Dear HASS Seminar participants, February 24, 2010:

What follows are the introduction and conclusion to a project near completion concerning a women's group in Durban….We welcome critical feedback, GV and TW

## Introduction

In 1972, the *Leader*, then the most widely read South African Indian newspaper, carried a review praising the latest edition of *Indian Delights*, a cookbook published by the Women's Cultural Group of Durban. The reviewer, Ranji Nowbath, who wrote under the pen title of 'The Fakir', was a regular columnist with a signature style of irreverence. So he might have been intending irony along with a bald flourish of male chauvinism when he expressed his paternalistic enthusiasm for the Women's Cultural Group, rounding off with 'I think it jolly good that our women should be getting down to doing some solid work for the community and a movement such as this obviously caters for the need for women to get together now and then and have a good natter, while at the same time doing constructive work'.[1]

Tea parties, gossip and a bit of charity on the side—the Women's Cultural Group has certainly not been the only women's organization to be met with stereotypes that conceal the nature and magnitude of its labour, struggles and achievements. Yet an account of the Group that sets out only to catalogue its impressive triumphs would also miss much, most importantly the social complexities that make its story a rich account of historical change.

This book is about how the women of the Women's Cultural Group, women with limited formal power in the spaces both of politics and custom, re-defined their citizenship through membership to a voluntary association they themselves created. It is also about that very practice of 'getting down to doing some solid work for the community', and the meaning this work has had over time, both for the women themselves and for the communities it has served. Over the decades, their efforts have raised millions of rands for educational bursaries and charity organizations, produced a best-selling and internationally acclaimed cookbook series, organized hundreds of cultural and scholarly public events and contributed untold hours of time, talent and labour to social upliftment and development. Through these engagements, members of the Women's Cultural Group crafted legitimate spaces in which they could publicly assert their creative power and their socio-political ideals. They utilized informal and customary roles to

[1] *The Leader*, reprinted in WCG, *Eighteenth Anniversary Brochure*, 1972, 6.

rework formal conceptions of civic agency and identity during a period when apartheid policies were assigning racialized significance to these roles. Their activities engaged them deeply also in the work of cultural production, contributing to the creolization of Durban's diverse Indian population and its diasporic self-understanding. Over its fifty year history, the Group reflected changes in national and religious politics, local family structures and educational opportunities—and also influenced these changes.

In 1954, a group of young, mainly Muslim women in Durban, South Africa took part in a public speech contest sponsored by the Arabic Study Circle. Stimulated and inspired, as well as surprised by their own outspoken participation, they left the meeting with an idea to form a circle of their own, an organization where they could channel their creative and civic energies, cultivate their friendships and their intellects, and make modern women of themselves. They created the Women's Cultural Group.

The Group's Constitution provides for a secular definition of membership, with gender and age the only delimiting variables: membership was open to 'all women over the age of 16' and has historically included women from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Still, the Group's overall membership profile places it within a specific social milieu. A majority of Group members have been devout Muslims, who identify themselves as 'housewives', and who are attached to middle- or upper-class families. Most have been of Gujarati ancestry, identifying ethnically as Surtee or Memon, and most have been the daughters, granddaughters or great-granddaughters of Indian traders and entrepreneurs who immigrated to South Africa in the late 19$^{th}$ century. A high proportion of members, therefore, may be said to have kinship or social ties to the dynastic economic power of an elite Gujarati merchant diaspora, a network of religious and business affiliations that has constituted an important resource base for the Women's Cultural Group.

Yet identity is claimed in multiple and fluid ways and members also express a strong sense of South African Indianness as well as transnational identifications with clan and village communities in South Asia. For the Group, national, urban, religious, cultural and gendered designations have all operated both as constraints and resources in conceptualizing an authoritative civic autonomy. Negotiating decades of law-making practices that attempted to arrest racial identity, map out Group Areas, manage unequal education, divide public amenities, preclude protest, and offer up of subordinate and racialized power-sharing deals by the state, the

self-described 'non-political' Women's Cultural Group laboured to bring about its own vision of the social good. The story of the Group, therefore, reveals the dynamic meanings of community, culture, identity and space during a time when the national legislation of apartheid was attempting to make these ideas fixed and synonymous.

Although seemingly generic, the name 'Women's Cultural Group' signals some of the complexities that have been a part of the Group's fifty year existence. The organization was to be comprised of, and run by, women; a culture-based ontology would provide a platform for its activities, educational endeavours, and social exchanges; it was to be a formal society with a regular membership. Each of these constitutive elements raises questions that can help to situate the history of the Group in a broader social and theoretical context.

One deceptively straightforward concept is 'Group'. In this study, we conceptualize the Women's Cultural Group as a voluntary association, a specific cultural form considered to be a corollary of civil society within the broader modernist construct of the nation-state. Voluntary associations are formally constituted organizations established for the purpose of social improvement or a community good; are independent of government; and are typically run through a board, with rationalized offices and democratic decision-making procedures. [2] Non-profit in principle, they reinvest funds and monetary proceeds back into the organization and its projects. Voluntary societies are frequently, though not necessarily, gendered. They can be organized around sets of occupational or responsibility interests, business groups or parent groups, which importantly may operate, *de facto,* as men's lodges or mothers' unions. Globally, many women's associations have worked towards similar humanistic aims and visions of the 'good society', as revealed in the narratives they employ in telling their stories.[3] In its formal similarities to a prevalent organizational species, the particular case of the Women's Cultural Group may be considered in relation to the substantial scholarly literature that examines the social and political positioning of women's voluntary associations.

Research on the global rise of women's leagues, clubs, organisations and voluntary associations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries indicates that they have played an historically

[2] We draw on the definition of Christina Schwabenland (2006) who attributes it to a U.K.-based report by the National Council of Voluntary Organizations, 1996, entitled 'Meeting the Challenge of Change: Voluntary Action in the 21st Century'.

