

I'tikāf: A British Muslim's Spiritual Sojourn

Hamzah Zahid

Contents

Acknowledgments	5
Transliteration	5
Glossary of terms	5
Introduction	7
Thesis Structure	8
Literature Review	10
I'tikāf	10
Sacred Space	11
Sacred Time	13
Theorising religious practice.....	14
Oversights in British Muslim Studies	14
Concluding Summary	15
Methodology Chapter	15
Positionality	18
Ethics	19
Note-taking	21
Data analysis	22
Findings Chapter 1 – Thick Description, <i>Fiqh</i> Description	23
Findings Chapter 2 – Identities, Vulnerability, and the Night of Power	30
Concluding Summary	33
Findings Chapter 3 – Themes in I'tikāf	34
Seeking refuge from the world.....	34
Ritual as a symbol of transnational Muslim identity	36
I'tikāf as a transformative ritual.....	37
Concluding Summary	38
Discussion Chapter	40
The first-ever account of I'tikāf.....	40
Combining Geertzian Symbols with a structure-agent framework.....	40
A typology of Niyyah-consciousness and implications for auto-ethnography	42
A typology of Niyyah-consciousness	43
Implications for auto-ethnography.....	44
The Discursive Tradition as a structure	45
Concluding summary	46
Conclusion	47
Bibliography	49

Appendices.....	52
An average day in I'tikāf	52
Ramadan's Endgame: Completing the Qur'ān	72
How Life Springs Anew: Leaving the Mosque	74
Methodological appendices	78
Information sheet	78
Consent form.....	80
Interview questions	81
Participant profiles	81

Acknowledgments

I should begin by thanking Tamanna, who believed in me, and convinced me that maybe, just maybe, I have something to offer in this field. My comrade Ayesha as well, for pushing me to apply for this MA.

My supervisor, Riyaz, has been consistently excellent and encouraging. The idea for this dissertation started off as a stray idea in my mind, which Riyaz latched onto, and continually encouraged me to see it through. As a supervisor, he demonstrates *iḥsān* (spiritual excellence).

My cat Inflation, for all the cuddles and tomfoolery.

My dear elder brother, Azib, who always saw strength in me, even when nobody else did. My sweet sister, Henna, who provides me with such love and encouragement, and brightens up even the stormiest days.

My father; if I could be a tenth of the man he is, I would be content. He has always modelled such raw dedication, dexterity and tenacity, mixed with an unparalleled considerate nature.

My mother; among all humans that I live with, she is the clearest, brightest manifestation of God's mercy. I do not deserve her.

Finally, I can only pray that He accepts it from me, He who found us wounded and afraid, and took me in.

Transliteration

I will transliterate the Arabic terms that I will be using. I will not transliterate Arabic terms in two cases; (1) when I am quoting another source and (2) words that are commonly used in English such as Eid, Islam, Ramadan, etc. In the former case, I will quote the Arabic terms as they are transliterated and spelt in another source. Approaches to transliteration can be a source of data, so I opt to preserve this.

Glossary of terms

Adhān: the call to prayer delivered out loud in the mosque 5 times daily for every prayer.

‘**Aṣr:** one of five daily prayers, held in the late afternoon.

Dhikr: broadly refers to the state of being in which one remembers God. This can manifest in a specific practice such as repeatedly saying God's name, or using a rosary.

‘**Īd:** commonly spelt Eid. A celebration that happens once the month of Ramadan has ended.

Iftar: the meal that is eaten at sunset, marking the end of the fast.

‘Ishā’: one of five daily prayers, held at night.

I’tikāf: the ritual of staying in the mosque for the last 10 days of Ramadan for worship.

Iqāmah: a quicker iteration of the adhān given immediately before congregational prayer begins.

Fajr: one of five daily prayers, held at dawn. It also marks the beginning of the fast.

Ghusl: a ritual bath in which the whole body is washed. This must be done after penetrative sex or emission of sexual fluids. Without this, Muslims are not allowed to pray.

Ḥadīth: a documented saying or action of the Prophet Muhammad.

Ḥāfiẓ: one who has committed the entire Qur’ān to memory, verbatim. Plural: ḥuffāz.

Laylat al-Qadr: (Night of Power): the night on which the Qur’ān was first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in Ramadan. The exact date in Ramadan is unknown, but theologians have narrowed it down to occurring on one of the odd nights in the last ten nights of Ramadan i.e. 21st, 23rd, 25th, 27th and 29th nights. It is described as being more virtuous than 1,000 months in the Qur’ān, making it a highly sought-after night.

Maghrib: one of five daily prayers, held at sunset. It also marks the end of the fast.

Masjid: Arabic term for mosque.

Mua’dhin: the one who pronounces the adhān and the iqāmah.

Mufti: an Islamic theologian specialised in producing legal edicts.

Niyyah: the intention with which one does an action. Good deeds are only accepted if one has a pure intention.

Sunnah: refers to the way of being of the Prophet Muhammed.

Suhūr: the pre-dawn meal. Also referred to as Sehri.

Tarāwiḥ: an additional prayer held in Ramadan after the ‘Ishā’ prayer in which long portions of the Qur’ān are recited, usually for more than an hour.

Wudū’: ablution; washing of one’s face and limbs which must be done before prayer.

Zuhr: one of five daily prayers, held during the early afternoon.

Introduction

The founding moment of Islam was when Muhammad was in solitude. He grew increasingly perturbed at the degradation of his community into violence, bloodshed, and a bastardisation of the pure faith of Abraham. He took to spending long periods in isolation and contemplation in a cave in a mountain near the outskirts of Mecca. Muhammad would take food with him because he would expect to be there for long periods at a time. During this period of intense isolation was when the Archangel Gabriel appeared before Muhammad and presented the first verses of the Qur'ān to him, rendering Muhammad a Prophet of God. This fateful night came to be known as the Night of Power, becoming the temporal container of one of Islam's most magnanimous events. The month in which this occurred was Ramadan, which was at that point not a month of fasting, nor a sacred month. The cave in which this took place came to be known as the Cave of Hira, and the otherwise innocuous mountain became Jabal al-Nūr – the Mountain of Light. The thunderous appearance of revelation thus left a permanent imprint on space and time.

Muhammad, now Prophet Muhammad, descended from the Cave of Hira, physically but also in a metaphorical sense. In the ultra-dense spiritual space of the Cave, in isolation, a profound spiritual opening took place. But despite the gravity and magnitude of that, society was the domain in which that spirituality had to be actualised and propagated. He thus descended from the hyper-spiritual to the mundane.

Prophet Muhammad was to continue to spend time in spaces of isolation, spending long nights in prayer, and in I'tikāf. I'tikāf is a ritual conducted in the last 10 days of Ramadan, in which one lives in the mosque for the entirety of the 10 days, spent in worship, not leaving except for necessities. The Prophet performed I'tikāf every year. It seems then that solitude and isolation is a spiritual whetstone, undertaken habitually by the Prophet, in which great ravines of religious fervour open. But it is not the ultimate or even typical domain of the believer.

1,400 years later, on the British Isles, the echoes of that thunderous moment of revelation are still heard, and the sacred spaces and times that it birthed are now occupied by 3 million British Muslims. Muslims across the world, and indeed in Britain, place great currency on enacting the Sunnah – the sayings, actions and tacit approvals of the Prophet Muhammad. The ritual of I'tikāf is among this, and so it is practiced in British mosques. Within Islamic Law, it is designated as Sunnah Mua'kiddah Kifāyah – a highly emphasised act that a community of Muslims must fulfil; even if one person fulfils this ritual, this is sufficient on behalf of the collective.

The picture I have painted above roots the experience in a particular religious narrative, showing the reverberations of the founding moment of Islam and how they manifest in 21st century Britain. Quite deliberately, I have crafted the above narrative as though it were a sermon being delivered inside a mosque. But against a backdrop of Colonialism, the Rushdie Affair, the Bosnian Genocide, 9/11, the War on Terror, 7/7, and Counter-terror policy, such a sermon would never be heard. Instead of sitting inside the mosque to listen to the sermons, the sociological study of British Muslims has looked on from the outside, invoking the weight of the cognitive frames birthed from a cacophony of traumatic and violent events. Consequently, British Muslim Studies has produced few studies on mosques from the inside, the experience of Ramadan, and none on the ritual of I'tikāf.

Why would somebody spend 10 days (over a third of a working person's annual leave) just worshipping in a mosque, without bathing, with no beds, no entertainment, away from family and friends? What happens in the mosque during these ten days? This broad, amorphous term, worship,

how does that actualise? With no prior academic exploration of I'tikāf, many questions spring forth. Having encountered moments of spiritual profundity of my own in I'tikāf, I feel aware of the phenomenon and of its gravity. The contemporary sociological endeavour contains a suitable repertoire of tools to engage the complex and personal nature of prayer. Combining these together, in this thesis, I present the first-ever auto-ethnographic study of I'tikāf. Quite literally, this study is from the inside of a mosque. For 10 days I lived in a mosque, participating in the ritual of I'tikāf, with the full weight of my convictions as a Muslim behind me; I entered the ritual a Muslim, dreaming of absolution, and at once, a researcher, dreaming of exploring a virgin field of research.

In conceiving of research questions to guide my research, I decided to make them as broad as possible because I'tikāf has never been explored before:

1. What happens during I'tikāf?
2. Why do people participate in I'tikāf?
3. How do individuals change during I'tikāf?

Thesis Structure

With dual identities in hand, I begin this thesis with a Literature Review, in which I identify a complete absence of studies exploring I'tikāf. This provides an opportunity to provide a theorisation of I'tikāf, which I conceive of as a confluence of sacred space and time. Accordingly, I provide an account of the literature on sacred space (mosques) and sacred time (Ramadan). I buttress this with a theorisation of worship and prayer. Taking these three strands together, I weave a preliminary theorisation of I'tikāf as a ritual that expresses both an underlying conviction and a desire to engage in a positive spiritual feedback loop during an especially sacred time that can generate patterned spiritual and social activity, often to seek the Night of Power, in the sacred space of the mosque. I then reflect on what the identified literature gaps are indicative of in British Muslim Studies. This literature review also functions to underscore the central claim to originality of this thesis; the originality of the subject matter.

Following this, I provide an account of my methodological choices. My primary methodology is auto-ethnography. I locate auto-ethnography in a history of Positivism and the epistemology of reflexivity, concluding that auto-ethnography is a valid and robust methodology, and supplementary methods can function as an interesting reference point; accordingly, I use participant observation and informal interviews alongside auto-ethnography. Intimately related to auto-ethnography is positionality. I specifically invoke the Islamic concept of niyyah (intention - the purity of which determines the acceptability of an action before God) as a platform to explore the idiosyncrasies of a researcher who is dually engaged in worship and research. My methodological choices and reflections also form a part of this thesis' claim to originality; auto-ethnography has seldom been used in British Muslim Studies and has not been explored in the way that I hope to do.

Thereafter, I present the first of three findings' chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of the rules of I'tikāf using Giddens' (1984) structure-agent framework. This provides the pretext for a full, in-depth account of an average day in I'tikāf, which is in the appendices. This is not an actual day that I encountered but is an amalgamation of several episodes to convey the various encounters and activities that take place in I'tikāf. I present a day based on the patterned behaviour on the 24th day of Ramadan, upon which is the 25th night of Ramadan (in the Islamic calendar, night precedes the day, so the night is 1 count ahead of what day of the month it is). Thereafter, I present two extremely

noteworthy additional episodes of the I'tikāf experience, which I was not able to fit into the average day: completing the Qur'ān, and leaving the mosque at the end of I'tikāf. This chapter and the average day in I'tikāf substantively answer all three of my research questions and is also the first-ever account of I'tikāf in British Muslim Studies.

The second findings chapter addresses the conflict between my identities as a Muslim and a researcher that I encountered in the ultra-exclusive and specific occasion(s) of the Night of Power, concluding that even in the event of a conflict in identities, reflections on this conflict provide a powerful insight into the transformative power of I'tikāf and the idiosyncrasies of being a Muslim researcher. I specifically use the concept of vulnerability (Behar, 1996) to explore these changes.

The third findings chapter seeks to discuss broader themes that emerged by comparing my own experiences with the data generated via participant observation and formal interviews. I provide thematic reflections on exploring two themes around engaging in I'tikāf; seeking refuge from the worldly life, ritual as a symbol of transnational Muslim identity, and I'tikāf as a transformative ritual. I use Geertzian symbols and structure-agency frameworks as a theoretical basis for exploration.

Thereafter, I discuss my findings, emphasising the originality of my account of a day in I'tikāf. I discuss the wider use of a combined framework of Geertzian symbols and structure-agent frameworks to explore sacred moments. I attempt a systemisation of the idiosyncrasies faced by Muslim researchers based on negotiating my own identities within the substrate of wanting a pure niyyah (intention). Finally, I discuss the importance of the discursive tradition (Asad, 1985) and how this should be leveraged by researchers.

Literature Review

The central claim to originality of this thesis is that, to the best of my knowledge, there is no study which focuses on I'tikāf as its subject of study. Rytter's (2016) amusingly named paper, *Burger Jihad*, is the only other study I could find which included some mention of I'tikāf, though this was tangential. Because of this, I have focussed on providing a critical commentary on existing literature (or lack thereof) and on developing a theorisation of I'tikāf and my site of research.

This lacuna of literature creates a fruitful space for creatively conceiving I'tikāf vis-à-vis related areas of study. To this end, I construe I'tikāf as being a particular overlap between a sacred space (the mosque) and sacred time (the last nights days of Ramadan), and an expression of devotion coupled with a morally constitutive element. This conception is inspired by Ahmed's (2016) ethnography of a Cardiff Mosque, and Turner's (1969) idea of liminality and communitas. Faced by a similar gap in literature, Ahmed used Lefebvre's (2004) concept of sacred rhythms, that is, ebbs and flows of sacred activity in course with cosmic and vital rhythms, to conceptualise the lived spiritual experiences of the mosque.

I will thus structure this literature review as follows. I will first discuss the literature specifically on I'tikāf. As mentioned, this is almost non-existent. Following this, I will discuss the literature on sacred space i.e. mosques, in which we will see a gap in understanding the daily lived experiences of mosque life, which this thesis will seek to address. Thereafter, I will review the literature on Ramadan, which together with the literature on mosques, dovetails to provide an imperfect prelude to the exclusive and particular ritual of I'tikāf. We will see once more a considerable gap in literature on Ramadan. Following this, I will briefly cover a conception of religious practice. This will flow into the final section of the literature review, in which I argue that literature gaps convey a systematic bias in British Muslim Studies, one which has created a strong preference for studies around integration and extremism at the expense of exploring the lived experiences of British Muslims.

I'tikāf

As mentioned earlier, the only study which touches upon I'tikāf is Rytter's (2016) study of two groups of Danish Muslims that travelled to a Pakistani Sufi lodge and took part in I'tikāf. Using participatory fieldwork, the study examines how food consumption plays a role in spiritual cultivation. The simplistic food of the *langar* was contrasted by Hardee's Burgers. The luminous Hardees logo was visible from within the Lodge, thus becoming the subject of the titular burger jihad. The temptation of the burger symbolises subservience to their nafs (lower self) and spiritual incompleteness, which serve as a counterpoint to the path to spiritual completeness. Rytter (2016) thus concludes that the anthropology of Islam should pay closer attention to the everyday, in this case food. This is an apt conclusion to reach; as I will discuss later in this chapter, the absence in focus on the everyday has created a body of literature which focuses on the very particular considerations of integration and extremism, rather than more commonly experienced spiritual or cultural experiences.

