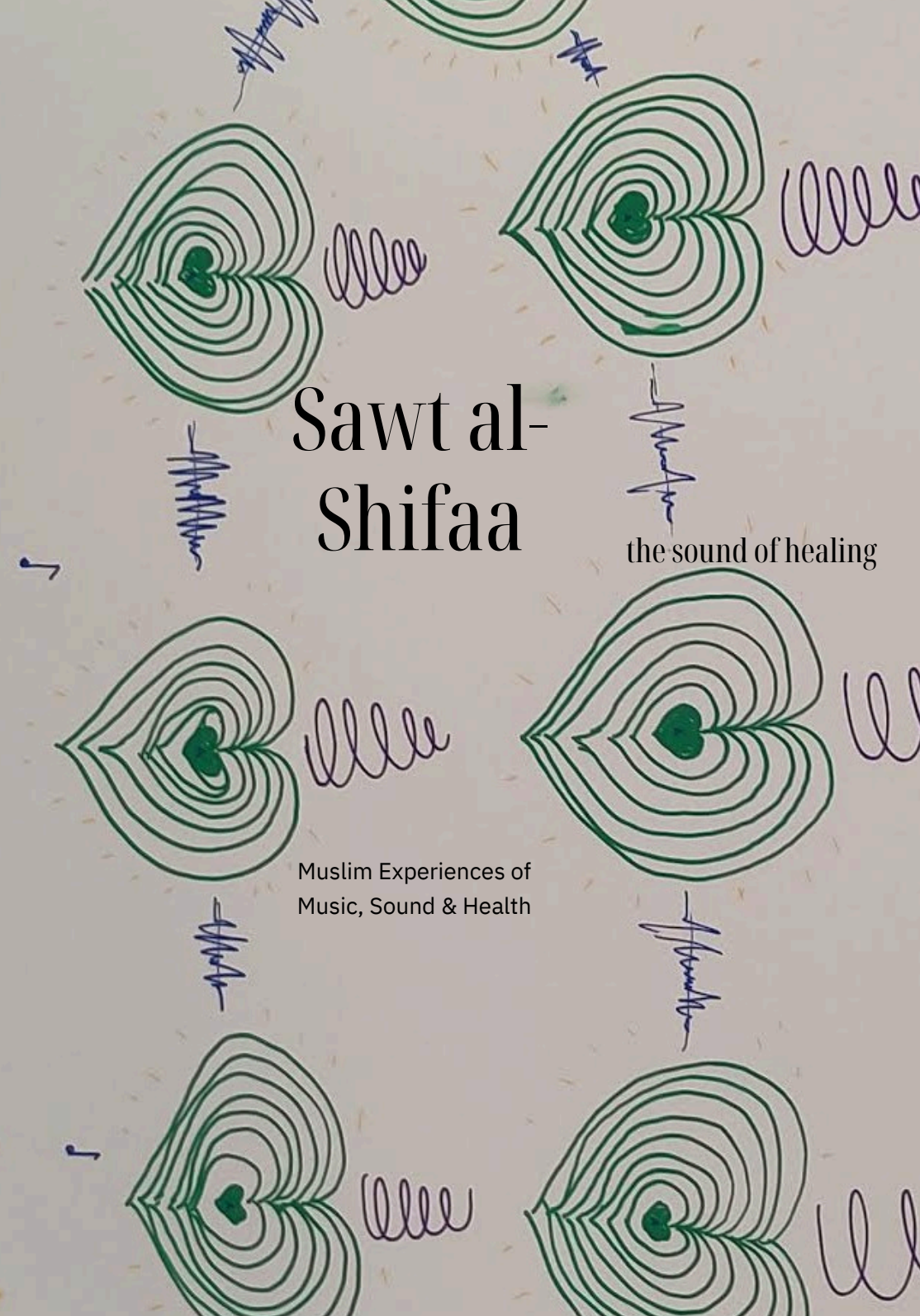




Sawt al-Shifaa

the sound of healing

Muslim Experiences of
Music, Sound & Health

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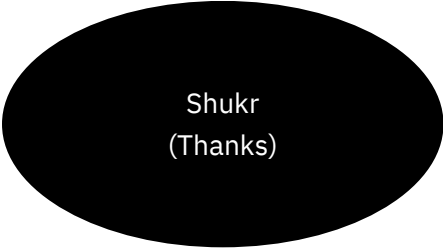
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Shukr (Thanks)

There are many people I would like to thank, honour and name in love and gratitude: the community members of Sawt al-Shifaa who have become dear friends and who **made** the project, Lee-Shan Tse for her constant support, Kate Jones at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama for all our discussions around community music and music therapy during my time doing this research residency, Asif Butt for his groundbreaking work in healthcare for our Muslim communities, and Sidi Haroon Sugich for inviting me to speak about music and health in Islamic traditions several years ago over lockdown and inspiring me in so many ways to pursue this topic. I'd also like to thank MLSL for being the first reader and giving me so much useful feedback and encouragement.

I'm also grateful to all the Muslim families, children and young people who I have had the honour of making music with in hospitals over the years.

May Allah protect and bless all of our parents, grandparents, elders, and communities. May Allah bless this project and endeavour, forgive me for my shortcomings, and allow this work to be of some benefit and good to our communities.

Ameen ya Rabb al Alamein.

**Q - What's your vision and
highest hopes for this zine,
Fatima?**

My vision is that it's a space where Muslims can freely explore and share all of our many beautiful messy relational experiences of music and ourselves, to play with language and art and collage and poetry, to capture some of the special connections we experienced in the groups.

I also hope that it can be a resource for other Muslims who didn't attend the sessions and who we don't yet know, whether they're just curious or wanting to make music or think about their own music/sound and healing/health journeys...

For me the beauty of having this in zine form is that it's by us, for us: it's not an academic publication and it comes from the heart.

Q - How can I read this zine, Fatima?

However you want! You can read from the start to end, you can just look at the drawings, you can open the zine and start reading from whatever page grabs your attention, you can scan the QR codes to listen to the songs and music included, and you can use the blank spaces on each page to add your own notes, doodles, and reflections. If you're reading a hard copy, scan the QR codes to hear our songs and sounds. If you're reading a PDF, just click the QR codes and they will take you directly to the link.

INTRODUCTION

Sawt al-Shifaa (the sound of healing) was an 11-month participatory research project exploring Muslim experiences of music, sound, and healing in community. It began in September 2024 as part of my research residency at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

This project aimed to understand how Muslims access music and sound for health, while creating a space to practice musicking for well-being. I started recruiting participants for the project in early January 2025, with the first session at the end of the month. The sessions were held at a community theatre close to where I live, and consisted of a combination of music-making, improvising, and talking about some of the ways music and sound have related to participants' experiences of health.

There were 16 participants in total, who attended a variable number of sessions (from 1 to all 6) each. Additionally, 2 people signed the consent form but did not attend any sessions. I transcribed as much of people's speech as I could while also facilitating the sessions, as well as recording in social and musical detail some of the music making that took place right after each session.