[3] Schwanbenland, in *Stories, Visions, and Values*, explores this avenue of inquiry in relation to Indian and British women's societies.

transformative role both in national and in gender politics. Elizabeth Clemens has argued that voluntary associations emerged out of conditions of inequality, to enable 'those who are relatively weak and disadvantaged by a particular set of political rules to change those rules'.[4] Women, who in many different cultural contexts have been ideologically and materially positioned within the customary domain of household and private sphere relationships, have been amongst the categories of people historically excluded from expressing themselves through official vehicles of citizenship, such as the franchise. As 'non-political models of organization' that may be used for political purposes, voluntary associations represent a cultural innovation that potentially shifts the locus of influence from formal governmental structures of participation to popular mobilizations and interest groups. They can, therefore, on the one hand, be conceived of instrumentally, as tools through which actors 'reject the established conventions for political organization […] and mobilize in ways that are not anticipated or constrained by the dominant rules'.[5] Yet, on the other hand, given that such models of organization can be adopted for a variety of uses, they occasion a range of interpretations and political meanings, both for their participants as well as for scholars.

Many writers have highlighted how voluntary organizations have enabled large numbers of women to redefine their role in society by expanding the legitimate structures and spaces for civic participation and a public presence. Through associations, women's 'shared experiences and cooperation […have] increased their collective sense of sisterhood as well as their individual feelings of self-esteem and self confidence'. [6] The cultivation of leadership talents and other skills, developed through experiences of planning, fundraising and campaigning have been a clear benefit of membership for women, especially for those not situated within formal or informal wage economies. Extended social networks and meaningful friendships are another advantage. Such benefits are an important form of social capital that women may accumulate through 'shared norms and values of reciprocity and trust',[7] which can also advance their standing—and sometimes that of their families—in their own communities or beyond. For some feminist scholars, the idea of sisterhood contains the seeds of an 'awakening' to a particular kind of political consciousness, one that anticipates a liberal formulation of gender equality. For example, Karen J. Blair, in her foundational book *The Clubwoman as Feminist* theorized that

4 Clemens, "Organizational Repertoires and Institutional Change," 782.
5 Ibid.
6 Wedell, *Elite Women and the Reform Impulse in Memphis,* 54.
7 Schwabenland, *Stories*, 11.

early American women's clubs, which eschewed overt political involvements, were yet proto-feminist in their effect of normalizing women's influence in schools and other public institutions. Unlike suffragists seeking equality and the vote, these women sought the more 'moderate' aim of broadcasting an ideal of 'ladydom and the myth of women's instinctive domestic and moral traits'. Yet, argues Blair, the very moderation of this objective 'made it attractive to millions of women who were able to enrich the quality of their own lives while transforming the worlds of culture and reform'.[8]

Recent studies have been more tentative in assigning overt political meaning to women's collective action, acknowledging the problematic nature of conceptualizing a 'women's interest' when differences in economic status, cultural background, religion, race, sexuality and age are so clearly manifested in the divergent experiences of lived womanhood. Margit Misangyi Watts has noted that 'clubs and associations have been viewed by historians as constructive segments of society: however, they have been observed also to be forms of organized social control through which upper-middle-class men and women have sought to promote and ensure the acceptance of a particular set of morals and standards'.[9] The regulatory power of women's social organizations, specifically in enforcing class and racial privileges was explored by Diana Kendall in her case study of a philanthropic organization run by white, affluent women in the Southern United States. Kendall concludes that, whether 'intentionally or unintentionally', the 'power of good deeds' is neither straightforward nor benign.[10] Similarly, writing about an earlier period of women's organizing in New York, Anne Boylan cautions readers 'to think hard about the interests that specific voluntary associations serve, the exclusions they practice, and the mechanisms whereby they claim to speak for the commonweal'. Her findings indicate that the political and economic power that women wield in these organizations can deepen 'chasms of religion, race, class and legal status that separate them from each other'.[11]

The category 'womanhood' is insufficient grounds for generalizing about the motives and effects of women's organizing, which defy a unitary political trajectory or sensibility. Still, of course, the widespread prevalence of women's associations, and the distance which benevolent and reformist groups have frequently maintained from feminist politics and activism,[12] require a

8 Blair, The *Clubwoman as Feminist,* 19.
9 Watts, *High Tea at Halekulami,* 23
10 Kendall, *The Power of Good Deeds,* 167.
11 Boylan, *The Origins of Women's Activism,* 218.
12 Boylan, *Origins of Women's Activism, 219.*

theory of gender that is historically grounded. A convincing account focuses on the relationship of gender subjectivity to the modern state. Sonia Alvarez has observed that formal liberal politics poses specific dilemmas for women. Where women may organize alongside men for causes that fall within a national or civil rights rubric, they yet may find it difficult to 'advance claims, that are considered to be by definition outside the legitimate reach of State intervention—for example, claims concerning women's rights in marriage and the patriarchal family'. [13] In other cases, from subject positions within household and marital relations which typically fall (ideologically and often legally) within 'customary' jurisdiction, rights-based claim-making is not viable. Moral discourses, emphasizing cultural and religious principles, can be brought more powerfully to bear on matters that impact community and private sphere life. In this sense, civic associations can be perceived as offering to women who occupy anomalous political ground a means by which to empower themselves and 'to develop their own brand of feminism that is humanistic in scope'.[14]

Indeed, members of women's groups can view humanistic or religious concerns as central and driving motives and do not necessarily conceptualize their work as having either political impetus or impact. Perhaps particularly when women's groups self-identify as religious organizations, religious motive are sometimes taken—by members and by others—as face-value explanations for why women have organized. Piety and religious principles are sometimes viewed as synonymous with doing good works. Yet, as Patricia Wittberg contends, this is an ahistorical reading:

> Most [people] probably assume that the involvement of [religious] groups in such organizational activities [as soup kitchens, schools and mission fundraising] was natural and normative. It is not. While most if not all religious traditions require their individual adherents to perform private acts of charity, for a religious group to construct and operate formal organizations—which are specifically dedicated to education, health care and social services—have been far less common.[15]

Religious welfare structures and social charity works certainly predate modernity. Yet the modern voluntary association is a recent organisational template belonging to forms of national citizenship, and has its root in secular 'ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity which influenced European revolutionary movements'.[16] Still, religion is not easily distinguished from these

[13] Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil,* 29. See also, Waetjen, *Workers and Warriors*. x.
[14] Lloyd, 'Organizing across Borders',
[15] Wittberg, *From Piety to Professionalism*, 3.
[16] Schwabenland, *Stories,* 9.

processes and voluntary associations have sometimes pioneered or given formal structure to new expressions of religious compassion and cultural communalism. The way religion informs women's organizations is, of course, variable, just as the impact of religion on gender cannot be generalized. Ghada Hashem Talhami, examining women's groups in Palestine and Egypt, cautions that '[a]lthough it has been customary to emphasize the role of religion in shaping women's roles in the Arab Middle East…the impact of Islam varies greatly from one country to another due to the succession of contrasting political ideologies such as liberalism, authoritarianism, socialism and Islamic fundamentalism'.[17]

In thinking about women's religious organizations, some scholars appear to imply that religious motivations are merely a strategic and politically expedient means of smuggling in secular, feminist ideals and empowerment through the 'acceptable' language and discourses of traditional gender roles. This does not ring true with the way many religious women's organizations understand themselves and such a reading of human agency would appear to emerge from within the contradictions of liberal citizenship itself, its conception of the political as a disenchanted and rationalised space. Such a reading cannot account for action that both constructs and derives from simultaneous and integrated subjectivities. Filomina Chioma Steady shows that since 1932 in Freetown, Sierra Leone, women have been organizing to set up Islamic schools. The Muslim Association was founded in 1942 with the 'main objective of setting up educational institutes' based on a 'Western' model, since this was now valued as one of the main avenues for social mobility.[18] A certain degree of female emancipation was thought possible through trade, and girls were taught these skills from an early age in order to be economically self-sufficient by the time they were married. This work was considered an extension of one's identity as a 'good Muslim'.[19]

Such cases appear to evidence Schwabenland's assertion that women's associations often sit at the boundaries of political/non-political, public/private and secular/religious social fields. Thishas been a source of strength and success for many groups, and it seems empirically problematic to insist that only one side of these binary constructs represents a valid consciousness.

Through this brief summary, it is hopefully evident that the objective of scholarship on

[17] Hashem Talhami, "Women and Philanthropy in Palestine and Egyptian Societies," 245.
[18] Chioma Steady, *Women and Collective Action in Africa*, 120.
[19] Ibid, 125.

women's societies and associations has not only been to assess their impact on the social environments in which they labour, nor merely to chronicle their achievements as expressions of specific kinds of religious or political commitments. This research has also sought to understand the way these groups have both signified and shaped the transformation of larger ideological norms and social relations of power pertaining to gender, class, culture and nation. So, while it is clear that women's collaborative efforts have reformed urban environments,[20]advanced the wellbeing of specific cultural or religious communities,[21] and promoted educational causes at a national level, such achievements themselves reveal the historical changes in which the public meanings of womanhood are reinvented.

Another critical question raised by the designation 'Women's Cultural Group', relates to culture and communal belonging. Schwabenland reveals how voluntary associations convey their vision of the good society through narrative as well as through practice.[22] In the vision of the social good explored and advanced by the Women's Cultural Group over its 50 year period, the concept of *culture* has been central. Culture, however, is an idea that is difficult to pin down. In the context of a state regime with an even more legally assertive programme of segregation and identity management than had existed under colonial governments, the meaning of culture carried great ideological weight and was being deployed in politically instrumental ways. The Group's identification of itself as a cultural society reflects some conceptual ambiguities, but also indicates how those ambiguities could be cultivated to suit its own purposes. Did 'Cultural' denote a *particular* heritage and tradition or was it rather a synonym for 'intercultural'? Both interpretations appear to have been embraced. 'Cultural' described Group-sponsored activities and events that showcased, by turns, Indian *or* Muslim identity (or both, in combination). But 'cultural' also identified a field of human diversity that was to be a basis for interaction between women from beyond Muslim Indian circles: a grounding of difference that itself could be shared and become a source of pleasurable exchange; a basis to come together *as women*. Zuleikha Mayat sometimes articulated this functional ambiguity directly, for example at the occasion of a Group-sponsored public lecture by Scottish Muslim convert and scholar Dr. Yaqub Zaki in 1977. Mayat explained to guests that

Living in a country where so many cultures exist side by side our organisation aims to

[20] See for example, Endres (2006) and Spain (2001).
[21] For example, Rugow (1993), Johnson (2004); and Wittberg (2006).
[22] See Schwabenland (2006).

> promote understanding between the communities by learning of each others cultures. Though membership has right from the beginning been open to all women irrespective of class, colour or community, the fact remains that it has always been predominantly Muslim. And as in all democratic institutions the will of the majority prevails and therefore our activities tend to be more Islamic than otherwise. [23]

A continually open signification as a 'Cultural' Group maximized its members' manoeuvrability and legroom for civic expression. So, at an 'Islamic' event (such as the lecture by Dr. Zaki) the Group's standing as a predominantly Muslim organization could be readily advanced. Other circumstances occasioned an emphasis on the Group's broader 'Indian' orientation, for example when describing the compilation of recipes that make up the cookbook *Indian Delights*. Still other contexts promote a definition of 'cultural' as plural or interactive, for example in its associations with the Zamokuhle women's group projects or in relation to its motives for offering Indian cookery classes.