For our purposes, Rytter's (2016) study provides little detail on the experience of I'tikāf. I'tikāf serves as the context for the field, a backdrop for the skirmishes with the nafs, and a pietistic model for ideal human behaviour. There is some helpful introduction to the concept of I'tikāf, and some of the practicalities that are entailed therewith, but otherwise this is not a study that deliberately explores

I'tikāf. Moreover, Rytter (2016) engages in participatory fieldwork as a non-Muslim Dane (Rytter, 2016, p51). This provides a particular lens of enquiry, and firmly positions Rytter as an 'outsider'. As I will later discuss, in the field I observed degrees of "insider-ness"; within this spectrum, I qualify as an insider to a sufficient extent that I had access to the spiritual-emotional character of I'tikāf and personally experienced this, making my study unique and distinct from Rytter's. In this sense, I also fit into the Denzin and Lincoln's (2001, p577) suggestion that the 'other' should conduct their own research; that is to say, a Muslim is conducting research into an experience that significantly hinges on sense of self.

Sacred Space

The lacuna of literature on I'tikāf affords a degree of creativity in conceiving of it in theoretical terms. Given that this study is the first of its kind, I aimed for my conception of I'tikāf to be as broad as possible, so that I did not inadvertently invoke the problem of foreshadowing. I therefore opted for a broad conception of I'tikāf as being a particular confluence of sacred space (the mosque) and sacred time (the last ten nights of Ramadan). This conception is an attempt to delineate the field which I would come to occupy. I avoided conceiving of I'tikāf in terms that would define the function of I'tikāf, such as Rytter's (2016) understanding of it within the Naqshabandi Sufi edifice, or as, for example, a retreat from modernity. Such a conception would limit the experiences that I had been open to as a researcher.

I will structure this section of the literature review by progressing from a broad conception of sacred time, and progressively narrow down to mosques in a broader socio-political context, then to the inner-chambers of the mosque, and finally, denominational influences on mosques.

Metcalf's (1996) edited volume contains several accounts of manifestations of sacred space, including in houses, mosques in prison, mawlid (celebrations of the Prophet Muhammad's birth) marches stamping the earth with the remembrance of God, inter alia. This broad exploration of sacred space is useful here because it enables us to locate the mosque within a range of sacred spaces, perhaps the most intense manifestation of one.

In examining mosques as a manifestation of sacred space, Ahmed (2016, p5) incisively observes that most literature on mosques conceptualise the mosque within a space; they discuss how the mosque occupies a certain socio-political role within the landscape of a city. Studies thus tend to look inwards into a mosque. There are very few studies which conceive the space *of* the mosque itself. Given that I'tikāf, by definition, is an experience that must exclusively take place inside of a mosque, I am primarily interested in this latter conception. In spirit with the breadth of my enquiry however, I will still cover studies which investigate mosques from the outside. I would later find in my fieldwork that the considerations of mosques from outside-in were to have ramifications and manifestations within the mosque itself.

Researchers have been peeking through the windows, observing the minarets, and perhaps catching an echoing mu'adh-hin. From the outside, the literature is rich. Here I will present some of the literature which describes the function of mosques, and what they have come to represent. To begin with, Eade (1993) contends that mosques represent an "Islamisation of Space". This Islamisation has taken place within the context of the *Satanic Verses* controversy and the Gulf War (Eade, 1993, p217). Eade thus locates the mosque in a substrate of national and international events. By virtue of this substrate, the mosque represents an intensification of activity of the Muslim outsider. Gale's (2004) argument that

mosques indicate the degree to which Muslims see a future for themselves in Britain is an interesting complement to Eade (1993). Together, they suggest that mosques occupy a contentious position, looked upon with suspicion on the one hand, and on the other, represent a defiant will to belong. In performing the ritual of I'tikāf and occupying the interior of the mosque, to what extent would I be separate from the impact of this contentiousness? As we will later see, I noticed a number of symbols of this outside-in perspective of mosques.

Moving from the outside of the mosque to the inside, Ahmed (2016)'s ethnography of a Cardiff Mosque represents one of the first studies that document the space *of* the mosque itself. Ahmed positions himself as an insider ethnographer to document the activity of the mosque, with a focus of the space and meanings within the mosque. The use of insider ethnography is apt to address the gap in studies *of* mosques because it provides an easier access to Geertzian webs of significance (Ahmed, 2016, p38). Using this, Ahmed discussed the dynamism with which the mosque fulfils the needs of its congregants, centred around a sacred rhythm that is characterised by *barakah*, that is, spiritual efficacy, which creates oscillating activity codified in the spiritual dictates of Islam. Importantly, Ahmed notes that his fieldwork shows the distance that his field had from the headlines of terrorism and integration (Ahmed, 2016, p177). From within the mosque, Ahmed's 2017 paper *The Other Ethical Approval* discovered that the congregants of the mosque themselves conduct an informal ethical approval of the researcher and need to be reassured that the researcher is Islamically orientated. The significance of this finding for my research is that when entering into I'tikāf and disclosing my researcher identity, I will be judged in a particular way, so I must be cognisant of this.

Ahmed's studies are important here for a number of reasons. Firstly, it creates some precedence for the use of an insider-ethnography to explore the inner chambers of a mosque. I crucially add an auto-ethnographic component to my study, which sets my research apart. Secondly, Ahmed notes the gap of literature that documents the activity of a mosque itself. Although my study is more focussed on a specific time and ritual within a mosque, I nevertheless contribute to this fledgling field of documenting the internal communal activities *within* the mosque, rather than examining the mosque as a site of broader social tensions and contentions.

A salient consideration when thinking about any mosque is affiliation, or extent of affiliation to particular denomination and/or movement. British Islam features a unique confluence of several Islamic reform movements, such as the Deobandis, Barelwis, Salafis, and various episodes of Islamism (Gilliat-Ray, 2010). I will focus on the Deobandis because my site of research is associated with it. I treat the association between this mosque and this movement tentatively. There is a risk that I can overstate this association, and in doing so invoke a bias into my observations.

Metcalf (1982) is an important source for understanding the Deobandi movement from a historical lens from the period 1860 to 1900. The Indian Mutiny (or War of Independence) was a cataclysm which birthed the political quietism of the Deobandis (Metcalf, 1982, p87). Within this context, 10 years after the Indian Uprising, Rashid Ahmad Gangohi and Muhammad Qasim Nanautawi founded Darul Uloom Deoband. A particular cosmology guided them: since God had taken political power away from the Muslims, it meant that Muslims were no longer deserving of it. In their logic, if they were to look inwards, and cultivate themselves morally, they would once more become worthy of political power. Thus, they sought to hold firmly onto the scriptural and spiritual legacies of Islam (Metcalf, 1982). One can summarise the Deobandi ethos with three Ps; piety, protection and preservation.

Sacred Time

I will structure this part of the literature review in a similar fashion, gradually funnelling down from a broad discussion of sacred time in Islam, to Ramadan as a manifestation of sacred time, and then to sacred time on British shores, in absence of literature on Ramadan in Britain.

Katz (2007) examines the nature of sacred time in Islam. She contends that time is inherently patterned in Islam. The main distinguishing feature of these preferred times was the multiplication of reward received by worshippers. (Katz, 2007, p143). Katz (2007) explains that the theory of virtuous times has had practical ripples throughout Islamic history, manifesting in concerted worship during these times. The activity that occurs during sacred time can agglomerate and birth particular ritual activity. For example, Katz (2009, p149) provides a thorough survey of the contestation in Islamic literature between two contenders of the most sacred of nights – the night of the *mawlid*, and the Night of Power, in which the Qur’ān was first revealed. This debate is frequently found in *mawlid* literature (Katz, 2007, pp143-147). Irrespective of the outcome of this debate, the Night of Power almost certainly falls during the period of I’tikāf. Indeed, to seek it out is one of the objectives of I’tikāf. Similarly to sacred space, sacred time in Islam also has a variety of manifestations, helping us to locate the I’tikāf within a particular manifestation of sacred time. Based upon this, we can reach a theorisation of sacred time that it is about birthing experiences, which can be rituals, social experiences, or patterned activity.

There are very few sociological studies of Ramadan, and even fewer in the British context. We must then venture outside of British shores to encounter a sociological study of Ramadan. Buitelaar (1993) conducted an ethnographic study of Ramadan in Morocco, specifically focussing on the experiences of women. She fasted for three successive years, based upon which she identified three concepts which represent a tacit ontology held by Moroccans; (1) *Ajr* – reward from God for having fasted; (2) *Tahara* – purity of soul attained through the cleansing property of fasting, and; (3) *Umma* – a sense of an Islamic fraternity that is underscored by the egalitarianism embedded in fasting. Buitelaar’s (1993) locates her study against a backdrop of references to the Islamic tradition, with her first chapter covering verses from the Qur’ān and Hadith regarding fasting, Maliki legal theory on fasting, and a tract by Imam Ghazali on the inner-dimensions of fasting. In doing so, Buitelaar’s study becomes one which provides valuable insight into the lived experience of the ritual of Ramadan in Morocco. Buitelaar frames these concepts within the Moroccan context, which doesn’t provide a sufficient basis for a theorisation of sacred time.

Moving from the Maghreb to Java, Möller (2005) provides an insight into the Tarāwiḥ (or *traweh* in Javanese) prayers (Tarāwiḥ is an additional and recommended prayer held in Ramadan after ‘Ishā’ prayers). He describes two accounts of the *traweh* prayer, one in a modernist mosque, and the other in a traditionalist prayer house. Möller (2005) sensitively and aptly construes the differences between the two prayers as being minor when compared to the much larger scope of agreement between the two groups, most notably on the importance of the *traweh* prayer. Tarāwiḥ is a salient consideration for I’tikāf; all I’tikāf participants will almost certainly engage in the prayer every night. Möller’s study provides some scope for conceiving of Tarāwiḥ as an important part of I’tikāf, since it features as a strong mainstay of Ramadan even between traditionalist and modernist communities. Nonetheless, Möller’s does not aim to provide a theorisation of sacred time manifest as Ramadan.

Werbner’s (1996) excellent paper moves further to contextualise sacred time on British Shores. She discusses the deterritorialisation of sacred spaces in light of migration, and accordingly, how marches centred around certain sacred times, such as the *mawlid* (birth of the Prophet Muhammad) sacralise

and “Islamicise” the very earth. Although Werbner’s study does not explicitly discuss Ramadan, it is instructive here because it introduces sacred time in the context of the historical particularities that have birthed British Muslim communities. Buitelaar (1993) and Möller (2005) provide direct studies on Ramadan, but not within a British context. Together, then, we can see that there is a gap in exploring Ramadan as a specific manifestation of sacred time in the British context.

Theorising religious practice

It is important to conceive of I’tikāf as a deliberate and pronounced religious practice. Winchester (2008) provides an important theorisation of religious practice that provides two different ways of conceiving of religious actions conducted during I’tikāf. Winchester conducted observation and participation of Muslim converts in Missouri, as well as interviews, and he fasted for the last week of Ramadan. He found that religious practice of the converts was different to Kant’s conception of religious practice as a product of a fully formed moral reason. Instead, participants expressed a dialectical relationship between their practice and moral reason; practice and moral reason formed a virtuous feedback loop (Winchester, 2008, pp1755-1756). For Winchester (2008, p1767) fasting in particular occupies a strong morally constitutive role. As we will later see, both conceptions can co-exist – my own motives for engaging in I’tikāf, and motives expressed by interviewees expressed both a Kantian desire for *ajr* (a la Buitelaar (1993)) and a positive spiritual feedback loop. Here, we can also introduce Turner’s (1969) important and influential concepts of liminality and *communitas*. Turner discusses these in the context of rites of passage, with liminality describing the process of change encountering during a transitory spiritual experience.

Oversights in British Muslim Studies

Throughout this literature review, there has been a pervading theme: *gaps*. In every area that has a direct bearing on my research topic, there is a dearth of literature. I’tikāf, the inner life of a mosque, and Ramadan – each of these areas has little to no literature. Compare this to the literature on mosques from the outside in; there is a rich literature exploring diverse ways that mosques occupy space in today’s political, social and physical landscape. This points to an unfortunate tendency within British Muslim Studies to focus on the political contentiousness of Islam and Muslims in Britain. As Möller (2005, p37) brilliantly observes:

“Compared to studies of, for example, political Islam, there are far fewer studies of Islamic rituals which confirm the view that Islamic rituals are unworthy of serious study. To this state of affairs we may add the general and unfortunate tendency in recent scholarship that has contributed (deliberately or otherwise) to viewing Islam as politically potent, and ignoring its religious and spiritual aspects. In this period of accusations of terrorism, there is an urgent need for alternative pictures of Islam.”

In a heavily securitised context, British Muslim Studies has focussed on a more contentious range of subjects. The casualty of this is that the spiritual or more mundane cultural aspects of Islam are often overlooked. Consider Ramadan: there are around 3 million Muslims in Britain, who are charged by their faith to fast for a month a year, that is, one-twelfth of their adult life. We do not have data to assess the number of Muslims who do or do not fast, but Ramadan holds enough social significance

so as to draw the attention of two Prime Ministerial public messages. It is significant. Yet there are almost no studies dedicated to exploring this. Where I became most acutely aware of this was when I thought I had found a paper on Ramadan, entitled *Ramadan in Liverpool* by Wilson (2012). This Ramadan was not the sacred month, but rather referred to Tariq Ramadan.

Similarly, mosques have been a crucible of controversy, but so few researchers have ventured inside to document what activity takes place in these otherwise mysterious, exotic and seemingly insidious buildings. I initially thought that the literature gap on I'tikāf was perhaps less noticeable because of its rather exclusive nature. During the process of preparing, performing and exiting I'tikāf, I found concentric layers of communal activity, from inside and outside of the mosque, demonstrating that despite the exclusivity of the ritual, the framing and experience of I'tikāf is very much nested within a rich substrate of communal activity. In other words, the literature gap on I'tikāf is symptomatic of a larger blind spot in our understanding of British Muslims, which I hope to demonstrate in the remainder of this thesis. Since the proclaimed objective of anthropology is to make the unremarkable remarkable, the focus on the very remarkable domains of the political contentiousness of Islam and Muslims at the expense of everyday spiritual and cultural experiences is especially noteworthy.

Concluding Summary

The absence of literature on I'tikāf has provided an opportunity for creativity in conceiving of it using related topics to construe its elements, making this a somewhat unconventional literature review. Accordingly, I presented literature on sacred space (mosques) and time (Ramadan). I used Ahmed's (2016) distinction of outside-in and inside-out to organise the literature around mosques. The latter category is sparse, and I associate this thesis in that sub-stream of literature. I provided broader context of my field with an account of the Deobandi denomination, but stressed the tentativeness of this association. Therefore, I discussed two conceptions of ritual practice – a Kantian one, and Turner's (1969) concept of liminality.

These various strands of literature that I have covered create a preliminary conception of I'tikāf as a ritual that expresses both an underlying conviction and a desire to engage in a positive spiritual feedback loop during an especially sacred time that can generate patterned spiritual and social activity, often to seek the Night of Power, which takes place in the sacred space of a mosque associated with the Deobandi in a broader social context which construes this sacred space as problematic. Those familiar with I'tikāf will realise that there certainly are gaps in this conception. It is not my intent to provide a full theorisation of I'tikāf here (this is difficult given the literature gaps), or even in this entire thesis. I would be content to provide a preliminary theorisation, with a full and complete account of I'tikāf.

Methodology Chapter

In this chapter, I discuss my methodological choices. I first locate auto-ethnography in a history of methodological advancements in the social sciences, and elaborate upon supplementary research methods that serve as a reference point to the personal experiences contained in the auto-ethnography.