I adopted a participant action research approach, where everyone was an integral part of the project and research and where I was a researcher working alongside participants to learn together, rather than doing research 'on' them. This also responds to the research recommendations of Equi's recent report on British Muslims' role in UK Arts and Culture, which advocates for centring Muslims in research about them (Equi, 2024, p.28) and resisting the colonial model of Muslims being research 'objects' under a secular white gaze (and ear).

After two months of analysis, I identified five themes, which appear listed on the next page and which are explored in these pages.

This zine was created by me alongside the participants of the group in order to create an accessible document sharing the research, which is primarily for us, by us. I have referred to everyone who took part in the project as participants or community members interchangeably, and in my accounts of music-making or writing about things people said, I have used different names for them except in cases where people have requested to be named.

I hope you enjoy reading!

A quick note about me (Fatima)

My name is Fatima Lahham and I am a Muslim musician and researcher based in London in the UK. I am of mixed heritage, with roots in Syria, Palestine, Panama, Spain and England. I am a recorder player and have research interests across music and healthcare, improvisation and early modern histories. I work at a music therapy charity called Nordoff & Robbins, and at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, who funded the project this zine is about as part of my research residency (2024-2025).

Feel free to contact me with any feedback or comments about this zine and the project, or if you'd like to collaborate or chat more!

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THEMES



CARRYING
EACH OTHER'S



QUESTIONING
RESEARCH

riq



Sonic
objects



Sibha

History: Sound Stories of Islamic(ate) Health Histories

In Attia Shiraz's curated exhibition *Awaken: Sufi Women and Music of South Asia*, held at the Royal College of Music Museum in London (2024), a series of video interviews animated one wall. In one of these interviews, a Sindhi musician reflected: 'I listened to the sounds of Sufism since childhood. Once a human likes something, it sits in their mind, so it became present in my blood as a child listening to the music.' This embodied way of relating to music has been experienced by musicians all over the world and at different moments in history, with people finding different metaphors and images to express how music relates to their bodies, often reflecting their social, cultural and spiritual contexts in the process.

Historical Arabic sources about music and healthcare also contain evocative ways of understanding music's effect on the body. For example, one of the most pre-eminent physicians of the sixteenth century, Dawud al-Antaki (d.1599), discussed eight rhythmical modes (patterns) and their medical applications according to the patient's state in his medical encyclopedia from c.1539 (Dawud al-Antaki, ed. Ahmed Samseddin, *Tadhkhirat 'uli'l-albab wa'l-djami' li l-'adjab al-'udjdjab*, Dar al-Kotob al-Ilmiyah, Beirut, 2006). These rhythmical modes and their characteristics are described in tangible metaphors.

The fourth mode is called ‘namlī’ (ant-like) because of the delicacy and speediness of its movements, and this mode corresponds to the state of a patient who has a high fever. The fifth mode is called ‘dudī’ (worm-like), and was recommended for use if the patient recovers strength but is weak and floppy.

Melodic modes or *maqamat* were also employed regularly ‘on prescription’: many physicians and musicians such as the medieval philosopher and polymath al-Farabi (c.870-950) prescribed different melodic maqams for different times of day in relation to the sun/prayer times: rast for example was for after sunrise because it offered feelings of happiness and calm (Nazila Isgandarova, ‘Music in Islamic Spiritual Care: A Review of Classical Sources’, *Religious Studies and Theology* 34(1):107).

The early modern Turkish traveller Evliya Celebi (1611-1682) wrote about visiting a hospital in Turkey, where in 1648, he reported that the sultan Bayezit had employed 10 musicians to play for patients. He wrote that this was specifically offered to people experiencing mental health problems. Three of the musicians were singers, and the rest were instrumentalists who played the flute, violin, flageolet, cymbal, harp and lute.

These historical examples of Muslims experiencing music and sound in healthcare contexts can be understood within Islamic beliefs around sound and its effects on the body. The importance of sound is emphasised in many Islamic texts. Sound and creation are fundamentally associated in the Qur'an with Allah's utterance 'kun' (be!) acting as a sonic fiat that resulted in the 'being' of creation (Samer Akkach, *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam: An Architectural Reading of Mystical Ideas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 96).

In a well-known hadith qudsi (a saying of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH believed to have been revealed to him by Allah), Allah speaks through the Prophet (pbuh) to say that when Allah loves his servant, Allah becomes the hearing with which Allah's servant is able to hear (Akkach, 21).

Hearing is also present in the following Qur'anic verse: 'And We have already created humankind and know what their soul whispers to them, and We are closer to them than [their] jugular vein.' (Quran, 50:16) As the whispering of our soul is heard by Allah, the verse also evokes our own hearing, since the jugular vein is also one of the two large blood vessels passing through each of our ears.

Given this radical importance of listening and sound to the human body, it comes as no surprise that therapeutic music-making historically had an important role in Islam, and one fundamentally connected to the body – according to the well-known Sufi scholar Ali ibn al-Higazi al-Bayyumi (1696-1769), listening to singing has a bodily effect: ‘when the hands are affected, this is expressed through clapping. When the feet are involved, it results in dancing. When the heart and soul are touched, it elicits crying’ (In Amnon Shiloah, *The Theory of Music in Arabic Writings c. 900-1900*, (G. Henle Verlag, 2003).

In her chapter on decolonising knowledge production in research projects about health psychology for British Muslim service users, Aaliyah Shaikh reflects on the importance of studying the experiences of Muslims within an Islamic ontological framework.

In response to her invitation ‘...to explore non-Eurocentric ways of understanding and to think about the relevance of Islamic knowledge production about health, the self and the body’, I proposed a creative approach to understanding the experiences of Muslims in the UK with music and health, framing the research against a backdrop of some of these histories and the lived and carried histories of the participants in the project (Aaliyah Shaikh, ‘Relevance of Research Methodologies Used in Health Psychology for British Muslims: An Epistemological Critique on the Colonisation of Knowledge Production’ in Sufyan Dogran, *British Muslims, Ethnicity and Health Inequalities* (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 74, 76).

Within these rich histories of sound, listening and music, Muslim approaches to music exist on a broad spectrum. Many people interpret religious sources to forbid (to varying degrees) listening to and making music, and throughout my own work as a Muslim musician in hospitals, I have often been advised not to work musically with Muslim service users by non-Muslim colleagues. I have rarely encountered Muslim service users who rejected music outright but have experienced more a sensitivity to certain kinds of music. Rather than showing a binary of music as either completely permissible or prohibited outright, this project has represented a spectrum of practice amongst Muslim communities in the UK in relation to people's experiences of music when they were growing up. While for some people music had sometimes been completely prohibited or completely allowed, in many cases, there was a more complex experience of some kinds of music and sound being considered more appropriate than others.