To the extent that this multifaceted description of itself as 'cultural' came at times into tension, it is fair to say that the contradictions emerged not only from the South African political context but also from factors internal to the group. A membership comprising mostly Muslim women of Gujarati heritage could not but render as 'token' those women who hailed from Parsee, Hindu, Zulu, English and other religious or linguistic backgrounds. And, though early on the Group resisted suggestions that they call themselves the Muslim Women's Group in favour of a civic, secular and open identity, it is evident that protocols in meetings and other events have over the decades increasingly reflected specific religious values and practices. Additionally, cultural and class mixing appears to have had varied meaning within the Group. For some members, the exchanges that the Group provided offered a unique forum of contact outside of narrow social circles. Other members were raised in more cosmopolitan environments; a few hailing from families that regularly challenged conventional notions of class or religious proprieties. As a whole, however, the Group's public reputation for being a 'multiracial body' that 'packs a mighty punch'[24] was well established, as was its record of support and charitable giving to Durban's spectrum of local, disadvantaged communities.

The Group was 'cultural' in another sense. Members were not merely practitioners, ambassadors and connoisseurs of culture. They were also producers, agents and brokers of

[23] Address by Z. Mayat: Welcome and Introduction of public lecturer, Dr. Yaqub Zaki, 1.April 1977.
[24] Reddy, Jayapraga. 'Women's Cultural Group—25 years of Service', *Sunday Times Extra,* 21 June 1981.

culture. This is best observed both in their creation of the cookbook, *Indian Delights*, the lodestar of their public existence, and through *Nanima's Chest*, a volume photographically documenting the beautiful textile arts belonging to the era of their grandmothers. Although individuals in the Group may understand themselves naturalistically as *belonging* to a community, *reflecting* its values and *enjoying* its traditions and heritage, they of course have also been active in its production and reproduction. Within South Africa's contemporary politics of ethnic divide and rule (and its attendant cultural brokerage) the Group's cultural productions could not be politically neutral, even though it emerged from ethics and circumstances that were remote from state sponsorship.

This seems to be what Ahmed Kathrada—who corresponded with Zuleikha Mayat from 1979 up until his release from Pollsmoor prison ten years later—was gently hinting at in a letter which conveyed his praise (and that of his fellow inmates) for *Nanima's Chest*. From his position as a secular, nationally-oriented activist (from a Muslim family) who nevertheless admired many cultural and religious traditions, it is not surprising that he raised the question of culture's political utility as an axis of social conflict and partition. 'My own views', he wrote,

> are best expressed in a passage I read by Gandhi where he says: I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I think that more or less accords with your views. My main criterion for judging questions of this nature is whether they promote sectionalism. *Nanima's Chest* should give no cause whatsoever for any anxiety on this score.

Still, Kathrada clearly believed there was more to be said on the matter and expressed the wish that he and Mayat could 'discuss this in greater detail with the pros and cons adequately slated'.[25]

Kathrada's worries were related in part to his own experience of the world, his choice to embrace political activism as the avenue for expressing his ethical convictions, which (despite his secular vision of society) most certainly were not unrelated to the religiously valued upbringing he shared with Mayat. In an encounter that deeply affected him, he had visited Auschwitz, with its walkways of incinerated bone, and had, when he wrote this particular letter to Mayat, already endured 20 years as a political prisoner for challenging racialized and ethnic policies of rule.

In South Africa in these decades, the 'winds of culture' were the veritable spirit of the

[25] Letter, Ahmed Kathrada to Zuleikha Mayat, 30 January 1983. In Vahed and Waetjen, *Dear Ahmedbhai Dear Zuleikhabehn*, 86-87.

times, blowing with gale force and inspiring an ideal of a *volk* as divinely ordained to rule. But the idea of nationhood itself—the premise of most conceptions of democracy—which emerged as a normative and modern concept, was premised on the correlation between sovereignty of state and a unitary sense of 'peoplehood'. In the late 20th century, too, nationalism was sweeping through African colonies: movements organised towards independent rule were compelled to create new conceptions of a national peoples' culture within these colonial-defined territories, often based thinly on a shared experience of subjugation.[26] In the theatres of anti-colonial warfare worldwide, as well as in South African resistance to apartheid, ethnic cultural difference was being denounced as 'reactionary', a tool of divide and rule, and a danger to national cohesion. While the broad-based popularity of Buthelezi's Inkatha revealed that conceptions of cultural identity informed the political thinking of many at the 'grassroots', its competition and violent clash with other liberation movements underscored the vulnerabilities to power that such thinking produced. National cohesion, it seemed, was the order of the day.

Yet the political dangers of a nation-building process that refused to accommodate diasporic, ethnic and transnational identifications became evident with the weakening of the Soviet Union and scholars have since had to grapple more seriously with realities in which 'minorities', 'foreigners', and other 'others' have been denied rights or their lives in cases of xenophobic violence, civil war or genocide.[27] By invoking Gandhi's words, Kathrada was conceding the importance of pluralism and of an openness and 'flow' of identifications and exchanges. Gandhi's metaphor of self and nation -- an open-windowed, open-doored house --hinges its meaning on the realities of domestic space, the gendered seat of culture. Women are key agents of cultural transmission, as scholarship has shown and as groups like the Women's Cultural Group are themselves aware.