Following this, I reflect on various aspects of my positionality as a researcher. Thereafter, I discuss the ethics of my research, note-taking procedures, and then outline my analysis frame.

The methodology that I have opted for is reflective of the various literature gaps that were discussed earlier. To recap, there are a number of gaps: (1) I'tikāf, (2) mosques from the inside-out, and (3) Ramadan. In this chapter I will argue that auto-ethnography and informal field interviews is a suitable combination to address these gaps in a robust way.

To begin with, the shared character between these three literature gaps is a distinct absence of reflection on the everyday spiritual encounters of Muslims. I'tikāf is major symptom of this – it is an activity in which individuals willingly confine themselves to the interior space of the mosque. Studies looking outward-in could hardly expect to encounter such an experience, much less document the spiritual contours of it. As Ahmed (2016) documented, most studies of mosques locate them in a political, social and physical landscape. The sacred rhythms that the mosque attendee encounters are seldom documented. Perhaps the clearest example of a gap in ritual Muslim experience is the literature around Ramadan, a time when perhaps up to 3 million Britons spend a month fasting, or one-twelfth of their adult lives.

Prima-facie, the 'auto' part of auto-ethnography would seem an effective choice of methodology to capture the spiritual-emotional webs of significance in I'tikāf. However, some would consider this a controversial choice: Delamont (2009) makes a harsh criticism of auto-ethnography, arguing that it is antithetical to the progress of Social Science. My methodological choice therefore demands some justification. In doing so, it is necessary to locate auto-ethnography in a broader trajectory of methodological developments in Social Science.

An ideal starting point for this exploration is the views of the Positivists and the Naturalists. Positivism in the Social Sciences reached the height of their prominence in the 1930s and 1940s, propounding a method which attempted to resemble the scientific method, creating replicability, and therefore generalisability (Hammersly and Atkinson, 2019, p5). Such a method is predicated on the existence of generalisable laws that can be uncovered with observable and therefore standardisable and measurable phenomenon (Hammersly and Atkinson, 2019, p6). In a context of test tubes, and easily definable dependent, independent and controlled variables, upholding such a method is straightforward. In the multifarious world of the sociological, this becomes more complex. Procedural Objectivity is then needed; this is to define the observer as closely as possible so that their behaviour can be accounted for (Hammersly and Atkinson, 2019, p6). In doing so, the researcher now becomes a dependent variable i.e., one which is kept the same, so that any changes to the independent variable can yield results that can be meaningfully interpreted as having a causal relationship to the dependent variable. The dependent variable further complicates the task of exploring the sociological via Positivism. What exactly is being explored, how can it be defined, and how is it affected by the researcher? Naturalism makes an intervention here, proposing that the social world should be studied without the disturbance of the researcher (Hammersly and Atkinson, 2019, p7). Positivism and Naturalism have both been heavily criticised for asserting that the researcher can independently research their site. As a result of this criticism, the methodological horizons of the Social Sciences have become broader and more diverse.

This sets the stage for Berger and Luckmann's (1966) influential and masterful text, *The Social Construction of Reality*, in which they consider the need for the researcher to bracket away their ontological commitments within the Social Constructionist perspective. They wrestle with the fundamental question of Social Knowledge: how does any body of knowledge come to be known as reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p15)? They argue that reality is socially constructed. This

becomes pertinent for Berger's later exploration of the Sociology of Religion. Religion has a 'world-building' function, so it participates in the social construction of reality (Berger, 1967, p3). In exploring the important function of religion in social construction, Berger (1967) proposes that theology must be 'bracketed out' so as to remain neutral. In our context, that would require me to bracket out my ontological commitments as a Muslim when engaging in I'tikāf. That would lead to a somewhat bizarre situation in which I would have to pray, recite the Qur'ān in a devotional capacity and live in a mosque whilst leaving my ontological commitments aside.

Cantrel (2018) is critical of Berger's insistence on methodological atheism, arguing that it does not provide a normativity for the academic study of religion because it marginalises religious experience, and itself imposes a secular normativity. Instead, Cantrel argues, scholars should be able to entertain certain religious beliefs as being true to consider the implications on how the subject at hand is studied. Similarly, Bull (2007) argues that ethnographies are inevitably affected by the interiority of the researcher. This is especially true for sensitive matters such as sex, drug use and religion. For Bull this is not something to be avoided, but yields further fruit in the field through means of access to increasingly exclusive spaces. This underscores the importance of reflecting on my own positionalities, which I will do later.

Later developments in Social Constructionism offer similar reflections. Manning (1998, p163) documents two types of Social Constructionism. Procedural Social Constructionism holds that our interpretation of a phenomenon is an integral part of the phenomenon itself. That is to say, the researcher constitutes part of the field; as a researcher in I'tikāf, I am part of what shapes the experience of I'tikāf. The second type of Social Constructionism for Manning (1998) is Reflexive Social Constructionism. Here, interpretation is all-encompassing, and even Sociology and the Social Constructionism itself are socially constructed. Manning (1998, p166) disapproves of Reflexive Social Constructionists, stating that they are 'literary critics with empirical ambitions'. Delamont (2009) similarly disapproves of Reflexive Social Constructionism as being part of Post-Modernism, and instead argues that Reflexive Social Constructionism should be distinguished with what she calls the Ethnographic Self, the latter being a productive exercise of reflection. Coffey (2011) likewise writes in her book *The Ethnographic Self* that the self constitutes an important part of the field, something that is to be leveraged to produce data, and not eliminated.

Where does auto-ethnography fit into this? Does it belong to the unproductive and improper domain of literary critics with empirical ambitions? And is it antithetical to the progress of Social Science? Zempi's (2007) fascinating auto-ethnographic study grapples with these questions. In her study, she donned the niqab to experience for herself the same treatment that niqabi women. Zempi is aware of the contentious nature of auto-ethnography, but argues that her study is not of the unproductive, literary sort that Manning (1998) and Delamont (2009) are opposed to. She argues that her study is an analytical auto-ethnography, that is, she connects her experiences to broader social phenomena, thereby exploring the social through the self. Analytical auto-ethnography is as opposed to evocative auto-ethnography, a method which draws attention to the researcher's experiences (Zempi, 2007, p3). Zempi's (2007) method of connecting her experiences to broader phenomena is achieved through the use of interviews with niqabi women, providing a point of comparison, and an analytical counterweight to her own experiences.

To conclude this account of the controversies of reflexivity, auto-ethnography can find a productive outlet on the conditions that (1) the researcher attempts a connection to broader social phenomenon, which is to be done via (2) a supplementary research method that provides a point of comparison. Whilst these conditions certainly provide helpful triangulation to an auto-ethnography, I contend that

auto-ethnography provides value itself. Studies such as Innes (2009) create an important precedent for insider ethnography, with Kanuha (2000) and Murphy (1987) showing the value of auto-ethnography, in particular in explicating deeply personal encounters of lesbian women and disabled peoples respectively. The fruit of insider-researcher has not yet been applied to British Muslim Studies, something that I hope to do with this study.

Nonetheless, I find Zempi's (2007) conditions useful because they provide a reference point against which I can situate my own experiences. As such, I base my methodology on these two conditions, whilst noting that the robustness of auto-ethnography is not solely contingent upon these. I therefore combine auto-ethnography, which substantively explores my own experience, and connect this via the use of (1) participant observation and (2) field interviews, both formal and informal. Both of these supplementary methods provide a sufficient amount of data to siphon my own experiences into a broader schema of phenomena. The literature review was a preliminary attempt at doing this; I provided a theorisation of I'tikāf in terms of sacred space and time and located my research site within several different cognates.

Positionality

I will now reflect on my own positionality as a researcher, so as to understand the impact that I come to have on the methods that I will employ, and the research site. I will do this by considering the various identities that I straddle. Firstly, and most importantly, I am a Muslim. My ontological commitments are within Sunni Islam, and I follow the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. This makes both my research site and topic of research hold sacred value for me. From my point of view, the mosque is the masjid – etymologically speaking, *the place of prostration to God*. I'tikāf is a deep devotional effort which will earn reward and take me closer to God. Perhaps this would make me less alert to certain aspects of I'tikāf, or would give me a particular lens for engaging it. This is a reasonable assertion to make. Nonetheless, I contend that nobody but a Muslim would be able to document the subjective and intensely personal experience of a devout I'tikāf. Certainly, a researcher who is not a Muslim could well engage in the outer motions of a ritual, as did Zempi (2007) and Buitelaar (1993), and provide a particular account of such engagement. For example, Metcalf (1994) does well to identify that the Tablighi Jamaat movement takes place with reference to a prophetic past, and aspirations to eschatological outcomes. But what Metcalf (1982) and others would not be able to do is to describe the internalisation of such an ideal, and the state of being within it. This is not to say that 'outsiders' cannot research a particular phenomenon. Such a claim would be exclusionary. One hopes that research can, to an extent, uncover the motivations and emotions of others, because then we can vest hope in value of research in generating empathy between peoples. What I do contend is that the outsider has something that only that an outsider can apprehend, and an insider has something that only an insider can apprehend and document. In this case, as an insider to the ontological substrate of I'tikāf, I can document the unique moods and circumstances that propel one to such a ritual, and the inner emotive contours of this ritual. This is in spirit with Denzin and Lincoln's (2001, p577) suggestion that the 'other' should conduct their own research; that is to say, a Muslim is conducting research into an experience that he is very much a part of.

Being a Muslim and researching into acts of worship introduces a further fascinating topic, that of intention (*niyyah*). Muslims believe, as per the first hadith of the most canonical collection Sahih Bukhari, that actions are rewarded by God based on the purity and nobility of the intention behind them. I will address the tensions I encountered between my identities as a Muslim and a researcher in

my findings chapter. It certainly is worth noting this uniquely Muslim challenge for a researcher as a methodological observation.

Secondly, I am visually South-Asian, and am often seen as being Pakistani, Indian or Bangladeshi. This places me within the ethnic-majority of British Muslims, i.e. South Asians. Within my research site, the dominant ethnicity seems to be Indian-Gujarati; at the very least, the mosque management is Indian Gujarati. This makes me partly an insider: I fit within the broad South Asian character of the mosque, but not entirely, since I am ethnically Pakistani and do not speak Gujarati (other than occasionally saying *kemcho*, meaning how are you). Visually, then, my presence in the mosque is not something that draws particular attention, other than my unusually long hair. I have been an attendee at this mosque for around 11 years, further making my presence unremarkable in the mosque.

Thirdly, I am very familiar with the sights and sounds of Deobandi mosques and the Tablighi Jamaat movements, having spent a number of years frequenting Deobandi mosques because of their proximity and relative cleanliness. But, I am not a Deobandi in a formal sense; I did not attend a madrassah as a child, or a Deobandi Darul Uloom as an adult. Within the realm of modern Islamic reform movements, I describe myself as a denominational nomad. My extended family are Barelwi, I attended mostly Deobandi mosques growing up, had an interest in the apologetics of the Salafi preacher Dr. Zakir Naik, was targeted for recruitment by two Hizb ul-Tahrir members during university, read some of Mawdudi's tafsir literature, studied with Ahl-ul-Hadith scholars during university, and finally, I am currently studying with Sufis. Many of these episodes were phases, and coincidental, but they have left me with a non-committal approach to modern Islamic reform movements. In some sense, this makes me partly an outsider to Deobandi communities. Given what I discussed earlier, perhaps this renders me open to certain insights by virtue of critical distance, and equally unaware of insights that only a committed Deobandi could have. This is true, but I remind the reader that the link that I draw between the experience of I'tikāf and associations with Deobandis and Tablighi Jamaat is tentative.

Fourthly, I have also done I'tikāf twice before – as the Mufti with us observed, I had “been in the trenches before”. I am a seasoned Mu'takif, and so have some idea of what to expect.

There are of course other aspects to my identities. Some of these would surprisingly manifest during I'tikāf, such as my identity as a boxer. For our purposes, the above three contours provide a helpful insight into the next topic of methodological import: accessing the field. The Deobandi denomination is notoriously difficult to access for researchers, evidenced by Gilliat-Ray's (2006) wittily-named paper *Closed Worlds: (Not) Accessing Deobandi Dar ul-Uloom in Britain*. I had no such difficulty. I spoke with a relative who was close with the mosque committee. The mosque committee acted as a gatekeeper, and they happily agreed for me to conduct my research there. I interpret this as being a product of (1) my own trustworthiness in the eyes of the mosque committee, and (2) proximity of my relative to the inner sanctums of the mosque management. Alternatively, I cannot rule out that perhaps this mosque happened to be more open to the research being conducted than others.

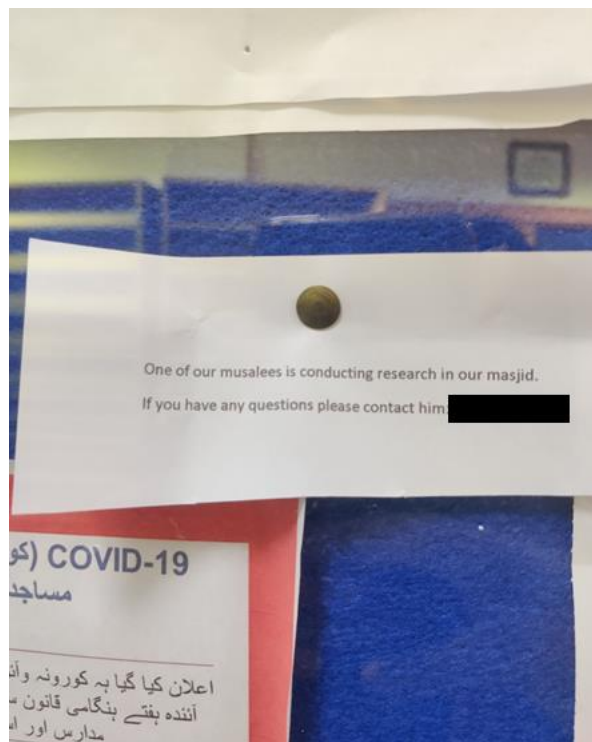
Ethics

To ensure that my research is ethical, I identified three groups of people that I would need to obtain consent from: (1) the Imam, (2) the mosque committee, (3) fellow I'tikāf participants, and (4) the wider mosque congregation. I intended to acquire signed consent from the mosque management committee to conduct the research onsite, as they are ‘gatekeepers’ of the mosque. I approached a

member of the committee who would be at the mosque for every prayer, and whom I had been on good terms with; he, after a short period of silence, swiftly approved my research. I provided a thorough description of the project via an Information Sheet to the first three groups; its purpose (for a MA dissertation); benefits/risks of taking part; withdrawal of consent; how data will be used, stored and processed; how confidentiality will be ensured. As discussed above, this did not present any challenges.

I also informed fellow I'tikāf participants, although they were not gatekeepers to the field. I did not know who my fellow participants would be until I'tikāf began, so I could not rely on the rapport that I had used to obtain access to the field. As such, on the first night of I'tikāf I gave participants an information sheet and a consent form, telling them to read the sheet and decide if they would like to continue. All 6 members provided consent. Some members struggled to understand what I was doing and what the project was about. Despite this, they still consented. The Mufti who was to join us for I'tikāf referenced my research in an approving way during one of the regular circles we would have after the Zuhr prayer, developing trust and openness with research participants.