Listening to people's experiences also highlighted the importance of non-musical sonic practices like *tajweed* (the science of Quran recitation), the *adhan* (call to prayer) and *dhikr* (remembrance practices) that are not categorised as 'music' but still play an important role in our lives.

In future work, I believe it is important to explore in more depth how the music in health ecosystem in the UK (community music, music and wellbeing initiatives, music therapy) makes space for Muslim experiences of music and sound.

The result of not taking these experiences and perspectives into consideration results in a lack of access and perpetuates healthcare inequalities, in a landscape where, according to Sufyan Dogra's recent edited collection on British Muslims and health inequalities, British Muslims live with the worst health outcomes when compared with all social groups and ethnicities in the country (Sufyan Abid Dogra, *British Muslims, Ethnicity and Health Inequalities* (Edinburgh University Press 2023), 3).

One topic that Dogra's text does not address is arts or music in healthcare, despite creative expression offering an empowering way to reclaim healthcare narratives, understand structural marginalisation, and maintain health and wellbeing. Social groups that are most likely to experience health inequalities are often also those that have been historically under-represented in the arts. My project aimed to not only further research into the experiences of Muslims in the UK, but also offer creative musical opportunities to some members of that community.

Central to these aims is the understanding of cultural and religious worldviews within which music and sound happen. The importance of history to decolonising knowledge production has been reflected upon recently by several scholars, and was frequently brought up by participants: one person emailed me before the sessions started to ask if I knew of Rahmi Oruc Guvenc, a Turkish music therapist who revived historical music therapeutic practices in Turkey.

She mentioned that she knew a close friend of his, and that he was who she had immediately thought of when she saw these sessions being advertised, while another participant mentioned that Al-Kindi was probably the first person to write about music therapy in 800. Several other participants expressed that they knew that music therapy was practiced in historical Islamic contexts, and that they would love to learn more about this.

In a recent article, Rania Awaad and Merve Nursoy-Demir reflect on the importance of knowing and studying the history of music therapy in early modern Ottoman contexts for both practitioners and service users today. They write:

In examining the historical origins of the medical use of music therapy, the common discourse found in the current literature define music therapy as having sprung in ancient Greece and continued linearly into modern Western medical practice, with either complete absence or insufficient reference to non-Western practices of music therapy. This Eurocentric framing is especially problematic given the fact that music therapy held an exceptionally important position in Islamic medicine from the 9th century onward, particularly during the rule of the Ottoman Empire (Rania Awaad and Merve Nursoy-Demir, 'Melodies in the hospital courtyard: A comparative history of Ottoman music therapy in the early modern period (c. 1400–1800)', *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 86 (2023), 2).

In my project, I have asked how Muslims experience music, sound and health today, starting from the perspective that our histories (some of which I have outlined above) are important to our lived experiences today. I worked alongside participants to reflect on how we relate to our collective histories in our everyday musicking and health practices, and how we might respond creatively to them.

MUSIC + IDENTITY

FAMILY/UPBRINGING

Siddiq: music & singing together was a way to be close: "that's how we bond in my family"

He mentioned his sibling plays the rabab and that they have a tabla & harmonium too:

"MUSIC TAKES YOU TO ANOTHER PLACE"

Batool spoke about coming from a Jewish family & remembered a lot of music at home.

She recalled that she used to love listening to the Torah being read and also loved singing carols & hymns at school.

Mohamed described
how he was not brought
up with music:

"It was like - music?"

How could you do this?!"

Mohamed said since he
now joined a Sufi tariqa,
he enjoys music very much
and finds it uplifting.

Someone asked if he was
raised Sufi and he replied
"no way!"

Mariam grew up listening to Urdu songs, but said that came to a stop due to "certain movements" in the UK.

Jamila resonated with this: she also grew up singing praises of the Prophet PBUH but related that music was haram in her household. She explained that the music that was haram was Western pop music.

Lena said her mum never put restrictions on singing, but would say - "if only you memorised Quran the way you do songs!"

Noor shared that when they were growing up, "music was a very strict no at home" but as a teenager they remembered "sneakily" playing guitar in their bedroom.

Maria remembered meeting up with a friend after school to watch a popular children's movie with a lot of songs, and having to watch it on mute to avoid listening to the songs, which meant they missed most of the movie.

A dream, a glance - by Syma

In the early 1970s a woman, distraught after awaking from a dream, knocked on the door of my grandparents' home in Peshawar, Pakistan. She had experienced several stillbirths and the early deaths of two children, one after another. In the dream, a voice of unknown origin compelled her: to end your suffering, find the resting place of Farid saab's ancestor and pay your respects. She knew of Farid saab – my grandfather – as they worked in the same university. She arrived confused and upset as, because my grandparents had come to Pakistan from India, following this spiritual instruction would be impossible, given its hard, militarized border.

Nani answered the door. She told the woman that nana – secular and likely dismissive of this encounter – was in fact a descendant of a Sufi saint: Fariduddin Ganjshakar, or Baba Farid, a 13th century poet and teacher still revered by Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs alike. To the woman's relief, his shrine was in fact on this side of the border, in a town called Pakpattan. They decided to take the long journey there, with my mother, a young girl at the time, in tow. After this pilgrimage, as the story goes, the woman bore three healthy children.

My visit to Baba Farid's shrine in early October 2023 marked a turning point both beautiful and devastating in my life, and I guess given the date, in the dunya too. The long, hot drive there was rewarded by the mazar's cool marble floors and open-hearted devotees. In the courtyard near his tomb, a communal prayer was read for Falasteen. Tiny miracles kept happening – coins dropping, petals drifting. The birds joined in. After maghrib, qawwals sang in agitated, endless praise. Time felt irrelevant. In the space of three hours, I had gained centuries.

When it was getting close to departure (thankfully later than planned, as Ali the driver was having such a great time), my heart felt like lead, a sick tremble settling in. My soul was touched, but my body couldn't handle it. I could not imagine leaving the shrine. Separation.

I broke down in the car. For many nights afterwards, I had a recurring dream: in it, I wandered in the dark with Shahana, my friend who had kindly accompanied me to Pakpattan. We were looking for shrines, sometimes finding remnants, or nothing. On one visceral night, a building appeared, surrounded by a flowing river. A week later, Shahana sent me a photo of a postcard she encountered of Pakpattan – according to lore, Baba Farid's shrine used to be surrounded by water.

The morning after our pilgrimage, we visited the shrine of the saint Bahauddin Zakariya. At its entrance, two musicians performed a slow version of Chhaap Tilak Sab Chheeni, a kafi (style of rhyming poetry) written by Amir Khusro, a 14th century Sufi mystic. The words "chhaap" and "tilak" refer to religious markers ('tilak' is a head marking in Hinduism, 'chaap' the forehead callous formed by Islamic prayer). "Sab chheeni" means "everything is taken away". This surrender of identity implies a transformation of the self. Fanaa.



