
HEALTH, COMMUNITY, AND BELONGING

BY ANISA KISSOON

My career has been shaped by my faith and a sense of responsibility to my community. I played different roles working with women, students, and in different sectors from health to the performing arts. But as a Muslim woman of Black Caribbean heritage, I was often seen as an outsider in the Muslim community. Much of this had to do with race, reflecting both the larger disjunctures in the British Muslim community and inequalities in society. I have found ways to challenge these inequalities and to advocate for inclusion. In particular, the tools of the performing arts have been useful to deliver simple messages through powerful ways to strive for unity and equality in our communities and in society.

My career began as a fitness instructor, working with Muslim women who I found were suffering from various ailments. Recognising the lack facilities in the 1990s for British Muslim women in London, I wrote a hundred letters to *masajid* that had already offered men classes such as boxing, wrestling, or football. I thought ‘You’ve got spaces and you’re doing stuff for the men, why don’t you do something for the women?’ Only one mosque got back to me and said, ‘thank you very much for your nice letter’ and that’s it. So I begun to hire out churches and Blackout windows to make it safe for Muslim women who also would ask for nutritional advice. Not only did we manage without any support, but I was also confronted by an imam at a mosque: “Why are you trying to lure our women?”

Despite encountering hostility, new opportunities arose. My career took another turn as I was offered teaching roles. As a PE teacher at several Muslim schools in London, sometimes I would just be given a classroom. I had to use this little space to teach sports and fitness.

Meanwhile, I began to travel extensively; charity had always been one of my biggest passions. I felt it important to take my children with me and we would fundraise for projects and travel to deliver the funds to countries such as Kenya. At the same time, my interest in Prophetic medicine and healing grew and when I travelled to Egypt I was taught how to teach hijama³⁸ therapy and bring awareness to this forgotten therapy to the UK. By 2006, I was certified and set up my own company in London and finally was ready to write my first book on holistic health.

My second foray in health did not go without significant obstacles, being a Black female revert to Islam. Again I was treated differently. I spearheaded the campaign for hijama to be accredited in the UK, and though I worked with the British Acupuncture Council to ensure hijama was recognised on its own rather than being regarded as a form of traditional Chinese medicine, it was with great reluctance I was recognised by a group of doctors at a conference about hijama. This blow and many others was almost enough to make me want to give up.

Fast forward to the 2010s and my career took another turn - this time, towards the performing arts when I used drama as a pedagogical tool with my children and started a theatre group, U Can B The 1. I was inspired by a drama group in the Congo who used drama workshops to raise awareness of women’s safety and we did small charity gigs. For me, it was important to recreate stories, as we were storytellers and poets. Our drama group used performances to teach audiences of women and youth about social issues like cyberbullying or gaming addiction. The group would perform at schools and other community settings; drama is an

³⁸ Cupping

educational tool that could be used to address a number of issues such as body image, self esteem, and identity. Before this, I was offered a role as a presenter on Islam Channel for ‘City Sisters.’ I used the platform of television as well as other media platforms to raise important issues in our community, such as domestic violence and racism.

The drama group began to evolve from workshops and smaller performances to much larger shows. A turning point came when my work in both theatre and charity came together. My family and I did a performance for an international charity. Afterwards, we were asked to write and perform in a series of performances, taking our show across the country. These performances would serve as an instrument for fundraising, but we would take real stories and recreate them. We were asked to produce the first Muslim Pantomime, called If the Shoe Fits. Though circumstances were quite difficult with the death of my mother and the birth of my 5th child, the tour was a sell out. It was well covered by mainstream media outlets. In fact, we did it again the next year, and in our third year in 2019, we completed 30 shows in 17 cities. We raised a lot of money as well as raised awareness about important issues. A big part of our play was diversity. We had Black, Asian, Chinese cast members and highlighted racism.



One of the dialogues I wrote into the script drew on the Last Sermon of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Mum: I think it is fair to say that everyone matters. Imagine if you were asked to paint the world and you only had grey paint.

Dad: No golden sun

Tony: No blue sky or green grass

Malik: No red pink and purple flowers

Inayat: I think what Mum is trying to say is all the different races, Black people, white people, Asian people are like the different colours on a palette. Together we make the world colourful, bright and beautiful.

Mum: Like our beloved Prophet said in his last speech, no one is superior to the other. Not white over Black, nor an Arab or a non-Arab. Inside we are all the same.

Source: If the Shoe Fits, Kissoon 2017

Audience members picked up on our key themes and ideas. One audience member noted: “So much effort was put into it and it provides comedy, morals, and ethics. It’s telling us about the mind, body, and soul.” Sheila Nortley, a playwright, said; “the representation of Africa was poignant, beautiful, because we don’t get represented much in Muslim stories so it was great to have a Nigeria accent in there, a Jamaican woman in there amongst others. It was so inclusive.”

Throughout my years in health, media and the performing arts, I was made to feel like an outsider, to be constantly challenged, and given little or no support. I learned that project funding could be determined by the colour of our skin. Earlier in my career, I would hear comments like: “it’s a shame that you’re not one of us.” As a result, my work has been largely self-funded and I have personally accrued much debt.

I remain optimistic for the future; but we have to do things differently and start to change the tools we use and use them for ways of inspiring our next generation. Can we harness new modes of working together to break down the barriers and bring us together as a community? To do this we must recognise the disadvantaged position Muslim reverts can start from. From feeling alone to feeling like we are on unstable terrain without the extensive support and



ANISA KISSOON

Anisa Kissoon has been serving the community at the grassroots level for over 25 years. She has been a leading lecturer and coach in health and well-being, a teacher, written books, worked with the youth and when and so much more. She is an expert in the practice of ‘hijama’ (‘cupping’). Anisa spearheaded the campaign for hijama to be accredited in the UK. In 2006, Anisa offered the world’s first ever accredited ‘hijama therapy’ course and ‘hijama therapy blood analyst’ courses in 2013.

As a presenter on Islam Channel, Iqra and featured special guest on numerous news channels, her enthusiasm in promoting health and well-being has benefited thousands globally. Anisa’s goal is to revive the forgotten sunnah of Prophetic medicine, whilst specialising in the use of Black Seed, Honey and Hijama. Anisa Kissoon also write the smash hit, ‘If the Shoe Fits’, The Great Muslim Panto, which was featured in the BBC, Times newspaper and more mainstream media all over the world.

For over 10 years Anisa, along with her family, have used the tools of performing arts and media to inspire and teach. Her main passion is to heal, so whatever platform or method she can do so she will, one person at a time.