Obtaining consent from the wider mosque congregation, who numbered in the 100s, was more complex. Since I would be present during all prayers, and I would inevitably observe other mosque congregants and converse with them on occasion, informing every single person that I spoke to, and requesting consent from them would of course be prohibitively impractical. Instead, I placed a notice on the mosque notice board with the consent of the committee:



I was particular in the wording and spelling of this note. Whenever the Imam makes an announcement about a regular mosque congregant, he refers to them as “one of our musalees”. I thus adopted the linguistic idiosyncrasies of my research site to lessen the obtrusiveness of my presence. I similarly did not use any diacritical marks on the word ‘musalee’, which correctly should be *muṣālī*. I did this because most of the mosque’s publications tend to only use a limited number of diacritical marks for transliterated words.

Note-taking

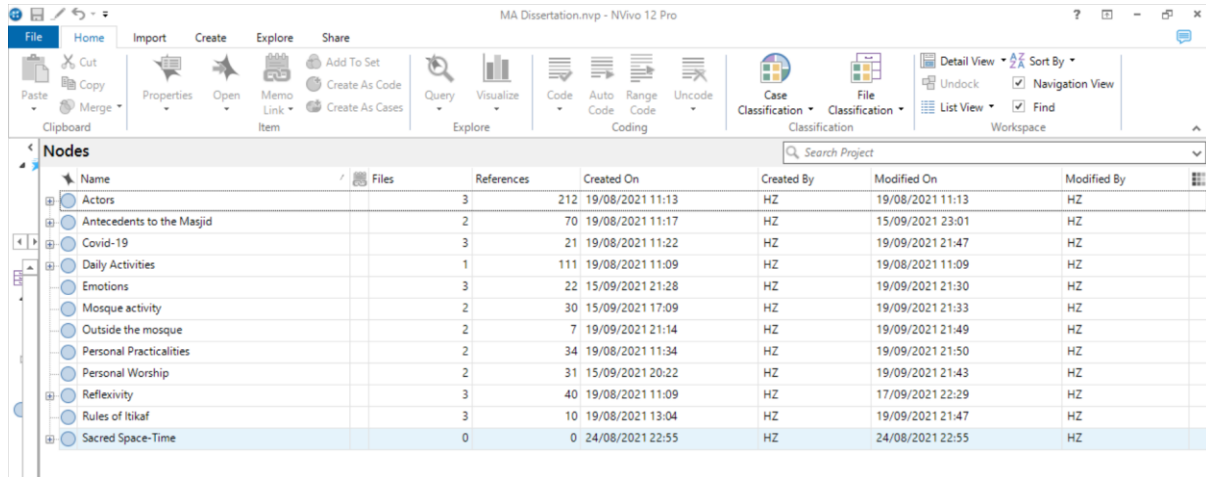
Obtrusiveness in the mosque space was something I was very conscious of. I did not want to disturb the sanctity of the mosque through my presence. Based upon this, I kept a small scratch notebook in my pocket throughout the day and night and wrote down my observations in note form, which, as far as I could tell, did not seem to be controversial. Then, once everybody had gone to sleep, I would type up my notes in full on my laptop in my personal cubicle:



As the days progressed, relationships deepened, and I eventually became comfortable taking notes outside of my cubicle in front of fellow I'tikāf participants, but still avoided using my laptop in front of other mosque congregants. Fellow I'tikāf participants would greet me, smile, and occasionally offer words of praise and encouragement. I found myself tiring considerably however, often being awake until 5:30am typing my notes. This eventually led to me missing out a type-up session and opting to sleep earlier due to physical exhaustion. On one occasion, the Mufti with us jokingly said that I'd been walking around like a zombie.

Data analysis

I produced 23,102 words in my field diary, and 2 formal interviews. After transcribing both, the total number of words produced as data is 33,624. I used 6 parent nodes with 32 child nodes on NVIVO.



The screenshot shows the NVivo 12 Pro interface with a list of nodes. The nodes are organized into a table with columns for Name, Files, References, Created On, Created By, Modified On, and Modified By. The nodes listed are: Actors, Antecedents to the Masjid, Covid-19, Daily Activities, Emotions, Mosque activity, Outside the mosque, Personal Practicalities, Personal Worship, Reflexivity, Rules of Itikaf, and Sacred Space-Time.

Name	Files	References	Created On	Created By	Modified On	Modified By
Actors		3	212 19/08/2021 11:13	HZ	19/08/2021 11:13	HZ
Antecedents to the Masjid		2	70 19/08/2021 11:17	HZ	15/09/2021 23:01	HZ
Covid-19		3	21 19/08/2021 11:22	HZ	19/09/2021 21:47	HZ
Daily Activities		1	111 19/08/2021 11:09	HZ	19/08/2021 11:09	HZ
Emotions		3	22 15/09/2021 21:28	HZ	19/09/2021 21:30	HZ
Mosque activity		2	30 15/09/2021 17:09	HZ	19/09/2021 21:33	HZ
Outside the mosque		2	7 19/09/2021 21:14	HZ	19/09/2021 21:49	HZ
Personal Practicalities		2	34 19/08/2021 11:34	HZ	19/09/2021 21:50	HZ
Personal Worship		2	31 15/09/2021 20:22	HZ	19/09/2021 21:43	HZ
Reflexivity		3	40 19/08/2021 11:09	HZ	17/09/2021 22:29	HZ
Rules of Itikaf		3	10 19/08/2021 13:04	HZ	19/09/2021 21:47	HZ
Sacred Space-Time		0	0 24/08/2021 22:55	HZ	24/08/2021 22:55	HZ

I coded all written data into a single coding file. The choice behind the nodes was informed by my prior experience of I'tikāf, and the theorisation of I'tikāf that I did before beginning the ritual. This informed an initial set of nodes, which I then added to when reading my diary two weeks after I'tikāf had ended. This approach does mean that I inflected previous experiences onto my analysis frame; in the absence of any prior studies on I'tikāf, this became the only feasible method.

The analysis outputted the nodes with the most references associated to them. I did not opt to structure this thesis around what topics were most referenced, because the nature of participant observation would naturally mean that I would be focussed around the “Actors” – hence that node has the most references. I instead structured my thesis around what seemed to me, and to other participants, to be the most spiritually evocative and characteristic features of I'tikāf. I was conscious that this is the first study on I'tikāf, so I want it to represent what I understand to be the key features of I'tikāf. There is of course an element of personal discretion here, but there is little that can be done in the absence of literature.

I have included a methodological appendix, which includes the information sheet, consent form, interview questions and participant profiles.

Findings Chapter 1 – Thick Description, *Fiqh* Description

For Geertz, “...man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (Geertz, 1973, 5). Understanding the nodes of meaning that spin these webs of significance is at the heart of Geertz’ project. In doing so, one realises an underlying substrate from which all social action emerges. That is to say: by placing close attention upon a particular, we can glimpse part of the universal that the particular is a manifestation of. In his famed study of Islam in Morocco, Geertz remarks: “the more I manage to follow what the Moroccans are up to, the more logical, and the more singular, they seem” (1973, 14). To move beyond a cursory description of the raw constituents of a culture or practice, thick description must thus be engaged in as an almost narrative-like endeavour that conveys meanings and significance in a way which breaches cultural particularities. I hope to provide such a description of I’tikāf in this thesis.

In order to provide a thick description, I must first provide a *fiqh* description of I’tikāf. *Fiqh* can be translated as Islamic Law; it is a codified output of an application of a Qur’ānically-derived hermeneutical and epistemological structure to provide a precise, legal account of the ritual acts of worship and their necessary constituent elements. For example, in order for wuḍū’ (ablution) to be considered legally valid in the Hanafi school of jurisprudence,¹ one must wash, at a minimum, their hands, face, wipe at least a quarter of their head with water, and wash their feet. Similarly then, I’tikāf has constituent parts and conditions that must be met in order for the ritual to be legally valid. Anything less than these necessary actions would render this action legally invalid.

The notion of legal (in)validity may initially seem irrelevant to a sociological or anthropological description; irrespective of whether the legal conditions of a ritual are fulfilled, the ritual is still conducted by individuals, and this bears some significance to them. I could thus proceed with an explanation of I’tikāf with no mention of its legal requirements. However, as I would discover during my fieldwork, legal texts form a structure that affects the attendees of the mosque, who are, in this case, agents. This is of course an application of Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory, in which social systems are built by structures and agents.

The form that Islamic Law could take as a structure could include a reconstituted understanding of a text, or a literal adherence to it, or a liberal understanding of it. In all cases, the activity of the mosque is still constructed in reference to a legal tradition, thus forming a structure. Understanding this legal tradition thus becomes an important reference point for understanding the activity of the agents therein, and consequently the entire social system of the mosque. As we will see in my description of I’tikāf, which can be read in full in the appendix, understanding the legal conditions of the practice (structure) determined my very footsteps (agent) inside the mosque (social system); I choose to be bound by the legal conditions of I’tikāf, because I believe it to be connected to my salvation.

Thus, a brief account of the legal conditions of I’tikāf is in order. Upon entering the mosque with my bags for I’tikāf, a briefing was held with the Imam, wherein he provided us with a sheet documenting the rules of I’tikāf.

¹ One of four legal schools that broadly constitute the Sunni legal tradition.

Basic rules of Sunnah I'tiqaaf

- I'tiqaaf should be done at a Masjid where five times congregational Salah takes place.
- Intention of I'tiqaaf is compulsory.
- Fasting is also essential for this I'tiqaaf.
- A tent is preferable for the mu'taqif not **compulsory**.
- It is permissible for the Mu'taqif to go out of the Masjid area to do wudhu even if the wudhu is for the purpose of tilawat, however it is not permissible for him to go out just for the sake of washing the hands, brushing the teeth or blowing the nose.
- If there is a queue in the toilet area, then it is permissible for him to wait in the queue.
- If there is no one to bring the food then it is permissible for him to go out and bring the food, however he will eat it in the Masjid.
- Apart from the obligatory ghusl, the Mu'taqif cannot go out for any optional ghusl (bath).
- If the Mu'taqif is unemployed and is dependent on benefits (*he cannot live without it*) then he may go to 'sign on' but he must come straight back. To be on the safe side he should do qadha of that one day after Ramadhan. If he is not dependent on benefits (*he has enough savings to fulfil his needs*) then he cannot go, if he goes he will be sinful and his I'tiqaaf will break. (Fataawa Rahimiya V5 PG212).
- To go out specifically to smoke will render the I'tiqaaf invalid, however if he in difficulty and feels his health will suffer then it is permissible for him. One should see this as an ideal opportunity to give up this very bad habit viewed by some scholars as Haraam.
- It is makrooh e tahrimi for the Mu'taqif to engage in worldly affairs e.g. business dealings etc.
- When going for wudhu take your own towel, so you can dry yourself whilst returning. Remaining in the wudhu area just for drying yourself will render your I'tiqaaf invalid.
- To remain quiet thinking it as an act of virtue is makrooh
- Don't argue, fight or engage in any unnecessary or immoral conversation.
- When going out of the Masjid area to do wudhu etc, it is permissible to talk whilst walking, but **DON'T** stand there (outside the Masjid area) to talk.
- During I'tiqaaf engage in as much Ibadat (tilawat, zikr, durood etc.) as possible. Study good authentic books, if you don't understand anything approach only a qualified scholar.
- Perform your Ishraq, Chast, Awwabeen, Tahiyatul Wudhu, and Tahiyatul Masjid and Tahajjud salahs.
- Take utmost care in not disturbing your fellow Mu'taqifeen either with your tongue or your actions.
- A Mu'taqif may change his clothes or apply Itr .
- At no time must the Mu'taqif leave the Masjid area without a valid reason accepted by the Shariah. If he does his I'tiqaaf will be broken.
- If the Masjid consist of many floors it is permissible to do I'tiqaaf on any floor. If the stairs of the Masjid are outside the Masjid area and one has to have access to the other floors then at the time of sitting in I'tiqaaf, when he makes the intention of I'tiqaaf, he must also make the intention, that I will be using these stairs to access these floors, this will make it permissible for him to access any floor. (Shaami)

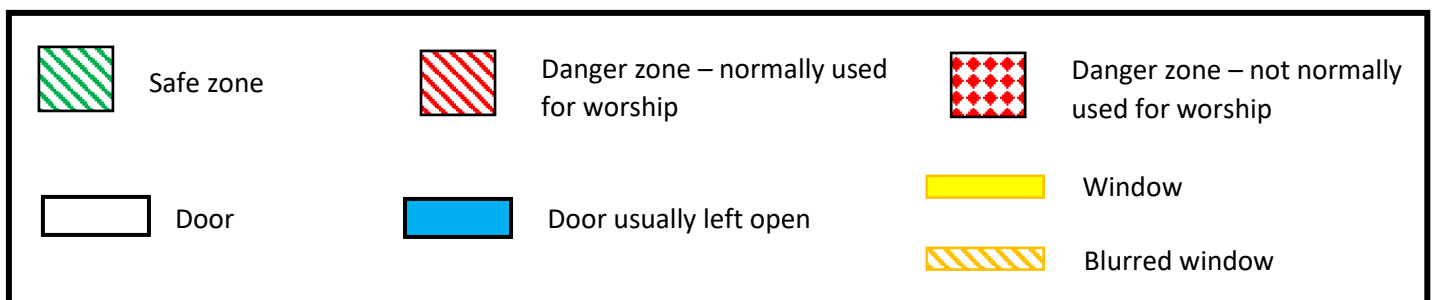
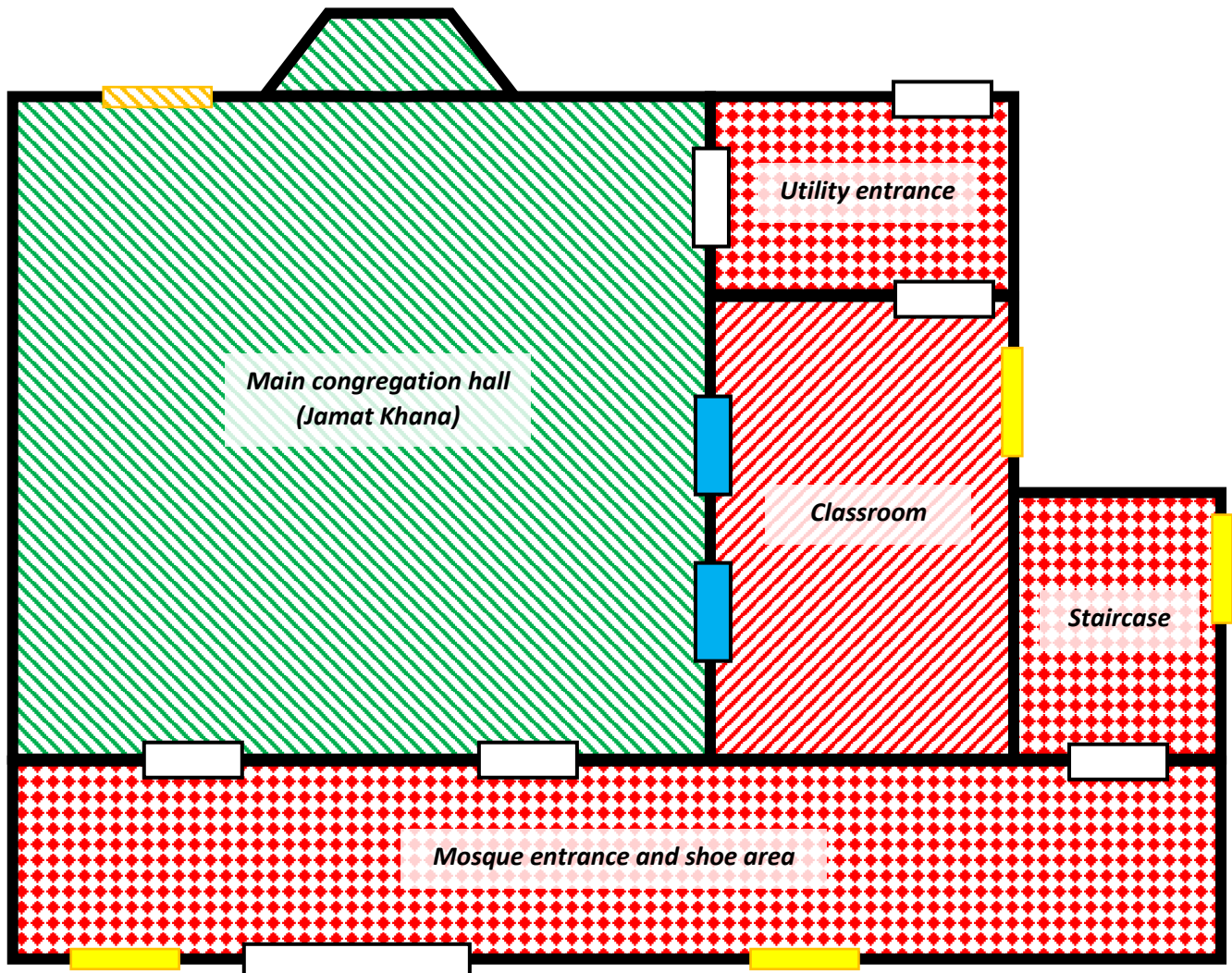
Translated by Imam [REDACTED] from the book Masaail e I'tiqaaf by Movlana Rafa'at Ali Qasmi.
Note: These are very basic and brief rules of I'tiqaaf. For more details, refer to authentic books of qualified scholars. Mufti Taqi Uthmani has compiled a book on I'tiqaaf.