I recorded the performance on my phone. The lyrics repeated momentary ephiphany. “Bāt agam keh dīnī re mose nainā milāike / You've said the unsaid [agam = secrets of divine nature], with a mere glance”. A glance is so fleeting. Time is so irrelevant. Back in the UK, I couldn't listen to my phone recording, as every time it started I felt that sick feeling again. So I would listen to Abida Parveen's version instead – hypnotic, pounding, rock n roll. Parveen once said in an interview that she was neither man nor woman, but rather, ‘a vehicle for passion’.

In Khusro's devotion, gender subversion also expresses the Divine: “Mohe suhāgan kīnī re mose nainā milāike / You've made me your bride, with a mere glance.”

Today the recording, with its sweet vocals, rising chords and easy-going drums, is my go-to healing sound, dappled with our casual chat and Ali's out of tune humming. I listen to it wherever I feel my hope wavering; whenever I am.



CULTURE

Asma told a story about how perceptions of music are often dependent on culture. She remembered attending an Islamic retreat where an Algerian attendee had put on an Urdu song, which used lyrics from a Sufi poem. However, as the song became popular due to its use in a Bollywood movie, it was heard as inappropriate for that space by some of the South Asian attendees, and this resulted in a lot of tension.

CHANGE & TRANSFORMATION

Asma shared that she felt different every time she came to our space, reflecting the different music and expression she offered each time. Jamila asked, "what about me - I'm the same aren't I?" Asma replied - "No, you're different too!"

Music came up not just as offering the freedom to be different, but also forming part of people's transformative journeys as Muslims.

Batool said that when she became Muslim, she did not stop listening to sound and music - on the contrary, she loved the adhan, wird, dhikr, Quran recitation.

She spoke about hearing the adhan: "It takes you over, and you have to listen."

Jamila shared how she felt music used to form part of her life before she started practising:

"There's that part of me that's like - that's the other me."

She described how she is connecting with music again now, and how the connection is different: "I think

Whitney Houston songs are beautiful - but it's like, where do they take me? They take me somewhere different now to where they did before."

18 Apr, 13:47



ali_z_hussain

The way we listen to music also matters, Ibn Arabi says. Whereas some people listen purely with their emotions, others decipher *ma'rifa*, or gnosis, that is tethered to these emotions.

In other words, the benefit and power contained in a piece of music depends not only on the musician, but also the listener's ability to excavate spiritual realities therefrom.

@ali_z_hussain

ali_z_hussain #ibnarabi
#ibnuarabi #ibnularabi #ibnülara...



Amazing subhanallah!

I'm just writing a page of the zine for my project and wrote almost the same thing in another way through someone's story



Asma described her journey
of discovering identity through
sound:

"I was trying to find my own
sound... I wanted to find
my soul."

"The acid house
rave scene kicked
off when I was 19,
and it was there I
felt one with unity.

I found God
in the rave
scene."

Mariam shared that she had joined a singing circle for Muslim women, and that once she did, something shifted in her.

" I connected with the sacred, something multi-dimensional:

Singing in that collective, they say something about softening the heart. Something changed in me after singing those praises of the Prophet (PBUH)"

Abdullah shared that he had been song-writing for 8 years when he reverted to Islam: "it always felt like that's what got me here." He described how he had suddenly been faced with anxiety about what others thought of him now as a Muslim making music, while also understanding where hesitation around music came from in the Muslim community: "a lot of Western secular music is bad for you, it's confusing. I think there needs to be education about it."

In other contexts, transformation was related to social experiences of Islamophobia. In a discussion about the sound of prayer beads (tasbeeh) versus the sound of a tasbeeh clicker, Asma said she had thought originally the clicker could be more subtle on the tube.

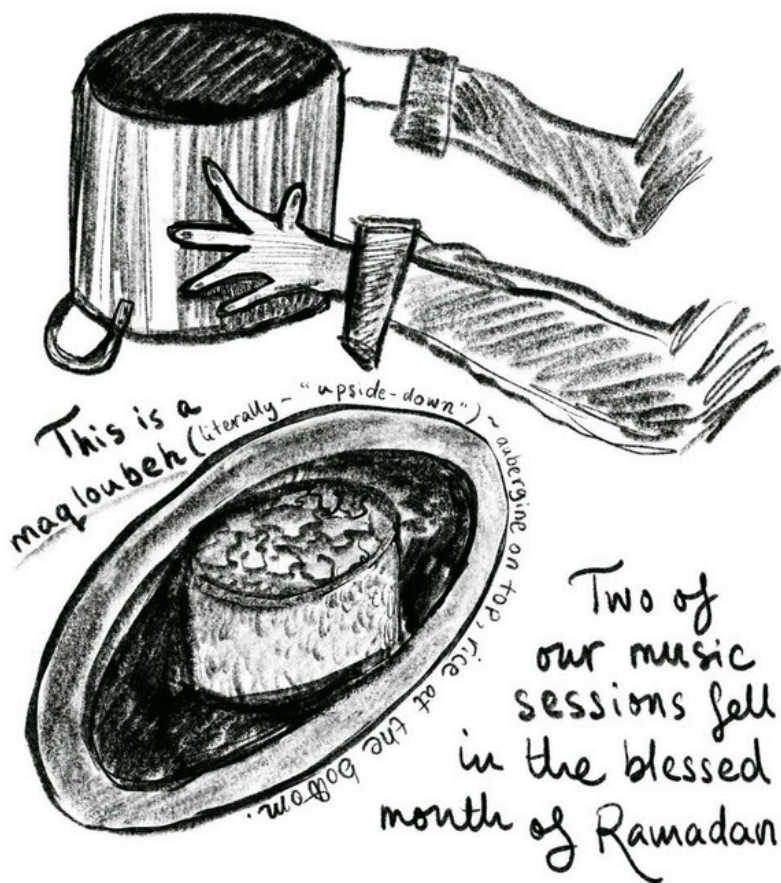
"I don't want people to think..."



TICK... TICK... TICK



RAMADAN



We discussed our relationships to music and sound in Ramadan: some of us avoided listening to certain kinds of music, many of us chose to embrace silence and listen to Quran recitation more. Some people described craving specific sounds, like the cannon firing marking iftar time in many countries.

Maria shared that her tariqa is from West Africa, and that they often sing all night: *when I was In Touba (Senegal) recently, people just erupt into song, it's really joyful and free. I think about that in Ramadan. On laylat al qadr they just sing all night...you'll be like what do you have the next day and they'll be like I have work at 6!*

from my notes after our
first session in Ramadan:

JAMILA: "THAT WAS MUCH MORE PEACEFUL,
WASN'T IT

our sounds resulted in
la ilaha ill Allah
in such a round & reson-
ant way & next to me
I heard Abdullah
very softly sing
Muhammad Rasul Allah
in response, sometimes
barely sounding.

It was the sound of the
shahada, the essence of
what we all shared
and what brought us
together.

THAT WAS WHAT WE
NEEDED."

