrificed their Prophet Muhammad for the Persian Baha'Allah. They would spend the rest of their lives as devout members of the fledgling Baha'i community of South Africa. Once this change became known, their Muslim relatives, neighbours and friends largely rejected and even denounced them. Some of them reportedly suffered personal abuses and minor infringements of their properties. Baha'ism became a negative term and a mysterious and subversive sect in Muslim circles.

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

Michael Noor was working in the clothing industry and was in his 30s'. He was married and residing in Claremont when he first encountered Perdu. He recalls that his brother Ameer wrote from Durban – where he was a neighbour of Circle member Sedick Burke — urging him to attend Perdu's lectures if he came to Cape Town. When Perdu went to lecture there, Michael duly made his way to the lectures. He recalls the first one on 'Science and religion' at the Avalon Bioscope in District Six. He actually did not understand anything that Perdu said. But Perdu's other lectures, especially those on the Qur'an, were most appealing to Noor. Like many others who remember Perdu's lectures, Noor was also most impressed with his exposition of *s'rat al-Shams*. It is known by scholars of Baha'ism that the Baha'Allah had himself authored a *tafsir* of this *s'rah* and it is quite likely that Perdu used it in its entirety or as the basis for his own explanations at his lectures. Noor, who must have been in his late seventies when he was interviewed, still believed the 'revolution

he (Perdu) started in the minds of men; it went on for years after he left.' Later Noor chose the Baha'i faith.²⁹ His appreciation of Perdu is strikingly similar to that of Circle members. They did not convert however.

Perdu was thus successful in Cape Town. The shaykhs in Cape Town who had first supported him challenged Perdu when his views became known. Perdu had impressed Shaykh Ismail Ganief who later admitted that when he first met the man:

It is true that we accepted him at first as a Moslem, after he was put to the task of answering many questions put to him. However, we detected many flaws in his lectures, which put us back in doubts about his 'real identity'. He is very clever in avoiding debates. We have made a mistake to accept so soon(sic).³⁰

In Durban Perdu was less successful. The Arabic Study Circle was Perdu's employer in Durban. He produced a very polished journal, *al-Mu'minon*, for the Circle. None of his Circle colleagues converted to Baha'ism. Dr. Mall's brother-in-law, however, converted but it is unclear how this happened. This convert, Dr. Abdul-Hak Bismillah, was regarded as the first 'Asian in South Africa' to adopt Baha'ism.³¹ What is certain is that the biggest campaign against Perdu, and also against Baha'ism, was launched in Durban. The Durban line of attack relied on print media to circulate word of the danger in the House of South African Islam. The public disputations that were staged in public halls and mosques in Cape Town were now supplemented by another form of disputation. It is to the Durban anti-Perdu and anti-Circle campaigns that we now turn.

Ibrahim Mohamed Bawa went to Perdu's small and sparsely furnished office in Commercial Road for private Arabic lessons one Saturday morning. He had heard him lecture at the popular Circle meetings and wanted to improve his Islamic knowledge. Bawa was the ideal Circle member - highly educated, sophisticated, modern, and very interested

²⁹ Michael Noor, Cape Town, interview, 01 January 1999.

³⁰ Letter by Shaykh Ganief reproduced in Peerbhai (ed.) *Verdict on Perdu*, p. 48.

³¹ *Pictorial history of Baha'ism in South Africa, 1911 to 1922* (Johannesburg: National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of South Africa, 1992).

in his religion as a contemporary culture and way of life. He had qualified as a Barrister at Lincoln's Inn, London, in 1941, and returned home in 1942 whereupon he immediately got involved in establishing a Natal Muslim Council to co-ordinate all Islamic activities in the province. This was a short-lived venture that he would resuscitate a decade later with Dr. Mall as his deputy president.³² In the 1970s' he was involved in the formation of the equally briefly tenured Islamic Council of South Africa. These initiatives reflect Bawa's commitment to stability and unity in the Muslim community. Perdu's unorthodox views challenged, and his secretive style of introducing them, deeply disturbed him.