The sheet consists of 21 bullet-pointed rules translated by the Imam from an Urdu book named *Masaail a I'tiqaaf* [sic], authored by Movlana Rafa'at Ali Qasimi [sic]. Taken as a whole, these rules constitute the "routinisation" part of the cycle of structuration. What this means is that these rules regulate and categorise activities (Giddens, 1984). The behaviours and interactions of the mu'takifs are thus conditioned by them.

11 of these rules are concerned with where one is and is not able to go within the mosque during I'tikāf. The first rule clarifies the broad space in which I'tikāf takes place; "I'tiqaaf² should be done at a Masjid where five times congregational Salah takes place". So, one must remain within the mosque for a duration of 10 days. Even within the mosque, one is expected to remain in the areas designated for congregational prayers. That means that the shoe area of the mosque, the additional side rooms, and even the toilets and areas where ablution is performed, are not to be entered, except when there is some necessity to do so i.e. using the toilet, or making ablution for prayer. The rule sheet specifies that even "remaining in the wuḍū' area just for drying yourself will render your I'tiqaaf invalid", conveying the strictness in remaining within the designated zones.

Below is a diagram of the ground floor of the mosque (which spans three floors in total), denoting the various 'Safe Zones' in the mosque, where one is expected to reside, as well as the 'Dafe Zones', where I am in danger of rendering my I'tikāf invalid. The ground floor was the main space for worship, the 1st floor where we would sleep, and the basement where we would eat, though all three floors could be used for worship.

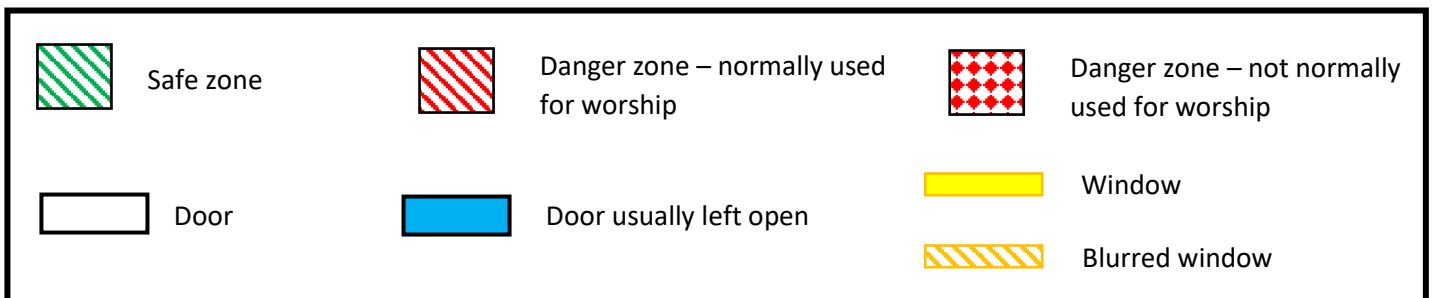
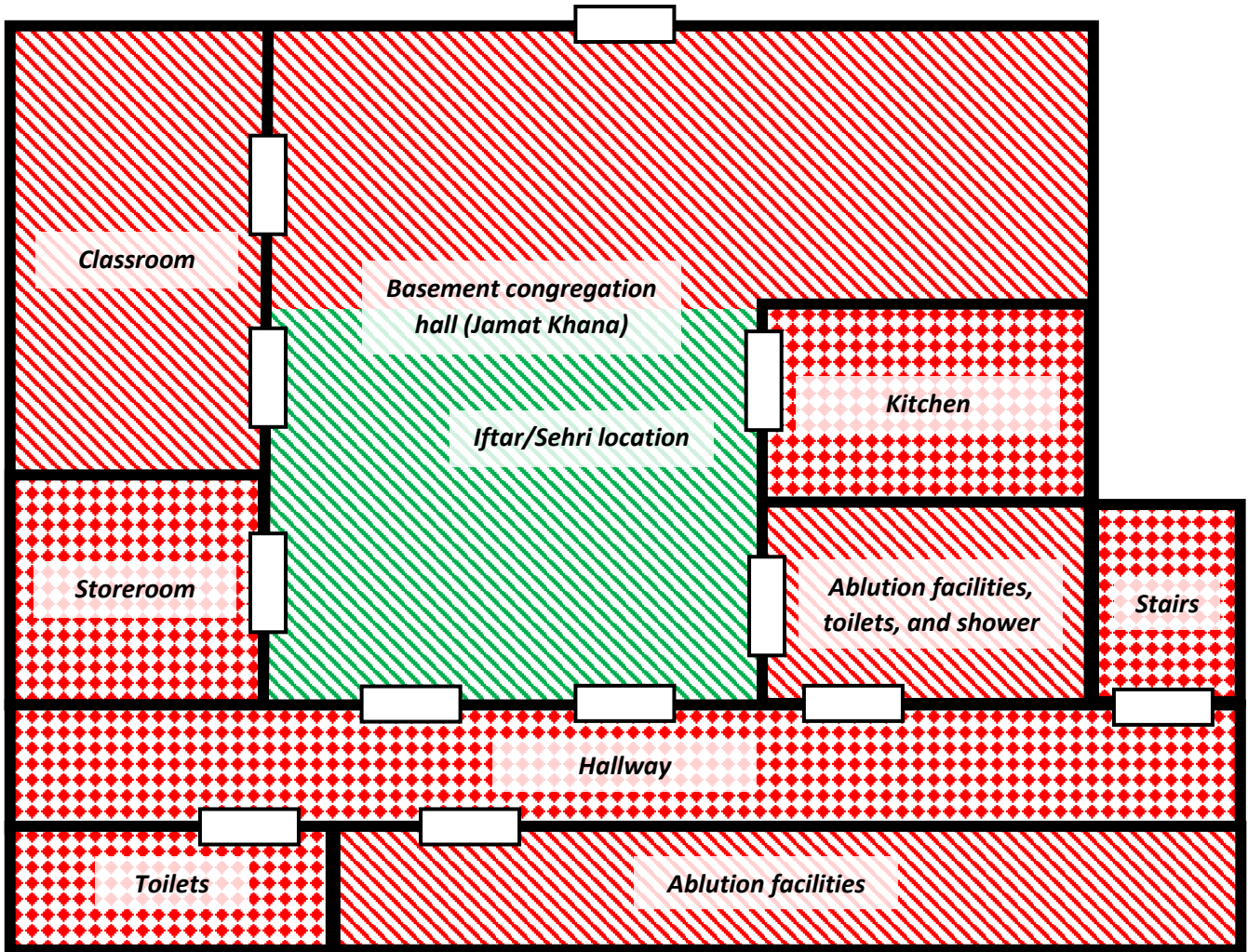
² This is an Urdu transliteration of 'Itikāf



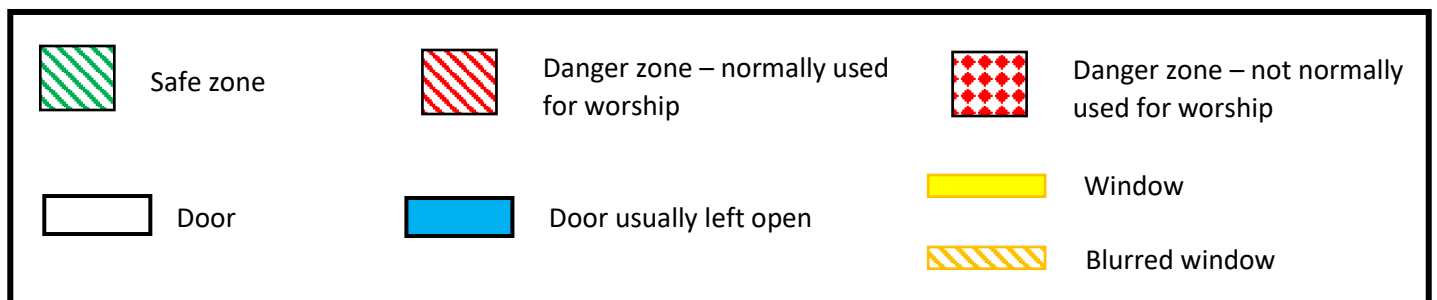
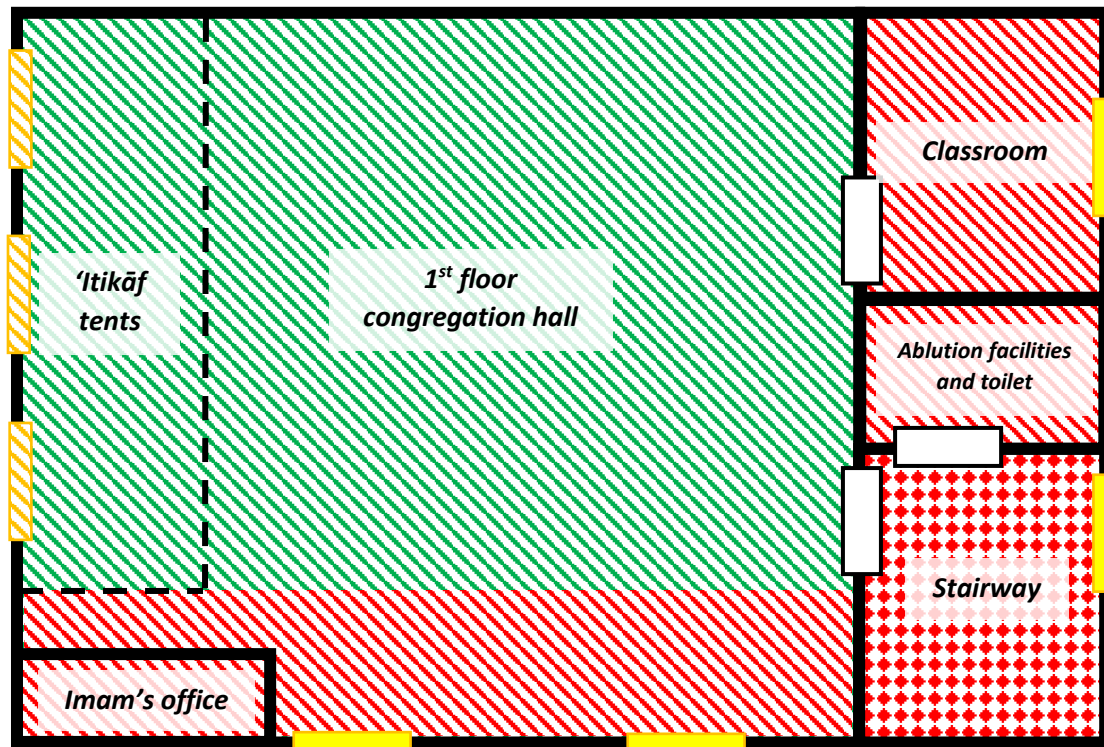
Anything that is not green can only be used as an area of transit or for some necessity. The doors connecting the main congregation hall are usually left open, and after the congregational prayers, worshippers very often continue to perform extra prayers or other acts of worship there. In a previous year when I did I'tikāf, two out of seven of us who had been partaking in the practice had invalidated their I'tikāf by strolling there by mistake. This demands a degree of vigilance.

The basement where we would descend to eat presents additional complications. Within the same hall, there is a “Dafe Zone” which begins part of the way through the hall. When a mosque is built, there is a physical barrier that it adheres to. A shar’i barrier (a non-physical barrier demarcated to

specify the space of the mosque within Shariah Law) must also be determined by the Imam; this barrier denotes the main prayer areas of the mosque. In the basement, this was designated to be part of the way through the hall. What this means in practice is that I could be walking in the basement, and could exit the “Safe Zone” with no physical barrier to remind me otherwise, rendering my I’tikāf invalid. In recognition of this risk, the mosque installed a curtain along the boundary line, which is usually pushed to one side. In a previous I’tikāf, two people similarly nullified their I’tikāf by – again – casually strolling into the Dafe Zone. The place that we was designated for us to eat had been quite close to this invisible barrier, inspiring various comments of caution for those sat too close to the invisible barrier.



The 1st floor, where we would sleep, had a similar challenge which demanded vigilance. Our makeshift tents had been on this floor, and similarly, an invisible barrier had been present. We would sometimes demarcate that barrier with benches. When I first entered the mosque for I'tikāf, but had not yet begun I'tikāf, I hung my hoodie in the Dafe Zone at the back of the prayer hall. Once I began I'tikāf, I had not been able to retrieve it until I asked somebody to get it for me.



Rather glumly, no Safe Zone had a window that was not blurred. We received light but were never simply able to gaze at the sky, something that I came to miss.

The spatial demands of I'tikāf thus entail confining oneself to not only the physical edifice of the mosque, but also specific spaces within each room of the mosque. This adds a great degree of vigilance and intentionality to merely being within I'tikāf; I willingly confined myself to a limited space, realising my agency within the structure of Islamic Law.

These spatial demands are perhaps the most notable and significant feature of I'tikāf. Within these spaces, there is a broad encouragement that one should be engaged in worship throughout the 10-day duration: “During I'tiqaaf engage in as much Ibadat (tilawat, zikr, durood etc.) as possible. Study

good authentic books, if you don't understand anything approach only a qualified scholar." Ibadat here refers to worship in its broadest sense, inclusive of daily prayers, recitation of the Qur'ān (tilawat), remembrance and meditative ponderance of God (zikr), sending peace upon the Prophet Muhammad (durood). Importantly, Ibadat includes seeking Islamic knowledge. Although this is not immediately apparent from the wording alone, within the context of I'tikāf and the mosque, a Muslim would immediately understand that this refers to books about Islam. The qualification of "authentic" is important here; it constricts the understanding of what constitutes books of Islam to some assumed understanding of authenticity. In my own understanding, I might read *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky to understand some of the darker elements of human nature with more precision. In my mind, this constitutes Islamic knowledge because the subject matter is the human condition. Here, it would seem that such a broad interpretation would not be within what is regarded as being authentic. We can also note here that I'tikāf as a structure contains a degree of flexibility, expanding the scope of agency experienced within.