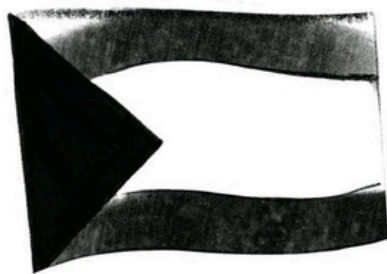
WE WERE THE QUIETEST WE
HAD BEEN

THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

BEING LENT COOKING POTS

Throughout this project, community supported me in countless ways, epitomised by over 15 people offering to lend me a cooking pot big enough to make the magloubeh we ate for iftar in Ramadan.

Many people also expressed their feelings about the benefits of being in community throughout the sessions. On one occasion, Lillie spoke about the difficulties of continuing as 'normal' during the devastation and genocide we are all witnessing in Gaza.



"There is hope too, in community. Spaces like this make me feel hope." ~ Lena

Sorry for being so slow

13:33



لا حول ولا قوة الا بالله



Allah Is Sufficient For Me

Rotana · Allah Is Sufficient For Me · Song · 2024

open.spotify.com



But this is the sound: <https://open.spotify.com/track/0x5zlwvJIY8zGKEwz6Cktg?si=5SDII063R5ePtAMZGHfXjg>

13:33



After the genocide, it's been on repeat

13:34

And someways the sessions with you felt like it takes me back to where this sound takes me

13:34

The way we experienced community through the sessions was also largely mediated through the space itself that the sessions were held in. Over the course of the sessions we used the room not only to discuss and make music, but also to pray, break our fast, take naps, and drink tea. I also noticed that a new use of the room emerged, that of taking space and time after making music, where we become accustomed to sitting with each other in silence. Some people would hold their hearts with their hands, some people cried, some people smiled, others said alhamdulillah or thanked the others in the group. It struck me that this became as important as the music making itself, and further bonded us as a small community over the course of the sessions.

Fatima's notes

The most powerful moments for me were when we finished the improv and there was a beautiful blanket of stillness covering us and we actually could not find words to speak for a few minutes maybe more after. In that liminal space we were suspended in different spaces and it felt like the densest space is the one where we use the cognition part of our brains and I think I had accessed my pineal gland directly.

Anonymous feedback

THE WAY WE STARTED SINGING



"ahh because it's in 'Allah' as well as in important words in other traditions"

In our first session, Siddiq had proposed that we start sounding together by putting a hand on our diaphragms & singing on "ahhh."

WAS MADE IN COMMUNITY

Mariam wrote after the session ...

I think we should leave 5 mins max to finish off the session each week! Or at least at the start! Get everyone going. It was really beautiful what we were weaving today 🙏🙏🙏



After this exercise, we started playing in quite a scattered way, with pockets of people trying music out in different ways. Abdullah and Noor at the piano with the bass, Lena and Areej on the cajun, Husaina on a little folding keyboard that I had brought with me, Ali on riq, and Kamila on the tabla. Batool, Aisha, and Asma sang.

Mohamed said: *so this is gigging is it...so this is a gig...*

It's halal gigging! replied Ali.

I started playing recorder, and bass and piano followed. Ali was playing the riq by striking the skin very softly, and Husaina was playing the folding keyboard very intently but with no sound I could hear, since the other voices and instruments were so loud.

We fell into a thick, tintinnabular sound with singing and pillowy chords, until at one point I heard someone sing *Allah*. To me, it felt uniting and full of relief.

I was singing *ya Allah* on a repeating bass line with Noor, harmonising with Abdullah, while the rest of the group were singing *la illaha ill Allah*.

The interweaving was so simple, but deeply beautiful. This section ended and then we moved into a new melody that Ali introduced on *la illaha ill Allah*, that sent us in a whole new direction, with rhythms introduced by Husaina and piano offering rich harmonies with chords that punctuated through. I looked around and saw nodding heads, feet tapping, smiles.

When we finished, everyone just sat for a long time, hands on hearts, eyes closed. I felt quite overwhelmed and just sat rocking for a while. When we finally came out of it, someone said thank you. *Now THAT was a cool gig!* exclaimed Mohamed, picking up on his comment earlier.

May I say, it was the only gig! replied Ali.

Mohamed agreed, and we all laughed, the moment needed that lift, and it was really welcome.

Husaina leaned over to Mohamed - *YOU are iconic!*



Community with the
natural world also
came up. Mohamed
shared a song called
"Dancing with the Universe"

After our first session, I had encouraged everyone to share recordings of soundscapes or sounds of nature in the group chat. Mariam shared a recording of Hizb al-bahr (Litany of the sea) which contains Quranic verses & supplications, and is a powerful invocation read by Muslims around the world. The recording Mariam shared had the sound of the sea in the background. She wrote: "This version has the sound of the sea to it. It makes it not only very healing but so powerful. Paired with the invocations, you experience the might & power of the sea!"



In our reset session, Mohamed shared a recording he had made in Southern Crete, the sound of the sea hitting rocks.

"the sea is awesome"

ASMA

I like the sound of thunderstorms. The crashing reflects all the crashing in my head. It's part of the universe...

DANCING
with the
Universe!