The story of a Muslim women's society, told in the 21st century, necessarily carries the burden of its current global geo-political context in which Islam—and most especially Islamic womanhood—has become highly charged and polemicized. A substantial literature exists to probe and debate questions generated by Western feminism about the agency and subjectivity of women who identify with religious and cultural formations which defy, or appear to defy, secular, liberal and individualist conceptions of bio-political freedom and civic androgyny. In this debate, as in the official discourses that pervaded US offensives in Afghanistan under

[26] See, for example, Cabral "National Liberation and Culture".
[27] See, for example, Appadurai (2006); Mann (2004); and Sen (2007).

George Bush following the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon, the figure of the veiled Muslim woman has operated as potent symbolic currency.

The fifty year history of the Women's Cultural Group, as an organisation of mainly Muslim women, speaks to changes not only in national politics and global economy, but in local doctrinal contestations within Islam and the shape gender has taken in Durban Muslim life. In the decades of its existence, in religious circles, the Group was initially viewed as posing a radical, modernist challenge with regard to the status of women in Islam. They advocated space for women in Mosques and an interpretation of Islam that showed women to be equal partners in public affairs. In relation to the patriarchal apartheid state, the Group positioned itself for racial and gendered equality. Later, with the rise of feminist and radical political discourses in the 1960s and 70s, the Group's activities and approaches came to be regarded as moderate or, compared with new forms of political activism and new class constituencies, conservative. More recently, in the last decade or so, with religious ground having shifted once again, the Group retains its advocacy of education for Muslim girls when many Muslim families are looking to interpretations of an Islamic Way of Life that preclude daughters' educational options. Moreover, as social inequalities and poverty continue unabated in post-apartheid South Africa, the reformist zeal and liberal pluralism of voluntary associations like the Women's Cultural Group have become cutting-edge models of a selfless citizenship in stark contrast to the conspicuous consumption signalling new avenues of class mobility.

Another notable trend against which the Group faces new challenges is the growing sense of communalism, both among Indians and among Muslims, bolstered in response to policies of the ANC led state, which has utilized race-based schemes for historical redress favouring Africans as the group most systematically disadvantaged by apartheid. Currently, high ranking individuals in the ruling party speak a language that is racially and culturally nationalistic, with neo-traditionalist rhetoric pointing to an uneven commitment to ideas about women's equality, despite parliamentary quotas and constitutional leverage. Clearly, the meaning of citizenship and civic agency that is crafted by a Muslim women's voluntary association will continue to be responsive to shifting political, religious and socio-economic conditions. The story of the Women's Cultural Group is far from over.

We have organized this book thematically. As a whole, it conveys a broad account of a particular group of remarkable women. Yet, each chapter also reflects on how the specific

experiences of the Group articulate with events and trends in the regional or local social landscape. The chapters can be loosely grouped into two parts. The first four chapters reflect on the Women's Cultural Group primarily as a cultural entity. Chapter One introduces the context of mid-century South Africa and the interlacing configurations of marriage, family, class and community, traced through key moments in the biography of Group founder, Zuleikha Mayat. The chapter is titled for Mayat's metaphor and working definition of South African pluralism, a piquant mix of humanity, and it highlights those aspects of Mayat's life that shine a bright light on experiences of Muslim womanhood within this variegated context. In Chapter Two, we chronicle the founding of the Group itself and explore its aims, ambiguities and multiple meanings as reflected in the life-worlds and experiences of a number of its members. We explore generational changes in women's motivations for joining the Group and in its membership and organisational identity. Chapter Three recounts the planning, compiling and authoring of the famous and best-selling cookbook, *Indian Delights*, a publication that launched the Group into a new level of independence and acclaim. We argue that this book was historically significant, too, as an artifact of print culture, both in the imagining of a creole 'Indian' cultural identity in South Africa, as well of global diasporic community. The fourth chapter considers the public avenues and mediums through which women's familiar, 'private' worlds were expressed as part of the Group's cultural mission. These include theatrical productions, publishing, lectures, poetry festivals, and fashion-shows. Taking on various socially available roles of historian, anthropologist, ambassador and critic, the Group and its cultural productions reflect shifts in the ideological positioning of culture and identity over the latter half of the 20th century.

The final four chapters explore the activity of the Women's Cultural Group in the arenas of social reform, welfare and philanthropy. Chapter Five fleshes out a theme that is flagged in earlier chapters, the concern for women's literacy and education. Biographical reflections by several Group members from each of three generations help to explain why bursary loans to students constitutes the core philanthropic venture of these women. Chapter Six concerns fundraising and friendship, and traces the evolution of the Group's non-profit money-earning strategies and social occasions over five decades. This is a story that underscores the creativity, resourcefulness and sheer hard work that has remained characteristic of this women's organisation, even as its approaches are transformed through a professionalizion of skills and self-understandings. This chapter also reveals how informal labour and moral work have

operated as a motor for circulating local wealth, and how *social* capital and status is generated alongside quantifiable sums, enlivening local ideals and imaginaries of community. Chapter Seven catalogues the charitable endeavours and welfare work undertaken by the group and its civic petitioning over formal political issues. It is in their facility as a community resource that the Women's Cultural Group has found its current core of identity and activity. In our final substantive chapter, we follow the steps the Group took in pursuing a dream for its own future: the building of an institutional space—an activity centre for women—in which to coordinate their many involvements and formalize their ideals. We explore the meaning that this dream had for the Group as its membership grew beyond what could be accommodated by home meetings, and as success with non-profit projects, *Indian Delights* in particular, produced a solid confidence in their capacities. Their quest for such a space, and the compromises they were eventually compelled to make, illustrates the tenuousness of their gender position within a context of male power, and how the winds of political and social change around them displaced the foundations of their vision.

The delights of friendship, luncheon and 'a good natter' (as Ranji Nowbath put it) are certainly a part of why the Women's Cultural Group continues, after fifty years, to be a vibrant avenue for civic and community-based involvement. But as longtime member Shairbanu Lockhat roundly declared, and as readers will certainly discover for themselves, for members of the Women's Cultural Group 'it's not just coming here and having tea'.