The spatial demands of I'tikāf invoke certain practical challenges. Since the showers are outside of the Safe Zone, one cannot shower for any reason other than what is legislated by Islamic Law; this reason is almost always that of having a nocturnal emission, which would obligate the ritual cleansing bath (*ghusl*). This of course is outside of one's discretion, so it is entirely possible for somebody to not bathe for the entire 10 days. There is some slight consolation here: one is allowed to change their clothing and wear perfume.

There is also an encouragement to perform additional, supererogatory prayers: "Perform your Ishraq [performed around 20 mins after sunrise], Chast [performed any time after sunrise until meridian], Awwabeen [prayed between Maghrib (sunset prayer) and 'Ishā' (early night prayer)], Tahiytul Wuḍū' [prayed after completing ablution], Tahiytul Masjid [prayed upon entering the mosque], and Tahajjud [prayed in the final third of the night] salahs". These are optional prayers beyond the five daily prayers for those seeking greater devotion, both inside and outside of Ramadan. They are not necessary to perform in I'tikāf, but are encouraged because I'tikāf stresses growing closer to God. These prayers are not necessary to perform outside of I'tikāf, nor are they necessary to perform within I'tikāf. In combination with the five daily prayers, one would offer over 10 prayers a day, in addition to other methods of worship discussed earlier. The overall expectation of I'tikāf, then, is to engage in as much worship as possible, throughout the 10 days.

The spiritual rigour of these 10 days does not include taking an oath of silence; this is explicitly prohibited if it is done so thinking it is a virtuous deed. But the tongue is to be held; it is "makrooh e tahrimi" to engage in "worldly affairs e.g. business dealings". "Makrooh e tahrimi" is a legal classification in Islamic Law which can be translated as 'prohibitively disliked' [actions]. Practically, Muslims are forbidden from doing such actions, but the legal evidence behind them is slightly more uncertain, so they are not labelled as being *harām*. The social consequences that emerge from communication are similarly discussed: "Don't argue, fight or engage in unnecessary conversation"; "take utmost care in not disturbing your fellow Mu'tiqifeen [Arabic word for those in performing I'tikāf] with your tongue or your actions".

The rules (or structure) of I'tikāf paint a challenging ritual, characterised by a state of mindfulness and vigilance which reverberates throughout one's entire day, interactions with others, physical state, and even one's very footsteps. What was my experience of being an agent within this elaborate and seemingly arduous ritual? An extensive, in-depth account of an average day is available to read in the appendices. I present alongside this two additional episodes from I'tikāf: completing the Qur'ān, and

leaving the mosque. I recommend reading these accounts before proceeding to read the remainder of this thesis.

Findings Chapter 2 – Identities, Vulnerability, and the Night of Power

Bowen's (1954) *Return to Laughter*, though a fictional work, presents an interesting exploration of the positioning of a researcher. Bowen had distinctly placed himself as an outsider field worker among "primitive" people, construing the ethnographer as distant from the field. In engaging in an auto-ethnography as a Muslim, my project is both similar and dissimilar to Bowen. *Similar*, in that we both encountered tensions emanating from the self and our fields. And *dissimilar*, in that, a. my work is not fictitious, and b. since Bowen had seen himself as being distinct from the populace of his field, whereas I am, in some ways and not in others, an *insider* to my field. In this chapter I describe how my identities as a Muslim and a researcher clashed in the ultra-exclusive context of the Night of Power using excerpts from my field diary. My experience on these Nights shows the value of auto-ethnography in conveying the concept of the "Vulnerable Researcher" (Behar, 1996) who is changed by the field. In doing so, this chapter substantively answers my third research question: how do individuals *change* during I'tikāf?

Vulnerability as a mediator of identity conflict in a researcher

A point of tension that is specifically encountered by Muslim researchers when investigating or participating in worship is that of *niyyah*. In one particularly famous hadith, the Prophet Muhammed remarked that "Indeed actions are by intention". That is to say, the acceptance of actions by God depends upon the purity of one's intention as being for the pleasure of God. The question that I thus tussled with was that 'I am doing I'tikāf because I want to engage in the worship of God, or because I am seeking to complete my dissertation?' In engaging with this question, I observed how I was vulnerable to my field of research, because of how it changed me. I frame these changes that I encountered through Behar's (1996) *The Vulnerable Researcher* in which the author makes a compelling case for identification as being the terms of relations between the researcher and the field, rather than difference. Through this identification, the researcher becomes vulnerable to the field. Although Behar's (1996) use of vulnerability was in reference to weaknesses and dependencies, I extrapolate vulnerability to mean susceptibility to change; negative change can occur as well as positive change.

As I was to find, reconciling my activities as a researcher into a substrate of religiosity was not a single moment, but was rather a series of moments in which my susceptibility to change (or vulnerability) was instigated by the spiritual magnanimity of sacred times and places that I occupied. Prior to entering into I'tikāf, I recorded an entry in my field notes which conveyed a sense of uncertainty regarding my conceptions of a pure intention:

"I've been thinking a lot about my intentions going in. Am I doing this for the sake of Allāh, or is this an easy way to get my dissertation done? This has been bothering me a lot. I am trying to feel excited, trying to feel pure, but there is something niggling away at me; whispers of my heart telling me that I am actually on here for my Master's, and not for Allāh.

And that scares me. I'm not sure what it means to have a good intention. How should that feel? What should the echoes of my heart sound like?"

I attempted to reconcile my feelings of uncertainty:

"I think I will try to read some spiritual literature to enthuse myself with the virtues of I'tikāf; the last nights, in which dwells the Night of Power. Is it not a guarantee to land on that night, to pray on the night that is better than 1000 months? To fulfil a communal obligation – to be a steward of the community, warding away harms of all kinds by offering my ten days? To spend day and night in Allāh's house, a domain of angels, and the remembrance of Allāh?"

My diary entry became a means of communication between my intentions, and this communication proved fruitful, at least initially. As I moved closer to engaging in the ritual, and thereby becoming party to its spiritual-emotional content, I became increasingly excited. In turn, I became more comfortable with my identity as a researcher:

"...my concerns at being a researcher dissolve swiftly; I become excited about the spiritual adventure that awaits, and the magnanimity of the days and nights of Ramadan that await me."

It seemed that my vulnerability to change changed proportionately to the scale of sacredness of a given moment. My vulnerability accordingly peaked on the Night of Power, in which my two identities as Muslim and researcher came into direct conflict with one another, in a way which forced an outcome to this tension. After every Tarāwih prayer would conclude, the other Mutakifs and Mufti Saab would assemble upstairs for an informal, light-hearted conversation. This even happened on the odd nights, meaning it could possibly have been the Night of Power. This daily (or nightly) gathering was a fruitful research opportunity, as I had not documented these conversations. But equally, it could be the Night of Power. I was thus faced with a choice:

"I am the only one down here. I wonder, should I be up there with them? I can observe their night behaviour, which I haven't done yet."

The time-bound nature of the Night of Power means that engaging in research activity here has a direct opportunity cost of missing out on the spiritual benefits of an especially magnanimous night. I realised that this was quite a unique opportunity to observe which of my two identities would dominate the other:

"In a time-constrained environment, a conflict is established between research and prayer; although this can be reconciled in a non-time-bound environment, such as general mosque observation, here the two are pitted against one another."

Ordinarily, I had no problem in being a Muslim and a researcher. But conducting an auto-ethnography during the Night of Power brought these two identities into direct conflict. The sanctity of the Night meant that the Muslim part of my identity had been especially vulnerable, resulting in a distinct decision to continue worshipping:

"I consciously decide not to, because it might be the Night of Power! I want to recite the Qur'ān and use every second of what might shape my fate for the rest of eternity. Research becomes less important to me here."

This particular decision took place on the 23rd night. At this point, I had been in I'tikāf for over 2 days. These 2 days of worship and spiritual cultivation had an impact on me, inclining me more towards worship:

“This is a change in me that I have witnessed: I was more attuned to research on entering I’tikāf, but now I am taking fewer scratch notes. Almost none during the night. I would rather pray.”

Here we see the distinct change that being in the field brought about in me. A conflict that I had been conscious of even when first conceiving of my research had now been resolved. As Behar (1996, p27) puts it, we can see the “role of witnessing in our time as a key form of approaching and transforming reality”. Perhaps another researcher’s witnessing of their self may have been different, but importantly, witnessing – or more broadly, *auto-ethnography* – demonstrates its value as a means to understanding the vulnerability of the researcher. We can extend this further to understand the potency of the field: the Night of Power had been a sufficiently powerful process so as to invoke transformation in myself. We also see here an indicator of I’tikāf possessing an element of Turner’s (1969) idea of liminality, which I will discuss in the following chapter.

Given the patterned nature of the potential occurrence of the Night of Power, this confrontation repeated itself later on:

“I again start reciting Qur’ān, intensely. I feel the same tension – do I go upstairs? Well, I could, but it is the night of Juma [Friday], and the last Juma of Ramadan! I decide not to make this trade-off again. This is a very unique situation because it epitomises the conflict between being a Muslim and a researcher. In my head, I regard my prayer on these nights as possibly determining my salvation in the hereafter. When this is compared against my researcher identity, I pick the former. This is not an expected or typical position for a Muslim researcher to be in, mind you.”

As I had remarked in my diary entry, this is not a typical position for a Muslim researcher to be in. It is worth discussing the uniqueness of this situation because of the unusual amount of vulnerability I encountered therein. As we saw in the literature review, sacred time is inherently patterned in Islam (Katz, 2007), with clear ebbs and flows, ushering in comparatively denser spiritual moments. In this schema, Ramadan becomes a delicacy, occupying one month in a year i.e. 1/12th of time for Muslims in sanctified through the presence of Ramadan. The *nights* of Ramadan collectively occur 1/24th of the time. The last ten days of Ramadan, i.e. the period of I’tikāf, occurs 10/356 of the time (or 5/178). The odd nights of Ramadan reduce this even further, to 5/356, that is 0.014% of all time. This 0.014%, a sliver of potent sacred time, is available to all Muslims – Muslims in any spatial setting can theoretically access and benefit from the sanctity of these nights. I have encountered this 0.014% in the exclusive and selected space of the mosque during I’tikāf. This confluence of space and time thus becomes a remarkably exclusive phenomenon. Through Behar’s (1996) concept of vulnerability, it would seem that the exclusivity of my field led to a proportionately intense bout of vulnerability, enabling a resolution to a longstanding conflict in identity.

Auto-ethnography is an effective tool to capture this. Innes (2009) discusses the advantages of insider-research in how an insider can bring a broader context to understanding social behaviour. As Innes (2009) correctly observes, some amount of distance from the field can have merit, but there are also different nodes of data that can be extracted by virtue of one’s insider status. In a similar vein, we can see above that my status as an insider to the ontological substrate of I’tikāf has provided access to the “moods and motivations” (Geertz, 1965) of worshipping on the Night of Power, which created additional vulnerability in me as a researcher.

Innes (2009), however, is more concerned with research participants. In the case of an auto-ethnography, *I* am the participant. Fitzgerald’s (2014) study documenting his experience being

stopped and questioned at Heathrow Airport for possessing academic books on terrorism demonstrates how the methodology of auto-ethnography, which is necessarily insider research, can provide an insight into unique feelings and emotions, such as “bizarreness”. In my case, the feelings and emotions were an existential reverence. The continuous mental bouts that I experienced when being faced with opportunities to pray on the Night(s) of Power here highlights the value of auto-ethnography in capturing not only a deeply personal experience, but also the fluctuations of such experiences. Thus, what I observed in the field is my own vulnerability as a researcher, which led to a decisive outcome to the confrontation between my identities. My auto-ethnographic diary provided a powerful insight into the vulnerabilities, or susceptibility to change, that I had encountered through the prism of the self.

Concluding Summary

In this chapter, I have presented the confrontation between my identities as a Muslim and a researcher through the prism of Behar’s (1996) vulnerability, which oscillates in accordance to the inherently patterned nature of time in Islam (Katz, 2007), culminating in my desire to pray overcoming my desire to research. The act of “witnessing”, or auto-ethnography, thus demonstrates itself as a powerful tool to document the vulnerability of the researcher. Simultaneously, the Night of Power emerges as a spiritual phenomenon with a degree of exclusivity that engenders an especially high amount of vulnerability.

Findings Chapter 3 – Themes in I'tikāf

In this chapter, I reflect on various themes that emerge through a combined reflection of my auto-ethnographic experience and my supplementary methods. I use a variety of theoretical frames including Geertzian symbols to explore I'tikāf as a refuge from worldly existence, and specific ritual acts as markers of a transnational Muslim identity. I also use Turner's (1969) liminality to discuss the transformative potential of I'tikāf. The data that emerges from interviews and participant observation provides an interesting reference point to my own experiences. Although I regard auto-ethnography as robust in and of itself, using supplementary methods provides an additional degree of methodological robustness.

Seeking refuge from the world

I have once again relied on Geertz's concepts for two reasons: (1) to create a degree of consistency with utilising thick description and: (2) symbols are an effective way of distilling several concentric layers of significance into a discrete and defined object.

An important part of my own experience of I'tikāf was feeling relieved at being away from the world, and all of its turmoil. This was to the extent that the first night after I'tikāf had finished was stressful and overwhelming as I reacquainted myself with life's various challenges, including, most notably, the violence in Jerusalem that had broken out during the last ten days of Ramadan³, which had galvanised British Muslim communities into donating to victims and protesting.

This had been a recurring theme in all field interviews and emerged during informal conversation as well. Expression of this sentiment occurred in two forms. The first was in response to a question that I would ask during the formal interview. When I asked a participant, Funny, if he found I'tikāf to be a break, he enthusiastically replied:

“Yeah! Cannot be a better break. It's better than any seven-star holiday, that's all I want to say.”

Another participant, whom I named Shower because of his happiness at when he *had* to take a shower (i.e. he had to do ghusl), similarly expressed the idea of I'tikāf being a break, but phrased it less as a holiday, and more as needing to leave the world:

“Balancing marriage life and family life. And it was just like it was getting a bit too much. Yeah. So that was another reason for me to come to the I'tikāf . I wouldn't have come here. Yeah. It's like shielded me from all the worldly issues. Yeah. For example, I don't go on my phone as much at all. Yeah, I'm not on it that much. I haven't logged on to my banking once. I've not been logged on to my cryptos or anything once. I'm not following none of that news. It's shielded me from a lot from worldly issues. And I mean, be at peace.”

The mention of a phone is poignant here. My own practice had been to switch off my phone, and to use it for nothing else other than a Qur'an app. Similarly, for this participant, his phone was a node of connection to the outside world. The phone seemed to be a symbol of worldly existence, containing within a forceful reminder of finances and banking. Similarly, Shower had stopped using social media

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-57044000>

during I'tikāf, which he would otherwise access via his phone. However, the worldly existence symbolised in the phone was not entirely to be shunned. I had used my phone for reciting the Qur'ān. I had observed others use it to listen to recitation of the Qur'ān. Mufti Saab seemed to always have his phone with him to deal with an ongoing stream of questions and projects. The phone, then, becomes a symbol of worldly existence which can importantly be harnessed for good. In this sense, the Mufti's continual use of the phone even in I'tikāf represented his higher spiritual aptitude, being able to straddle both his worldly and spiritual lives. This interestingly meshes with Islam's view of the worldly existence – a material domain which can be harnessed for good. In the specific context of Modernity, the symbol of the phone in I'tikāf bears resemblance to Julius Evola's (2003) advice to 'ride the tiger' of Modernity to achieve spiritual fruition. The tiger is not to be killed. Much like *The Life of Pi*, this tiger is part of the ride. The phone, then, with its raw power, is to be harnessed for good.