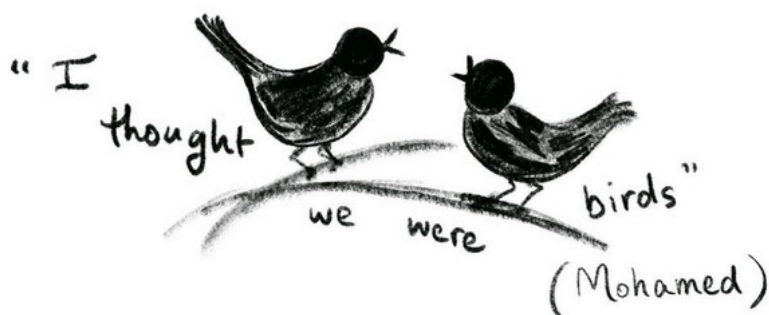
MOHAMED



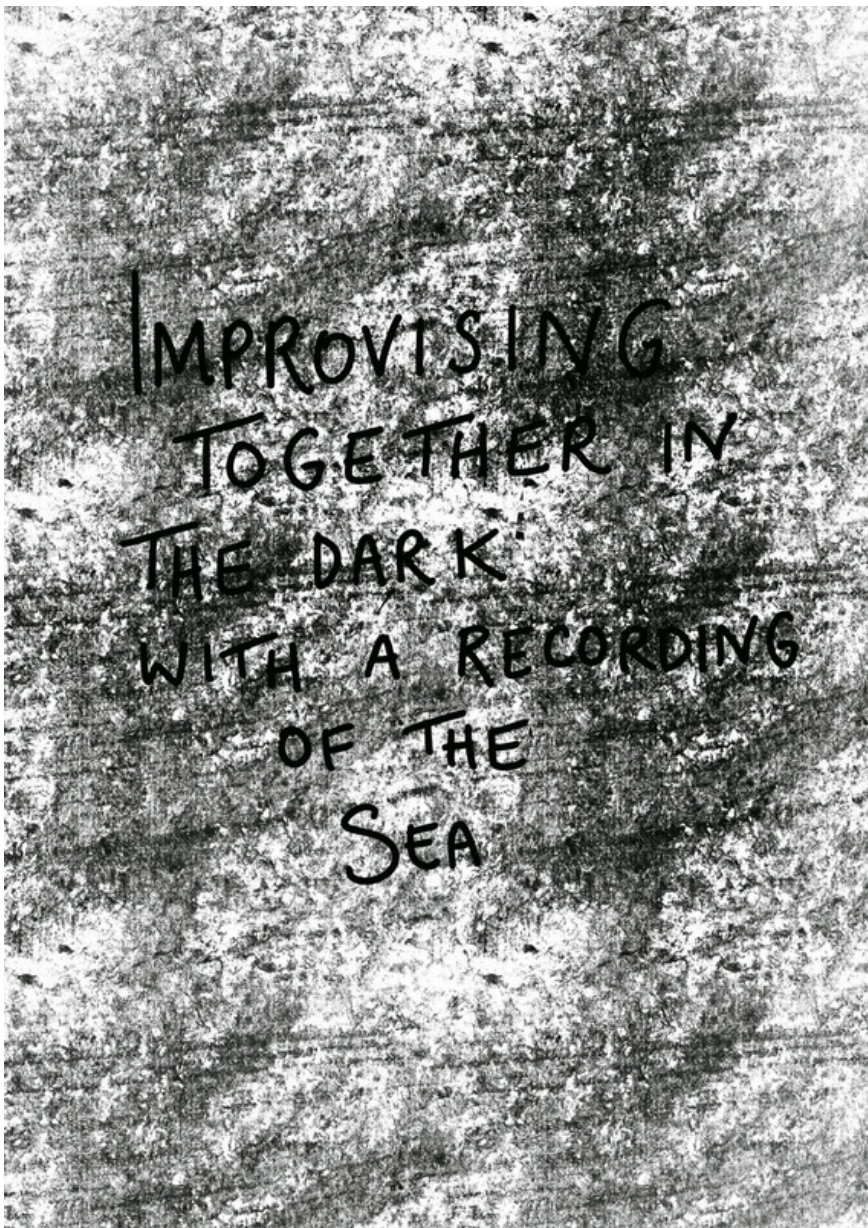
Noor shared a recording they had made to help a friend cry. In it, they improvised on bass with birdsong. We all listened.



AND EVERYTHING
(Batool after singing together)



"As we continued, I improvised on recorder while Noor, joining from their house, played bass guitar over zoom on my laptop on the floor in the centre of our circle. Batool played the *rig*, making a sea-like sound & Asma joined on tabla. As I got higher on recorder, Asma's voice started softly joining me & she introduced a beat. I couldn't hear Noor's bass as the frequencies were quite low, but I could feel it."



One session we turned the lights out which I think helped early on to allow people to sink into other parts of themselves and feel less self conscious.

Anonymous feedback



Mariam made this drawing after our final session

I SAW 8 OF US
IN A CLOSE CIRCLE
CONNECTED BY MUSICAL ENERGY...



... EACH OF US A HEART WITH
MULTIPLE LAYERS LIKE THE
FOLDS IN AN EAR...

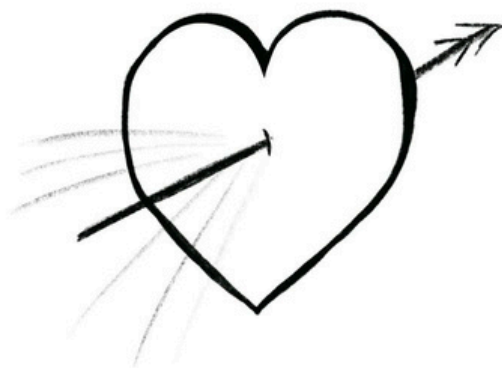
"It's what happens here!"

In our next session, after a free improvisation came to an end, Asma commented - *it's like we're carrying each others hearts with our ears...listening, are they going that way? are they going this way? Are they going to stop?*

This way of describing collective improvisation really struck me, as I went through my memory of what we had improvised and how it had unfolded – searching for hearts being carried by ears. Her comment had come at the end of an extended improvisation using voices, tabla, riq (an Arabic percussion instrument like a tambourine), piano and bass. We had entered into the improvisation spontaneously, partly from my invitation to explore a word, image, or feeling that we had felt on our hearts that day.

Abdullah at the piano was playing cluster chords in parallel movements, creating a repeated harmonic sway punctuated by the tabla and riq, and anchored by the bass which underlined the piano's harmonies and created a grounding container for the voices. *Allah hu, Allah hu* was sung by Mariam, who was then joined quickly by three other voices. Asma started to sing *al-Hay!* (the Living – one of the 99 names of Allah) and *al-Haq!* (the Truth – another one of the 99 names) after 'Allah' was uttered each time, rocking her head with each utterance. The intensity built and built, until Mariam stopped singing *Allah hu* and murmured and repeated, *ya Habibi. Allah humma salli ala Sayyidna Muhammad*. Later, Mariam commented, *singing the name Allah is burning* [gestured to her belly to her heart upwards], *so we needed to say the name of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him, it's cooling...*

Mariam's initiative to sing salawat on the Prophet PBUH seemed to me an extension of what Asma had described as 'carrying each others' hearts with our ears – she was car(ry)ing for all of our hearts by listening out to what was burning, what was cooling, and using her voice to sound accordingly. Caring for our hearts was physically present from our first gathering, at the end of which Siddiq generated the exercise that became how we started every improvisation from that day onwards.



LENA:

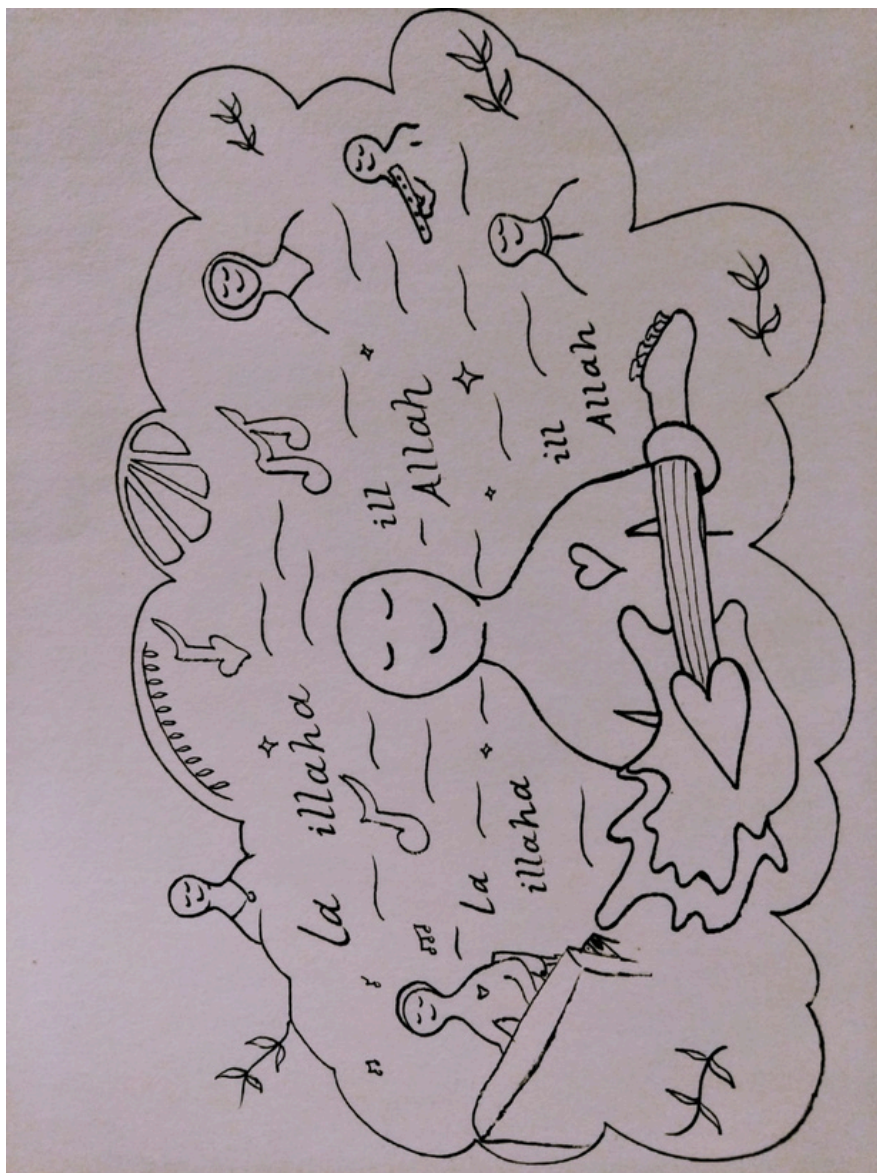
" when there wasn't access to the heart, sound was always an entry point. I have memories of when I was 2 or 3, being in a Muslim space in Lebanon and hearing sound... it's a memory I come back to, to feel that closeness again"

The sessions were spaces for whoever attended to settle, attune to the immediacy of the space, hearts, souls and nervous systems present. Fatima held the space so we were able to just sink into it and hang about in it, with the mind busy with questions, what next, what do I do? etc until this faded back and when the first person felt called to make a sound everyone slowly started to join in. And most of us had closed eyes we were listening to each other breath, pauses, sounds. It started like an orchestra warming up and with time we co created our own soundscape, rhythm and pace. And then like geese flying in a gaggle we went on a journey unique to that specific time and moment. Each session was different reminding we are different people in every moment and every breath/ moment is unique and unlike any other. My perception of time was different in the sessions, less linear, more circular. What was really lovely to observe was the deep connection formed with everyone in the session, we were interacting at a different frequency to when we entered the room from busy London life. I am very interested in co-regulation of our nervous systems and heart and spiritual systems and how they are interconnected. I really felt I tasted that in the sessions.

Anonymous feedback

I experience a sense of unity, where every voice matters and is part of a whole, which is blessed, beautiful and a real expression of one's soul. The personality, differences between people disappear and all that is left is, Oneness, Unity. Afterwards, I think that people who suffer mental illness, or feel outcasts in the society would benefit so much from sessions like these because they are about Being, where everyone has a share and who they are is sacred, when they give of their authentic selves. I learnt something about myself, that, it's difficult for me to let go when I'm in a group of people who I don't know. So the last session was the most enriching for me as there were few of us and I felt safe enough to really let go. Also, even though it wasn't a dzikr session, it was full of Remembrance, Glorifying God, the Heavenly Spheres. I have enjoyed every session I participated in and came away feel uplifted and enriched.

Anonymous feedback



“I was reflecting on this moment at one of our gatherings and this is what came out” - Sai

What is healing?

The music sessions in this project to a large extent were guided and shaped by the participants who attended, although I provided five loose themes that the first five sessions fell into: our everyday practices of healing, sounds of nature, whole-body listening, improvisation, and Ramadan.

I tried to involve participants in all stages of planning, which included responding to some comments about discomfort with me making audio recordings of the sessions, leading me to propose a different design in my ethics application. As a result, I did not record anything in the sessions, instead making notes of what people said and scribbling down my memories of music making as soon as the sessions ended.

In one sense, this felt like a loss as we now do not have recordings of the wonderful music making that happened, nor recordings of some stellar quotes that I am sure slipped through my fingers; but in another sense, it made what happened in the groups even more intimate, safe, and precious.

Interestingly, by the end of the sessions, there was a consensus amongst participants that recording music would be okay in the future, just not speaking. This opened my ears to the fact that participatory projects have to be open to change and transformation as trust grows and communities build; by the end of the six sessions and three months, I finally felt in a place to start this project – just as it ended!

As we finished singing together for the last time, Batool expressed disappointment that this time had not been captured via audio recording. Asma replied that even though we did not have a recording, our bodies had been recording what we have done and how we had sounded throughout the project.

Part of my process of involving the participants more fully was in encouraging them to ask questions too, rather than only supplying answers to my research questions; I told them that I wanted to do research alongside them rather than on them, and to incorporate their concerns and questions into the work.

One recurrent question was – what is healing? Some people asked this question more philosophically or etymologically – in our second session, Batool asked what *shifaa* (healing in Arabic) actually means and what the root in Arabic meant. She mentioned how last time we spoke of *shifaa* in terms of experiences, rather than ‘actual healing’. She said, *to heal you have to have knowledge of what needs to be healed. I think of healing as a miracle.*

Others reflected on healing as a practice: Noor spoke about how she uses bass playing as a healing tool, and how it has been holding grief for them over the last year: *keeping the bass really close to my heart, turning the vibrations all the way up...giving myself a soundbath.* She also shared: *something I’ve started to do when friends are going through a hard time, is improvising for them in a voice-note. I sent this to one friend, then I sent it to two others and they said it helped them cry. It’s like light breaking through - that’s what crying is, right?*

Asma shared: If I'm really sensory overload, the only thing that calms me down is submerging my ears under the water in the bath...I love the sound, I can hear my heartbeat...I feel like I'm in the womb again. Thank God I have a bath, part of my healing is being in the bath.

These very visceral experiences of using music and sound for healing wove through our sessions, offering examples of how we all practise this in our everyday lives.

This loose and open structure of the sessions did not necessarily land the same for everyone. One person shared in the anonymous feedback form:

I at times felt like groups were too loose and though there's power in that it also felt like a lot was lost by not having a bit more focus. I felt a desire to learn more about Islam and the role of sound in Islam historically. I still felt unclear about the role of space towards the end of the project but overall really appreciated it and would like a recurring containing space for dikhrs.