He recalls Perdu saying that 'Islam will be taken away by God' because 'a second prophet would emerge after 1000 years. A new revelation was needed.' Islam was neither powerful nor respected in the world because its time had passed.³³ Perdu also cynically asked Bawa whether saying the *kalima* (profession of faith) was a necessary condition for being Muslim. Such questions and opinions confused Bawa, the young seeker who simply wanted conventional Islamic and Arabic language lessons.

He did not get into any argument with the charismatic Perdu. Instead, he went to Mohamed Makki the well-known publisher of the *Muslim Digest*, by then already a well-established monthly magazine of Islamic affairs. A wiry bespectacled man who always wore a dark suit and matching necktie, Makki wanted to be a modern day intellectual Saladdin. Like Perdu he was a passionate worker for his cause and a man who lived very modestly. He was a disciple of Mawlana Abdul Aleem Siddiqi, the peripatetic south Asian shaykh of both the Qadiriyya and Chistiyya Sufi orders. After the Mawlana's first visit to South Africa, Makki began publishing yearly a miscellany of largely borrowed articles called *Ramadan Annual* in 1934. It was a thick glossy publication and through much of the Apartheid era the *Annual* boasted a message to the Muslims from the white Prime Minister. *The Muslim Digest*, similarly composed

³² *Indian Views*, 17 December 1952.

³³ Ismail Bawa, Durban, interview, December 1998.

largely of 'lifted' material often without regard to copyright, was born in 1950. These publications showed a remarkable consistency and Makki produced them since their beginnings on a shoestring budget from his humble cottage and without administrative infrastructure. Makki was thus a highly motivated publicist.

Makki had already worked with Mawlana Cassim Sema on the Perdu question. Makki claims that Dr. Mall's eldest brother, Muhammad, had approached Mawlana Sema to quietly inquire into Perdu's influence over his brother and the Circle. Muhammad, the concerned brother, also agreed to finance the anti-Perdu campaign.³⁴ Sema had already confronted Perdu when he was touring through the small towns of northern Natal. Makki found a new impetus when he heard from Bawa. They set out to stop Perdu once and for all. First it was through correspondence and private communication with Perdu; then followed public campaigning.

Makki found a collaborator for his team in Adam Peerbhai in Cape Town. Peerbhai was then beginning a career as an author of religious pamphlets for children. Makki knew that city well since he spent part of the year there with one of his two wives.

These three, led by Makki, then embarked on an exhaustive programme of action to expose what they called 'Perduism'. Bawa was the least fierce and confrontational of the group. In the forward to their publication *Verdict on Perdu* I. M. Bawa writes:

Perdu would have rendered a great service to the Muslim Community if he had confined his thinking within legitimate bounds; but, as this booklet records, he exceeded all limits, and sealed his doom when he sat on the Holy Quran and on the Holy Prophet Muhammad!³⁵

From this 'soft' opening the booklet proceeds in 15 short chapters to treat virtually every facet of the Perdu issue. The early sections are devoted to Perdu himself and his sponsors in Durban. Perdu is mistaken

³⁴ Mohamed Makki, Durban, interview May 1997. Mr. Makki would not consent to a having our interview captured on tape.

³⁵ Forward in Peerbhai (ed.) *Verdict on Perdu*.

for a Frenchmen spying for his government! The Circle is identified as the main culprit. Then follows an attack on Perdu's 'new prophet theories' and 'dangers in misinterpreting "khataman-nabeeyeen"' and other views purportedly held by Perdu. Perdu had said that *khattam* meant beauty and not *seal* or *final*. Hence, according to him, Muhammad was beautiful not 'seal of the prophets' as the Quran (33:40) says. The penultimate chapter is devoted to an assault on Baha'ism and Babism and Qadianism. Perdu is not definitely identified as a Baha'i. In the final chapter its author writes:

Perdu and his fanatical adherents from the Arabic Study Circle, were thus doomed to be exposed in the eyes of the public opinion (sic). Perdu should never have been given the inducement of remaining long in our community.