The symbol of the phone as worldly existence necessarily creates a counterpart: spiritual existence. Much of the Qur'ān's dialogue presents the worldly existence against the ideal of a spiritual existence; the two often come paired together. Then, which symbol came to represent spiritual existence? From informal conversation, it seemed that I'tikāf as a whole was the symbol of spiritual existence. During one informal conversation, Mufti Saab opened up to me, providing a deep, heartfelt account of the recent death of his aunt. With a glimmer of a tear in his eye, he explained how his aunt fell very ill after a Covid-19 jab. Following extensive scans, stage 4 cancer was detected, and she was given 8 to 10 months left to live. She died 2 weeks later. He explained that his aunt began to say that her parents were inviting her to them soon before she passed. Mufti Saab said that he was no stranger to death, but that he had never experienced anything quite like this. He then said that I'tikāf was a welcome break from this morbidity and from his generally crammed life. He said in particular that he wanted to be in a state of murāqabah (spiritual watchfulness over the self), and to take time to think through important decisions that lay ahead for him. In the Mufti's conception, then, I'tikāf was the counterpoint to the worldly existence. The emergence of this theme in informal conversation, without any prompt, adds a degree of significance in that it is sufficiently important to arise in a conversation without prior mention or a prompt.

The common theme amongst all of these interviewees and conversations is a clear demarcation between the worldly life and its toils, with whatever was to be found in I'tikāf. Some expressed it as a holiday, others said peace, and the Mufti referred to it as a chance to practice self-awareness. Broadly speaking, then, we can see a categorisation of existence, an ontology perhaps, that existed in the minds of the Mu'takifs. There is the world, the dunyā as it may be called in Arabic, symbolised in the phone, and then there is some spiritual refuge, symbolised in I'tikāf. Considering the varying modes of worship engaged by different Mu'takifs, there were various locutions to what this refuge consists of. It seems then that I'tikāf is shaped and occurs vis-à-vis the worldly life that the Mu'takif inhabits. What happened outside of the space of the mosque seems to determine the approach that Mu'takifs take. Thus, the symbol of the phone as the worldly existence is dynamically formed vis-à-vis the Mu'takif's personal challenges. Taking this symbology one step further, specific apps on the phone may come to represent corresponding challenges, such as banking apps with financial problems, or social media with an overflow of information. Similarly, the symbol of I'tikāf as spiritual existence also contains a degree of flexibility in terms of the modes of worship that can be engaged in.

Perhaps this can be generalised to a consideration of the function of I'tikāf. The participants of the sacred space bring their experiences with them, and this crafts the content and emotional character of the space for them. For some, it is to pause after grieving, and for others to take a break from family life. What the sacred space and time of I'tikāf then functions to do is to extract the meta-theme of

suffering in the worldly life out of these individualised instances. This meta-theme becomes a cognitive frame in which all of the challenges that an individual faces can be construed as being part of, irrespective of whether those challenges are death, family life or current affairs. This came to be symbolised in the phone. I'tikāf is then the counter-symbol to this cognitive frame, itself being a cognitive frame in which a restorative ritual can be undertaken that is distinctly not part of the suffering of the world. Worldly suffering and I'tikāf become two sides of the same coin, conceived as being mutually exclusive. The respective symbols of these domains thus crystallise motivations for wanting to engage in I'tikāf.

Ritual as a symbol of transnational Muslim identity

During Fajr congregational prayer, the Imam initiated an additional supplication called the Qunūt al-Nāzila, which is performed in times of difficulties and calamities. Up until this point, I had only heard whispers of some mishappening in Jerusalem. When I heard the Qunūt begin, I realised that whatever had happened was serious. The association of this ritual with international happenings and wider calamities was sufficiently well-established in my mind such that I correctly realised what was happening. This demonstrates the symbolic value of the Qunūt. It consists of an additional supplication, but it is connected to a wider web of meaning.

There are several threads to this web. The first is some association with the broader concept of the Ummah – that global fraternity of Muslims united by their common religion. The notion of the Ummah is an important feature of British Muslim identity, in which the local is connected to the global (Gilliat-Ray, 2010, p168). I later saw Mufti Saab watching a video of unrest in Jerusalem on his phone, demonstrating that the “virtual Ummah” (Al-Rawi, 2015) was in operation. By virtue of this Ummatic identity, whether virtual or otherwise, the physically distant happenings in Jerusalem became emotionally and spiritually near, manifest through the Qunūt. This one mosque on the British Isles, 1,000s of miles away from Jerusalem, now features rows of men standing and praying because of this transnational association. Accordingly, then, the Qunūt symbolises the association of my field site to a global fraternity.

The second thread to this web is a perception of besiegement. As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons for the Qunūt taking place is the occurrence of some kind of calamity. The violence in Jerusalem claimed dozens of lives. There is some element of interpretation here as to whether the violence constituted a sufficient calamity as to warrant the Qunūt. The occurrence of the Qunūt suggests that the Imam regarded the violence to constitute a calamitous happening. This is not to say that the violence was not a calamity: the point here is that there was some act of interpreting a current-day happening against the criteria for performing the Qunūt.

Considering the reasons behind this interpretation unveils the third thread here: a connection to a tradition. Jerusalem has an important symbolic role in Islam, being the place from where the Prophet Muhammad ascended to the heavens on the Night Journey, and as a container of a lineage of Abrahamic prophets (Abdullah in Abbas, 2007, p119). This memory forms a part of what Asad (1985) calls a discursive tradition, which conceptually relates a past to the future through a present act. Accordingly, the status of Jerusalem is this past, which, through the present action of the Qunūt, achieves the future goal of salvation. When the Imam made a supplication out loud on the climatic event of the completion of the Qur'ān, he sobbed, saying that he was afraid that all of the afflictions

befalling Muslims were a consequence of his own sinfulness. The violence in Jerusalem is thus connected to salvific role. We can see how the two-minute long Qunūt comes to symbolise an association with a past history that is connected to the future objective of salvation.

In summary, the Qunūt symbolises an association with the Ummah, and a perception of besiegement, which is connected to the discursive tradition that emphasises the status of Jerusalem. I should mention here that this theme does not tidily answer one of my research questions but it does tell us something of the emotional character of I'tikāf. My decision to include this theme in the findings chapter is an appreciation of the serendipity that the field can bring. I of course had no idea that the field would present an opportunity to observe and participate in a response to the unrest in Jerusalem, but events transpired in a manner which created this opportunity.

I'tikāf as a transformative ritual

An important theme in my experience of I'tikāf was how it became a space in which the tension(s) between my identities as Muslim and researcher came into communion, eventually dissolving in the potent cocktail of sacred space and time manifested in the Night(s) of Power. I'tikāf was a ritual which vivified my spiritual commitment. Here, we can see that Turner's (1969) concept of liminality can be a useful concept to account for the transformative potential of Ramadan. This was evident more broadly throughout my observations, informal conversations, and interviews.

My interview with Shower suggested that the primary expression of this transformation was to engage in more worship. Over the course of I'tikāf, Shower began to recite more of the Qur'ān. He expressed that his Arabic had improved, and that he was reciting faster and faster. This was a measurable improvement for him:

“And I've started reading faster: I can finish a Juz [1/30th of the Qur'ān] in about 45 minutes. Before it will take me much longer than that. Now, I'll be reading for about 20 minutes. And I'll be like, oh, I've done half. Yeah. And I'm like, okay, I'm getting fast, like the Arabic is getting quick.”

Interestingly, Funny developed the emotional and spiritual capacity to address an interpersonal conflict that arose during I'tikāf itself. We may briefly note that despite the cognitive frame of I'tikāf as being the counter-symbol to worldly suffering, some challenges emerged within the ritual itself. There was a recurring conflict between Funny and others, specifically around breaking glasses, and using mineral water in the kettle instead of tap water. Funny said:

“I was a bit nervous about this disturbance which, that's a very, you know, that's, that's a very, how can I say, it's very serious, you know, it does affect and it did make a big impact on me. But then obviously I was doing shukr [gratitude] and sabr [patience] and so far Allāh was basically giving me patience and helping me to go through it. And I'll handle. I went over I mean, I'm talking to those people as well. Right. I told them I got nothing against them.”

This is an interesting incident because it suggests that I'tikāf is a sufficiently broad ritual so as to provide a contemplative environment to process new emotional challenges. As we saw earlier, each Mu'takif approached I'tikāf with a set of life challenges behind them. In this case, we see Funny encountering an interpersonal challenge that formed in the context of I'tikāf. Before the end of I'tikāf

I saw an attempted reconciliation between Funny and the others that he had been in conflict with. They asked for forgiveness and told each other that they have nothing against the other. It seemed to be contrived, suggesting that although Funny had internally begun to process his emotions, he had not yet completed this process. Considering why this process was incomplete, or at least seemed to be, is perhaps too speculative. But at the very least, we can see that I'tikāf provided a space for Funny to dynamically respond to an emergent challenge through the spiritual tools of shukr (gratitude) and sabr (patience).

Here we can see that spiritual tools were used as part of the transformative element of I'tikāf. There had been another mechanism through which I'tikāf created space for transformation: Mufti Saab. Mufti Saab was touted as the mosque's featured activity during the last ten days of Ramadan. Mufti Saab's stay with us considerably affected Mu'takifs. Shower said:

“...you look at other people around you as well. Yeah. And they're a good influence, so if you see other people doing it, and you look at people like Mufti Saab, you kind of just observe how do they spend their time? Yeah. And you use them as like a role model, or use people, even other I'tikāf people, just look at them and say, okay, they're praying Qur'ān. They're doing this. Okay. I should do this as well.”

Interestingly, Mufti Saab is included in a wider phenomenon of a “good influence”. This good influence consisted even of Mu'takifs, and the environment of the mosque which became a model of good conduct for this Mu'takif. Accordingly, the mosque constituted a structure in which Shower's agency manifested in more virtuous deeds.

I'tikāf as a transformative ritual resonates with Turner's concept of liminality in that Mu'takifs experienced spiritual gains during the process, and entered and exited the ritual in different states. Turner further discusses the liminal *personae*. The liminal *personae* are those who are moving between spaces, neither here nor there; insofar as I'tikāf has a transformative function, Mu'takifs can be seen as liminal *personae*, being in a space of transition between two periods of worldly existence. The transitory nature of the liminal *personae* situates them in a *communitas*, that is, a place in which social structures and hierarchy are no longer functioning, creating a sense of equality. This can be applied to I'tikāf because there is no theological specification of a leader or of a hierarchy during the ritual, which meshes with Sunni Islam's lack of a formal clergy.

In other ways however, the concept of liminality does not entirely map onto I'tikāf. Mufti Saab was treated differently, having been given a tent twice as big as the rest of us, with a mattress. Theologically speaking, Sunni Islam has no clergy, but socially, the reverence for Mufti Saab created a degree of inequality among the Mu'takifs. Additionally, the willingness of participants to engage in I'tikāf as a transformative ritual demonstrates a prior ontological commitment to it as being something capable of transforming. In other words, the mere act of being in I'tikāf suggests an underlying conviction. The Kantian notion of worship being reflective of underlying conviction thus holds true for I'tikāf. Accordingly, then, we can combine these theorisations: Mu'takifs engaged in I'tikāf as an expression of an underlying conviction (Kant), holding the belief that the ritual would transform them, which it ostensibly did, pointing to liminality.

Concluding Summary

Combining my auto-ethnographic experiences with participant observation and interviews has generated three themes. The first two were expressed in the theoretical frame of Geertzian symbols: the phone became a symbol for worldly existence, which necessitated I'tikāf as the counter-symbol of a higher, spiritual existence; the Qunūt became a multi-faceted symbol, demonstrating association with the Ummah, a perception of besiegement, and adherence to a discursive tradition. The third theme was explored through the concept of liminality. Liminality and a Kantian conception of worship together provide a good theoretical expression of my findings.

Discussion Chapter

In this chapter I discuss the significance of my findings. Primarily, the account that I have provided of I'tikāf is the first of its kind. I also attempt to generalise my use of Geertzian symbols and a structure-agent framework to rituals other than I'tikāf, and even sacred experiences more broadly. Expanding the discussion on the structure-agent framework, I stress the importance of the discursive tradition (Asad, 1985) and how this is to be understood in a field context. Finally, I turn to the methodological implications of my findings, specifically around the idiosyncrasies of niyyah, and implications for auto-ethnography.

The first-ever account of I'tikāf

The primary claim to originality of my research is the combination of the subject matter (I'tikāf) which has never been specifically explored before, and the use of auto-ethnography, which has seldom been used in British Muslim Studies. Both of these together make the outputs of this thesis extremely unique.

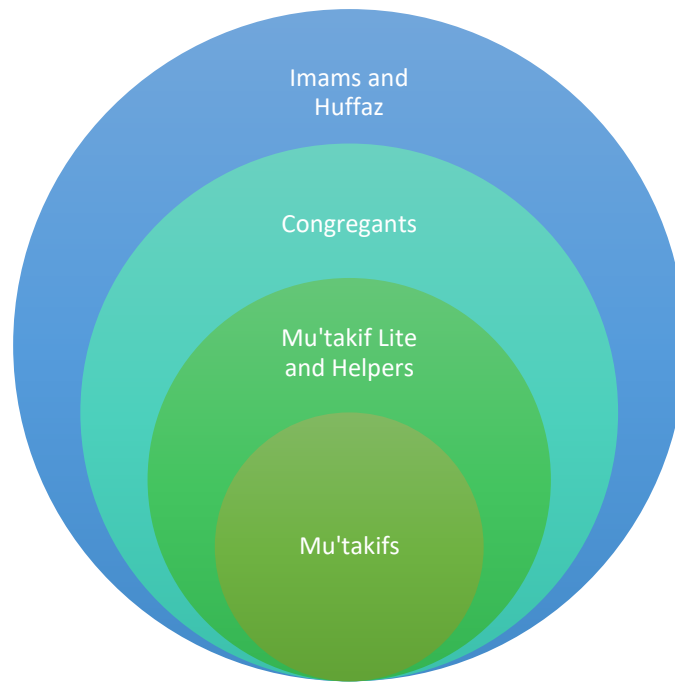
I have provided an in-depth account of a typical day in I'tikāf. This account has been framed within the literature on sacred space and time. In this regard, this thesis also presents the first-ever theorisation of I'tikāf: I have covered a preliminary conception of I'tikāf as a ritual that expresses both an underlying conviction and a desire to engage in a positive spiritual feedback loop during an especially sacred time that can generate patterned spiritual and social activity, often to seek the Night of Power, which takes place in the sacred space of a mosque. This theorisation combines conceptions of sacred space and time with a dual theorisation of prayer as an expression of underlying conviction and an endeavour to seek spiritual growth, and a structure-agent framework. I'tikāf also features a dimension of social activity. I will discuss this in the following section on structure and agency.

Additionally, I add here that my study also functions as an inside-out study of mosques and Ramadan. Both areas are understudied, supporting my claim to originality.

Combining Geertzian Symbols with a structure-agent framework

Throughout this thesis, I have used a structure-agent framework as a theoretical lens into I'tikāf. Here, I intend to show that I'tikāf can be summarised as consisting of several concentric structure-agent relationships. Within the deepest level of such a relationship, I argue that the most significant Geertzian symbols can be found; if religion is a system of symbols, it follows that the study of spiritual activity would benefit from focussing on the most exclusive phenomenon in which the most ripe symbols can be found.