## Conclusion

This book tells the story of a voluntary organisation, the women who founded and developed it, and the civic and cultural work they engaged under its banner of autonomy in South Africa's most infamously exclusionary historical period. It shows how gender, class, religion, and both generational and political change shaped the practical realities and meanings of their organisational work and collective self-understanding.

From 1954, the Women's Cultural Group has defined and pursued its vision of the Social Good. Marginalized in relation to formal and to customary institutions of power, the Group aimed to make a contribution that would shape the life of the nation and community to which

they belonged. Through an organizational form that both straddled, and made prosperous use of, the boundaries between political/non-political, secular/religious, and public/private, their history reveals an impressive range of accomplishments and successes. As brokers of culture, their agency in contributing to a local creole conception of "Indianness" can be seen in a variety of activities and productions—plays, cookery books, poetry and music festivities, culturally thematic fundraising events like "oriental' dinners and "Meena Bazaars" have all galvanized a heritage community, inviting participation in a performance of being 'South African Indian'. The extraordinary labour in a wide range of fundraising activities and their dispersal in educational bursary loans have made an impact on many hundreds of individuals, with a wider impact on class mobility for thousands. Donations to charities, as well as active involvement in welfare work have been nothing short of spectacular.

Documenting and celebrating the achievements of the Group and its work has been one important aim of this book. Dedicated civic labour, as an act of faith, duty, optimism or love, is an involvement that does not merely deserve, but also requires, more general acknowledgement, since the world continues to offer challenges of poverty, inequality and suffering. Considered by some to be a quaint or redundant operation, set against the professionalism of NGOs who command large sums of money and trained personnel, the voluntary work of ordinary citizens and the motivations that inform collective charitable work should rather be seen as an endangered but crucial resource, a practice to be encouraged as a standard of good citizenship and self-empowerment. Seen in this light, the Women's Cultural Group provides an inspiring example.

Yet, in this book we have also presented a historical narrative with the aim of identifying some broader trends and patterns, humanized and specified through the life stories of individuals. The case of Women's Cultural Group draws out the complexity and shifting nature of the social worlds that Muslim women in Durban have inhabited over the last half of the 20$^{th}$ century. With women's gendered subjectivities largely defined within household structures, and hegemonic statuses in the roles of daughters, wives, daughters-in-laws and mothers, the Group's assertion of a civic and public agency was largely engineered as an extension of feminine roles. Some scholars have emphasized the limitations of that tactic, and the dangers to autonomy of working within (rather than challenging) patriarchally defined norms. It is certainly true that the Women's Cultural Group cannot be conceptualized in the framework of feminist movement

politics since its aim has not been to effect a deep alteration of the gendered order of power in society. Although egalitarian in orientation, the Group has benefited as an organisation from maintaining an ambiguity in regards to the overtly political world. It has situated itself within, and draws upon, local community networks and has made itself a conduit of action for the ”ordinary housewife”, allowing large numbers of women to join. In this way, it has opened up a public life for many. The balance required of such an approach has, of course, sometimes created impediments to its autonomy and aspirations with fraternal structures at times wielding their authority, as was documented in Chapter Eight. But, far from forfeiting power, it appears to be much more the case that the Group's valorisation of the domestic has in fact ensured its public standing and its remarkable longevity. This is most striking in the literary success of *Indian Delights*, an enterprise in which kitchen knowledge operated as the vanguard to economic and organisational independence, as well as (inter)national acclaim.

Another notable feature that emerges in this history are the complexities of class and status that have shaped Durban Muslim life, rooted in the histories of migration as well as apartheid-era engineering. Durban claims the largest diasporic Indian population outside of India, yet this population is characterised as much by its diversity as it is by a creolized sensibility, developed historically at the crucible of racialised discrimination and through solidarities mobilized in resistance to exclusionary government. A number of Group members are progeny of the powerful, dynastic trading families whose assets in the past included shipping fleets and chains of business enterprises linking port cities around the Indian Ocean basin, and whose elite ranking and cultured worldiness made them key agents in the development of Durban, despite the city's segregated, parochial character. The Group's 'elite' reputation, one that is sometimes invoked disparagingly by critics, has undeniably emerged from the generally middle-class or upper-class socio-economic position of many members. Again, because of its avoidance of formal political action, it is sometimes labelled as 'conservative', or cast as a society of tea-drinking leisure-class ladies with an interest in protecting the socio-economic status quo. But many members, including Zuleikha Mayat herself, hail from relatively modest backgrounds, a petite bourgeoisie characterised by a strong work ethic that dictated long hours of labour for all members of the family, including children. Others were raised in modest economic conditions buffered by the strength of extended family ties, which shouldered the weight of financial losses or the death of a breadwinner. Finally, the gendered structures of kinship and migration that long

constituted a collective strategy for capital accumulation in Muslim trading families, are not easily summed up through descriptive class rankings like 'elite', particularly when access to formal political influence through processes of state is so notably absent. Among other indeterminate markers of class, is the variable of education, since it is clear that religious literacy and scholarship, as well as training in artistic forms of poetry and music, often took place within families, transmitted not only to sons but—as the story of Sayedah Ansari demonstrates—to daughters. Women, moreover, have had a different relationship to economic stratifications than have men. As evident in the life narratives of some of these women, marriage can effect transformations of fortune. And, while marriage has not been the inevitable fate of all women, family standing has influenced the ability of women to gain the education and training needed to fulfil professional aspirations and independence.