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

Perdu left Durban and finally the country in January 1959. According to one Baha'i follower in Cape Town: 'He said he was going to join his family and would return to South Africa "sometime". He gave none of his South African friends any address, but said he would write to them . . .'³⁶

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

³⁶ Written information from Dr. M. Walker, Mathematics Department, University of Cape Town, 16 November 1998.

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

Perdu's departure did not clear the path for the Circle to pursue its activities unhindered. The Circle was branded a sponsor of Baha'ism in the country. This was done to dissuade the community from supporting the Circle either financially or morally. The 'Makki group' disbanded but Makki remained opposed to the Circle and its members. He would recall with pride that he issued 13 pamphlets against Perdu! It reinforced his instinct always to suspect the motives of medical doctors and others with no theological training who meddle in religion.³⁷ He believed it was his duty to promote basic purified Islamic creed through his publications, and to criticize anyone who deviated from what he understood to be the religion of Islam.

Twenty years after Perdu's departure Makki was still closely following the Circle activities. His criticism was still that they promoted, not Baha'ism, but Qadiani literature. When Circle members, independent of the organization, promoted *The Message of the Quran* by Muhammad Asad, Mr. Makki began his campaign by invoking the Circle's Perdu fiasco.

In a 1978 issue of *Muslim Digest* Makki lashed out at the Circle below an interrogative headline: *Arabic Study Circle leads the way to mislead Muslims and usher in "Perdu era" once again?* Makki held that Asad's translation was Qadiani-inspired. Asad interpreted the

³⁷ Makki interview.

Quranic verses dealing with the rising of Prophet Jesus metaphorically; Jesus died although he was spiritually raised. This 'rational' approach is in keeping with Asad's preferred medieval and modern exegetes. This insistence on 'reason' and 'thinking' by Asad is perhaps also the reason for the Circle members' interest in promoting Asad's translation of the Quran.

The Circle's commitment to Arabic and Islamic Studies had led them to invite U.S. trained Pakistani scholars Salman Nadvi and later Habib al-Haq Nadvi to take up Chairs of Islamic related fields at the University of Durban-Westville. Since Asad spoke at the university and the Circle was so closely associated with these Departments critics began monitoring the texts and courses in Islamic studies offered at the university.

Makki made a direct link between the Persian 'Frenchman' Perdu in the 1950s' and the Austrian-Pakistani Arabophile Asad (Leopold Weiss) in the late 1970s'. Numerous pamphlets issued in the late 1950s' against Perdu were reproduced in his 1978 article against Asad. The Circle was portrayed as an organization with a long conscious commitment to undermining Islam from within. The Circle was a modernist perversion and subversion. They were cast as congenital conspirators against their religion - 'self-hating Muslims'. Other pamphleteers would join Makki in later years. In Makki, his sponsors and network of followers the Circle found committed and relentless opponents. These opponents were convinced that they were hiding their true identity as enemies of the faith. They had a predilection for noisy disputation and long memories to pursue their case against the Circle over the decades. The problems for the ambitious modernist Circle all started with that charming French Catholic convert who knew Arabic, Persian and some English but was really an Iranian Baha'i with a mission in Africa.

This essay has focused on the entanglement of a single individual in the public articulation of a particular group's work. In the process his public performance and his private life came to be held up against each

other. This question of the private and the public — their limits, their entanglements – are essential to consider the ways in which religious movements come to constitute themselves. The extent to which they try to keep these spheres separate, or fuse and collapse them, or challenge them can tell us a lot about their politics and trajectories. In this essay we looked at one “modernist” Muslim grouping and their reaction to a challenge to a private-public distinction is telling of their attitudes and possibly also “modernity”.