Another person commented in the form:

This approach invited us to at all levels to be together. I also enjoyed the group aspect as dance movement is often individual but sitting and listening to sounds the focus was more on the joint created sound and I didn't really hear myself. I really fell into listening to the group and awareness that we were a group and our container was each other. I felt refreshed, re-charged, lighter and freer internally after the sessions.

I think like how I used to feel more often as a child. In a very cognitive/ executive functioning required world to access different parts of my brain, heart and soul was very special. I also really appreciated the non-hierarchical approach and the diversity of all that attended. In my past experiences, these type of spaces were scaffolded by a common belief/ concept, teaching that on some level demanded me to belong to and where I felt my uniqueness could not be fully present or my authentic self. Diversity in groups, not labelling the group, sessions etc as anything specific from a cognitive perspective was really refreshing for me to experience. I would like to experiment bringing movement into the sessions too and what that brings/ changes to the experience.

In the future, I would love to have more time to work alongside community members from earlier on in the project timeline, to work together on how the sessions could best be structured (or unstructured) to suit everyone.



WHERE NEXT?

When the sessions ended, many people in the group expressed a desire for the group to continue, and we discussed ways that we could make this happen. Asma said that she attends another improvisation group but that there is never spiritual inclusion in some of these spaces, and that it would be nice to have other Muslims there. In the anonymous feedback forms that I shared with participants to let me know about their experience of the sessions, this sense of finding community and wanting a space like this came across in many of the responses, with most people actively letting me know they would want to keep attending. Following my call out for the group earlier this year, I have also heard from Muslims all over the UK that they would also like to be part of a space like this.

Muslims are often not represented in creative health and arts therapies spaces, yet we are here with histories and cultures and everyday practices of musicking and sound-making. It is my hope that we can keep building more spaces for each other to sound, to listen to each others' sounds and to keep learning about how our bodies and minds respond to music and sound with a focus on health and wellbeing.

With this in mind, I have listed some items in my ‘toolkit’ for holding a community space like this in the future. If you would like to add to it, please let me know!

An accessible community space that people are able to attend, pray and eat in, and where they feel safe to have their voices heard.

An invitation to start singing. This could be something like the exercise I have described above, putting one hand on your heart with your eyes closed and listening to the breathing of those around you, before singing when you feel ready to.

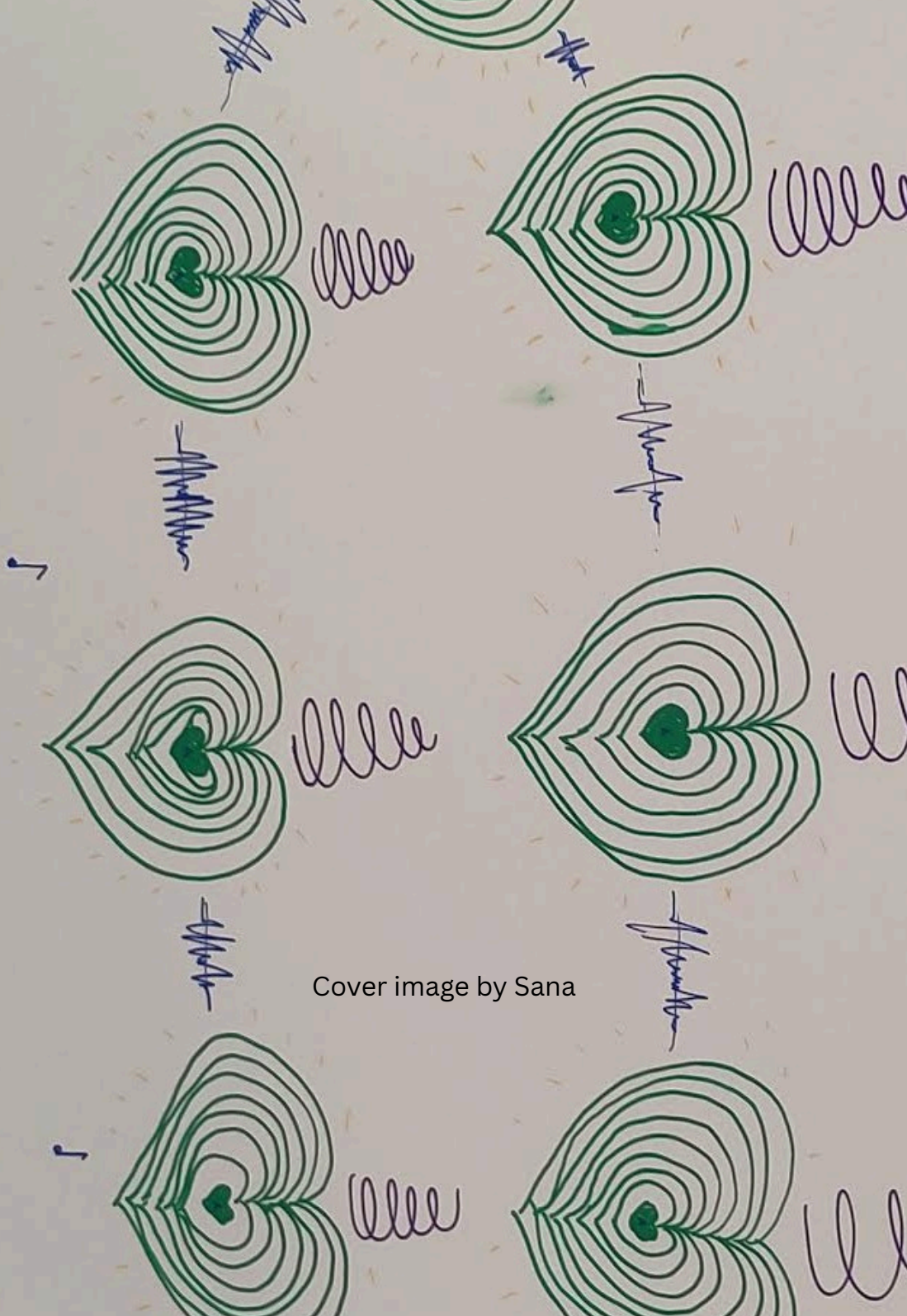
Space for talking about what’s on your heart.

An understanding of **healing and health that is built in community**: what harms one of us, harms all of us. What does that mean in terms of healing together?

By the community, for the community. A space created by all of us, for all of us, non-hierarchically, across generations. This requires honesty, courage, and holding. In the future, I will be inviting at least one other person to co-facilitate the group with me, as this is something to be distributed.

Willingness to improvise and adapt - Ramadan taught us this, and showed us how the space could adapt into a kitchen, dining room, living room, and prayer room. Our sounds changed and were changed too.

Carrying each other’s hearts with our ears - willingness to improvise with care and respect for one another.



Cover image by Sana