Elite power, and particularly the power of men, has, however been a historical force in the life of the Group. For the founders of the Women's Cultural Group, the figure of the modern woman and modern housewife provided leverage for civic participation. In grasping an ethos of modernity that had become celebrated through the imperial relations of British India and the South African state (advocated through the figures of Agent Generals, through club life and voluntary societies), the founders of the Women's Cultural Group were riding a wave of community enthusiasm. Though clashes with particular religious institutions and tenets have also characterised their 50 year trajectory, they have continued to view themselves—and to be viewed by others—as grounded in the principles of an Islamic Way of Life, motivated by calls to offer help and succour, mainly in the local eThekwini context but also on occasion in other parts of the world. Seen in this light, the Group has been a powerful asset within the Durban Muslim community, strengthening its collective identity and circulating and redistributing its wealth, with beneficiaries whom have included many non-Muslims. In the absence of a functioning welfare state, the Group has operated as a NGO, subsidized by the unpaid time, talents and labour of its members and the resources of their households and social networks.

The Group places an ethical premium on its voluntary nature, its model of civil servitude resting more on spiritual principles and collective action than of productivity traded for individual remuneration. Gender as well as faith informs such a perspective, since women's work has often been associated with the emotions of caregiving: love, loyalty, dedication, selflessness. This not only has shaped the Group's relationship to its beneficiaries, but also relationships

within the Group itself. Much of this is very positive. The Group is made up of gracious civic agents, who enjoy a lively camaraderie as partners in a common, relatively egalitarian purpose. While certainly there are disparities in media attention and recognition, the ideal of shared responsibility and shared satisfaction is deeply felt throughout the organisation. And the work has substantial and measurable rewards: the pleasures of friendship, the satisfactions of altruism, the admiration of patrons and associates, the stimulation of ongoing intellectual, social and ethical challenges. All members who choose to participate, do so knowing that their work and rewards are—on principle—similar.

But there are also drawbacks to this model. There are, increasingly, limitations on time and human resources as women juggle formal employment, family responsibilities and Group enterprises. It is probable that skilled women who might offer something valuable to the group can not always afford to, though some remuneration might secure their ability to serve. Across the decades, it is clear that there have been some very worthy projects begun but not completed, and this may be related to the Group's status as a voluntary association. Finally, the formalities of egalitarian sisterhood have meant that personality, as much as portfolio and office, is able to operate as a means for claims to intragroup power. Personality-defined hierarchies and cliques often operate in such associations informally, to drive agendas and particular directions. While many members we spoke to down-played these types of power-struggles as inevitabilities belonging to most groups, all could verify that feelings are sometimes injured and that fall-outs do occur. On the odd occasion, feelings of being undervalued or marginalized have prompted women to leave the Group, as have personality clashes. But it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which an expectation of egalitarian treatment is responsible for the disappointments experienced. The Group has many strong personalities and the dynamics makes differences inevitable, as Hajira Omar pointed out

> There, of course there are personalities that clash, you know. And Aunty Julu plays the perfect mother-in-law for everyone, she manages to calm things down, put things into perspective and she'll tell you … it's a strange diplomacy ... but she will make you feel that you are right and I'm sure she does that to the other person as well, and somehow you feel that you have won, but she just manages to bide the time and after a month or two you realise that's not the issue, you know, it's a common goal that you are working towards.

Ayesha Vorajee observed, philosophically that 'with any women's group, there will be bickering…but then we laugh it off eventually. There are sometimes tears …, or sometimes the

members can't talk to Mum about some issue. Then two, three of them would get together, come to me and tell me, you are the diplomatic one, please we want you to speak to Mum." Most of the women that we interviewed, even those no longer active in the Group, believed strongly that it would not have survived for over fifty years if the friendship and companionship it cultivated were not genuine, outweighing the tensions. There are many opportunities for community service available in Durban and, even busy younger women like Hajira Omar who are involved in several of these still find value in participating in the Women's Cultural Group.

Identifiable changes in the Group over its fifty years of existence have been observed in various chapters in this book. The Group has moved from an amateur to a more professional sense of its own status and abilities, a confidence that has come with skill-building and experience in projects of fund-raising, book production and charity work. With opportunities for women in education, younger members arrive with skills that can be put to good use in managing finances, marketing, design and recruitment. The Group's age demography has also changed over time: from its youthful beginnings as a horizontal single age-set enterprise, it now incorporates several generations of members and serves to offer (as an asset) the nurturing and disciplinary age-spectrum sorority that its founders—living in very different circumstances—once sought to escape. Such changes highlight not only the internal transformations of the Group, but the society-based revolutions that encompass it—changes in family and gender relations, as well as political changes in relation to culture, class and race in South Africa. Finally, global shifts both in Islam and in the globalization of western-style consumerism have created a tension-filled edge that middle-class Muslim women may face as a special challenge. As religion is politicized around the globe, modernity rejected by blocks within both Islam and Christianity along doctrinal lines of fundamentalism and with political agendas, a 'mainly Muslim' organisation that was founded with progressive, modern optimism is bound to feel pressures into the future.

The Group is no longer 'mainly Muslim' but, in effect, squarely so. Over the years, it has incorporated more religious routines into its functioning—prayers at meetings, for example—and seems to be comfortable with its identification as a Muslim women's organization. There may be a variety of reasons for this shift. Ironically, with the end of apartheid, racialized residential communities have in some cases become more insular. Without the moral imperative to defy state-engineered segregation, less energy has been focused on integrating into the broader

rainbow of the nation. With the opening up of markets and the democratic election of a state that promises service delivery to the poor, there is a perception that the philanthropy of voluntary groups is now more supplemental than central in provisioning welfare. Over five decades, too, the development of a solid Indian middle-class has transformed the once-dramatic polarization between wealthy trading families and indentured working classes. With women now an established part of the wage-earning population and with new commercial and institutional activities available, women's voluntary societies are no longer the only avenue for civic and public participation. Definitions of family and gendered respectability have accommodated new forms entertainment and socializing, and the recreational industry has burgeoned in a new climate of commercialism. Culture and cultural activities are valued in a new way, and fewer speakers of vernacular languages means changes in the nature and meaning of cultural participation and practice. Though poverty continues, the Group's focus seems to be less inclusive. It no longer is proactive about reaching across social boundaries but rather has made its work about ameliorating the needs of tried and true charity organizations and in addressing new kinds of needs among applicants closer in. The new political visibility of Islam and the US-led 'war against terrorism' has also certainly upped the stakes of religious identity and places Muslim womanhood under fire. The way that global and national trends have influenced the Group can be seen in the issues they have taken up more overtly as political.

In some ways it seems that the Group has come almost full circle with gender boundaries being vigorously policed again. Mixed gender seating at the annual dinner, for example, has become a bone of contention. In September 2008, a large Muslim corporate body did not want to attend a fundraising dinner because it was a "mixed function". The company offered a gift pack for guests in 'compensation'. But the Group chose to decline to distribute what would have amounted to free advertising for an enterprise keen to retain its public (and commercial) image through officially distancing itself from their event. Mayat wrote a sardonic reply, affecting concern for the company in question:

> The purchase of the tickets may or may not impact unfavourably on [you] since that will have a certain amount of anonymity, but the gift packs will clearly label the sponsors and therefore leave you with the smudge of being associated with an event that is not considered kosher. Because of my close relationship with [your institution] since virtually its inception I cannot permit this to occur. We therefore regretfully decline your gracious offer of the gift packs. There is no obligation on a donor to explain or apologise when refusing an application but since you have given a reason our members recall that recently

> [you] sponsored and prominently attended [two] Dinners which were mixed functions.[28]

It remains to be seen what the reaction of the Ulama will be when Zuleikha Mayat no longer leads the Group. She commands the respect of many stakeholders in the community and it is unlikely that anyone else in the Group would be able to write a similar letter without consequences.

This raises the problem of finding a successor for Mayat, whose iron dedication and ease of authority derives both from strength of personality and from her status as the Group's founding leader. Although the formal offices of President, Treasurer and Secretary rotate, Mayat has shown little hesitation in using her influence to direct how things run and has remained "mum" and "auntie" in all matters. Officially, she has moved away from this role on a number of occasions, to complete her own projects and research[29], but appears unlikely to withdraw from mentoring as long as her energies and intellectual zest remain. Although her fear of nepotism has influenced her hesitation to promote her daughter-in-law to leadership, Shameema enjoys the support of many members and has the conviction and personal traits needed in a leader. It is clear that regardless of who takes the helm, the Group will continue to change.

For the women within the Group, both change and continuity is notable but these have been experienced differently by different generations of membership. Friendship is one of the key resources that many life-members remember. For example, at eighty-eight, Gori Patel still remembers the camaraderie "very much. I don't forget the members … I don't forget the old members, you know, Amina Moosa and myself, we do lot of joke and laughing so that Mrs Mayat say, 'keep those two away from there,' in the meeting too, like, you know, like a good team and we were enjoying ourself."

Fatima Mayat, a second generation member, confides that

> the group has meant a lot for me because I met a lot of people, a lot of our old members like Mrs Motala, Mrs Moosa, you know, they were real hard workers. We learnt a lot. They were my seniors … when I joined the group, I was very young then and really, with these ladies and their pushing, we really, you know, I grew up.

While the 'the focus hasn't changed a lot ... the group is still there and the people are. But new blood has come in … there's lot of younger people'. Zuby Seedat also observed that there have been 'many changes' over time. We have 'progressed from time to time, our way of doing things

[28] Correspondence, Zuleikha Mayat, 20 September 2008.
[29] Most recently, this involved a book titled *The Muslims of Gujarat*.

has changed, older members like Zohra Moosa guided us … what to do and what not to do … but I always enjoy my time ... still.'[30] Zarina Rawat, a member for about ten years, is 'awe-struck' when she 'looks at old magazines and brochures' as she perceives that older generations were much more involved: 'they did more'. But Rawat perceives this less as a change in work ethic and more because of the changes in women's lives over the decades. 'Younger women with children have many more commitments … in those days they did not worry about lift clubs, madrassah rounds, sports … we can't commit too much ... we also like getting together but have lots of other things to do in the day… like taleem ...'[31] Hajira Omar makes a related point that different types of individuals join the Group and for different reasons. Some women have professional skills which have been developed outside of the Group, either in the business world or NGOs and want to contribute to social welfare work and view the Group as an avenue to do so. They may not necessarily be seeking social bonding because they have their own friends and networks. For others, membership of the Group is desirable precisely because of the friendships and camaraderie, as 'an extension of their social life'. And, she added

> that's a positive thing because I think there is such a strong social link between the women that they will want it to survive ... they like seeing each other often, they like working together …you know, when I'm called in there and I have the time, I take my rolling pin and help with whatever is happening there, and there is a wonderful friendship between a lot of the women and a lot of chirping and, you know, jokes about husbands and that kind of stuff.

Friendship, laughter, cooking—and, yes, many cups of tea. The half-century history of the Women's Cultural Group certainly reveals the strenuous labour and long-term vision of a remarkable set of women who crafted a modern citizenship for themselves in exclusionary conditions. But it also conveys the delights of civic participation and the lighthearted spirit which has both guided and rewarded their ongoing exertions. Like a recipe for *sutherfeni*, that beautiful and delicate nest of complicated sweetness usually attempted only by expert mithai makers, their story shows how a combination of ordinary ingredients, determination, lots of practice, and a fair measure of luck can combine to make something that sustains and delights us all.

[30] Z. Seedat, interview, 27 February 2009.
[31] Interview (telephonic), 26 February 2009.