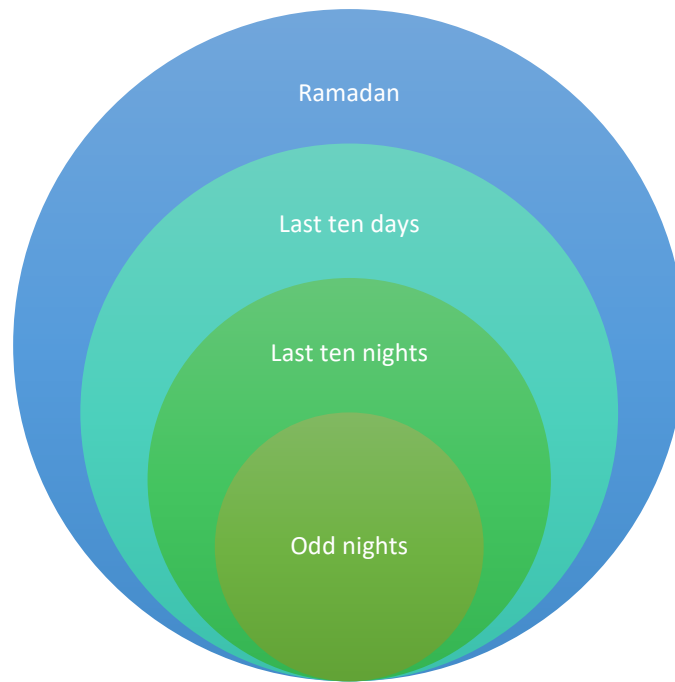
As well as being spiritually fertile, the experience of I'tikāf is also nested in concentric layers of social activity. The very particular times and places in which I'tikāf takes place may suggest a constricted, isolated ritual. However, several groups were occupying the same spaces, each engaging in particular behaviours which came to constitute the experience, at least partially. Below is a diagram of the concentric circles I observed:



Each circle represents a particular group of actors in I'tikāf; every group is both a structure and an agent, providing a frame of activity for the sub-circle beneath it, and acting in the frame provided by the superstructure. This is inspired by Orofino's (2020) study of Hizb al-Tahrir as both a structure for its members, and an agent within a counterterrorism framework. The Imams and Huffāz provided the structures of the congregational and the Tarāwih prayers, forming the context for the remaining social encounters to take place in. Congregants, such as Kufi, and my water bottle assistant formed the broadest social circle that I encountered. Each circle thus constitutes part of the social context in which the Mu'takifs reside. Within the circle of the Mu'takifs is the deeply personal and emotive spiritual practice that I have documented in my findings chapter. In this sense, I have connected the particularities of my self to a broader network of social activity, exemplifying Geertz' method of using a thick (and *fiqh*) description of the particular to connect it to broader phenomena.

The implication of this structure is that the very particular and exclusive space of the Mu'takifs contains distilled elements of all the superstructures within which it resides. The Mu'takif Lite and the Helpers provided important services to us, the Congregants showed a degree of respect towards us, and the Imams and the Huffāz carried out the congregational prayers. Therefore, by looking within the small circle of the Mu'takif, we will find some element of the wider structures.

By abstracting the above diagram, we can arrive at an approach to categorising the particular in light of several concentric structures. This can be applied elsewhere. Since time is inherently patterned in Islam (Katz, 2007), this approach is always helpful in understanding the various layers of a given sacred time. For example:



Similarly, an investigation into the odd nights necessarily includes some distilled indicator, or symbol of the wider structures, i.e. that it is nested within the last ten nights of Ramadan. The deepest level of the structure is therefore highly symbolically significant, containing references and symbols to the wider super-structures.

This has important research implications. Exploring the deepest level of a spiritual phenomenon would possibly mean that the most symbolically rich research field is being explored. In this thesis, although I explored the ultra-exclusive context of I'tikāf, I was able to identify several layers of activity. My contention, then, is that from the point of view of Geertzian symbols, the deepest level of a structure-agent nexus may contain the ripest symbols. Accordingly, the most densely sacred experiences should be the focus of research when exploring the relatively untouched domain of inside-out British Muslim spiritual experiences.

If we take Geertz's definition of religion as a system of symbols, then such an approach can be generalised to sacred experiences more broadly. If religion is a system of symbols as Geertz argues, we ought to search for the most dense, significant symbols because of the strength of their implicative associations. Using the above framework of concentric structure-agent relationships, the most potent symbols are at the deepest level. It follows then that by researching these innermost symbols, the most significant findings can be arrived at.

A typology of Niyyah-consciousness and implications for auto-ethnography

My second findings chapter showed a heightened vulnerability to the field in line with the sanctity of the Night of Power, which resolved an identity conflict, captured by my auto-ethnographic diary. Based upon this, there are clear implications for Muslim researchers negotiating their niyyah, and for auto-ethnography as an enterprise.

A typology of Niyyah-consciousness

The use of auto-ethnography is a new frontier and the various points of interest that are generated by a Muslim researcher reflecting on their own experiences have not yet been explicated. My fieldwork included a variety of spaces in which my identities interacted, and even conflicted in the ultra-exclusive case of the Night of Power. The exclusiveness and extremity of the Night of Power as a spiritual experience thus provides a wide spectrum of some of the idiosyncrasies and challenges that a Muslim researcher might face during auto-ethnographies. To this end, a broad framework can be suggested to identify some of these challenges.

This framework consists of at least four categories of interaction between identities of being a Muslim and a researcher, and is inspired by Gold's (1958) typology of Participant Observer Roles. His typology consists of a spectrum consisting of degrees of 'insiderness' to the research, varying between the complete participant, who is fully part of the research setting, and the complete observer, who is not in any way part of the setting. Similarly, the two poles that constitute my suggested framework is between non-conflict and conflict of niyyah:

1. Non-conflict: in this category, identities are not perceived as being in conflict at all. There is no consciousness that a conflict could occur. For example, in general, I see no conflicts in being a Muslim and a researcher, because I construe niyyah as providing sufficient spiritual resource to assimilate a wide range of activities into a spiritual edifice. This category can also include researchers who do not construe niyyah in the same way that I do, or who do not have the same spiritual practice that I do.
2. Conflict Consciousness: this category highlights the awareness that a conflict could occur between identities. For example, from a very early stage in my research design, I was conscious that a conflict could occur in my niyyah were I to engage in worship as part of research.
3. Unsettlement: this category denotes a sufficient level of conflict consciousness so as to invoke feelings of unsettlement, unsureness and even guilt in the researcher. This is what I began to feel as the time to approach I'tikāf became closer and closer. Researchers who feel unsettlement are likely to have some level of commitment to their Muslimness, such that the idea of an impure intent is sufficiently present as to invoke emotion.
4. Conflict: this is when identities come into direct conflict with each other. In my case, this occurred when I was faced with a choice of whether to continue to worship on the Night of Power, or to take up an additional research opportunity. This experience, of course, is contingent upon my own spiritual practice and character, which meant that only the extremity of the Night of Power invoked a conflict. Other researchers might encounter conflict in different situations, which will depend on their own conceptions of spirituality and niyyah.

Whilst Gold's (1958) typology is suggestive of a degree of fixity in what category a researcher occupies, in my typology, researchers can move between different categories. This flexibility is inspired by the oscillations that I observed in myself – we note here the value of auto-ethnography in capturing these movements and changes. I encountered Conflict Consciousness, Unsettlement and Conflict. Movement between these categories can either occur through the tacit experience of being in a spiritually charged setting, or through an intentional act to engender a particular internal state. I encountered both. Before entering I'tikāf, I intentionally read theological literature about I'tikāf to create feelings of excitement. Then, whilst in I'tikāf, I witnessed a change in my willingness to trade research for worship by the fact of my being in a sacred space and time.

In order to make this framework as generalisable as possible, I have attempted to explicate it in a way that can accommodate a variety of spiritual inclinations. My particular spiritual character meant that I occupied certain categories more so than others might. These categories are sufficiently broad as to accommodate different ideas of what it means to be a Muslim, what *niyyah* is, and the extent to which this can be reconciled with being a researcher. Perhaps a researcher with a more conservative outlook may encounter Conflict more so than I did.

This framework is a step towards developing an indigenous analytical framework for British Muslim Studies. I have constructed this framework from the particularities of my own experiences, and have attempted to generalise it, staying true to Geertz' method of arriving at the generalisable through the particular. The inspiration behind this framework is of course the spiritual encounters of a Muslim. As such, this framework is genuinely emic, built upon the spiritual predicates of Islam. The development of such a framework demonstrates the potential of research that focuses on spiritual experiences on its own terms. At present, the heavy emphasis on securitisation has meant that such a direction of research has been neglected. Accordingly, the unique implications of the intersection between Islam's spiritual infrastructure with the contemporary enterprise of social scientific research have been missed out entirely.

Other areas of social scientific inquiry have fruitfully explored the dynamics of insider research, such as Coffey's (1999) *The Ethnographic Self* which makes an important and influential case for understanding how the self inflects on the process of research, and Behar's (1996) assertion of vulnerability. Murphy's (1987) powerful and moving *The Body Silent* shows the fruit of insider research for disabled peoples, and similarly, Kanuha's (2000) fascinating insider research into lesbian women of colour. It seems that the power of insider, auto-ethnographic research has been acknowledged for other social groups. But British Muslim Studies seems to have lagged behind. Considering that Kanuha's research was over 20 years ago, we may quite reasonably ask about the reason for this lag. Given the mass of studies centred around securitisation and integration (outside-in studies, to use Ahmed's (2017) term), we can reasonably assert that the overbearing influence of a lens constructed by terror attacks and invasions has led to British Muslims being studied in these particular frames, at the expense of other ones.

I make this criticism because this underscores the value of research that seeks to understand British Muslims on their own terms, something that I hope to have done in this thesis. The lacuna of such studies means that methodological reflections have not been explicated. To this end, I offer some reflections on the implications for auto-ethnography.

Implications for auto-ethnography

There are a number of generalisable reflections that we can make about reflexivity and the enterprise of auto-ethnography.

Firstly, the auto-ethnographic diary can be a site which brings the different identities of the researcher into communion, providing insights into the dynamism of data production. This conversation can be especially fruitful when considering intensely personal experiences such as worship. In my own experience, two parts of myself, as it were, were engaged in a dialogue. Documenting this exchange has shown that reconciling (or not) different identities can be a dynamic process. As I encountered in my own field work, the various dimensions of this dynamism led to choices of how to (or how not to) engage in the field e.g. my choice to pray rather than engage in an additional fieldwork opportunity.

The auto-ethnographic diary thus becomes a powerful documentation of this dynamism, providing additional insights into the data produced by the researcher.

Secondly, and relatedly, this insight into dynamism makes the auto-ethnographic diary a powerful methodology to investigate the complex inner emotional machinations of worship and spirituality. The choices that the researcher makes are indicators of the impact that worship has; in my case, worship had enough of an impact on me as to pull me away from research, providing a useful data point that I'tikāf can provide strong emotional resource. If a researcher chose otherwise, it would suggest that the spiritual edification was perhaps not as powerful. Phrased differently, I have taken aspects of insider research from Social Sciences (such as Coffey (1999), Murphy (1987) and Kanuha (2000) and applied it to British Muslim Studies, and the study of worship more broadly. In such studies, auto-ethnography legitimates and leverages personal experiences as a source of data. In applying auto-ethnography to the study of I'tikāf and worship, I have thus legitimated individual spiritual experiences as a valuable source of data.

The Discursive Tradition as a structure

In the third findings chapter, three themes were explored. I introduced Asad's (1985) idea of the discursive tradition, specifically when exploring ritual as a symbol of transnational Muslim identity. Here, I would like to expand on the applicability of the discursive tradition, specifically construing it as a structure within which spiritual activity takes place.

When discussing the Qunūt, the element of the discursive tradition that emerged had been the past of Jerusalem, and its sanctity. In the first findings chapter, we saw a different element of the discursive tradition – Islamic Law (fiqh). I construed this as the structure that would frame my behaviour as an agent. We can examine this particular element with greater granularity here: the rules of I'tikāf presented to us were from an Urdu book named *Masaail a I'tiqaaf* [sic], authored by Movlana Rafa'at Ali Qasimi [sic]. More than just belonging to Islamic Law, this book is distinctly Ḥanafī, and from the Deobandi denomination, as opposed to being, for example, from the influential Central Asian Hanafī tradition. We can see here that the discursive tradition has several sub-levels to it: Sunni Islamic Law, Hanafī, and then Deobandi.

This can be generalised into an assertion that the discursive tradition functions as a structure, and therefore should be an important consideration when studying British Muslims. Any study that explores the spiritual experiences of British Muslims should make a consideration of manifestations of the discursive tradition. This could include understanding the legal positions of a particular group, as I attempted to do here. Comparing proclaimed legal positions with actual behaviour then becomes an additional point of data; areas of convergence or divergence demonstrate the dynamic ways in which the discursive tradition is animated by Muslims today.

I should offer a word of caution here. I remarked earlier that I cannot be sure of the extent to which my I'tikāf experience is conditioned by my mosque's belonging to the Deobandi denomination. Above, I have outlined that the manifestation of the discursive tradition that I encountered clearly does belong to the Deobandi denomination. But this is not equivalent to asserting that my entire experience was a Deobandi I'tikāf. One is a manifestation of the discursive tradition, and the other is the complex, multi-faceted way in which Muslims come to enact a given ritual. They may concord, or

not. Both are important nodes of data. I do not intend here to assert that manifestations of the discursive tradition are a one-to-one map of spiritual behaviours that they are concerned with. I do intend to assert that the discursive tradition is an important reference point against observed behaviours.

I deliberately want to distance myself from such a simplistic connection, because I have observed a mosaic-like identity construction during my field work: Algerian caretakers, an Arab mu'addhin praying behind a *young* Gujrati Imam; being engaged in Qunūt for people on the other side of the planet. I myself am a self-professed denominational nomad. Yet we all come together to constitute the congregation of this mosque, which might otherwise be simplistically described as merely Deobandi. This simplicity would be a disservice to British Muslim Studies.

Concluding summary

The discussions in this chapter have been considerably unique. I'tikāf itself is an untouched field. I have attempted broad and wide-ranging theorisations of it to link this particular ritual to broader implications. These attempts included: a combination of Geertzian symbols and a structure-agent framework to suggest a direction of research for spiritual experiences; emphasising the importance of the discursive tradition as a structure and suggesting ways of productively engaging this tradition; a typology of niyyah consciousness, and finally the usefulness of auto-ethnography in exploring topics of spirituality. Together, these discussions expand the uniqueness of this thesis beyond its already distinctive premise.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have presented what is, to the best of my knowledge, the first-ever study of I'tikāf, using an auto-ethnography: a unique methodological choice, which I have reflected on against findings from participant observation and informal interviews. This combination of a never-before explored subject matter and a unique methodology together underscore the claim to originality of this thesis.

In my first findings chapter, I have presented the rules of I'tikāf from the lens of Giddens' structure-agent framework. This serves as a preamble to the extensive documentation of an average day in I'tikāf that is in the appendices. This account substantively answers all three of my research questions (what happens during I'tikāf; why do people do I'tikāf; how do individuals change during I'tikāf). In my second findings chapter, I discussed the conflict in identities that were resolved through my vulnerability (Behar, 1996) as a researcher. This vulnerability was proportionate to the sacredness of the time that I happened to occupy. Simultaneously, this stressed the significance and potency of the Night of Power. In my third findings chapter, I used my data from participant observation and informal interviews to reflect on my personal account of I'tikāf. I used Geertzian symbols to explore the first two themes: (1) seeking refuge from the world, in which the phone came to symbolise worldly existence, and this in turn necessitated I'tikāf as a whole coming to counter-symbolise this, representing spiritual existence. I further theorised that I'tikāf functions to extract a meta-theme of worldly suffering from the individualised experiences of each Mu'takif, becoming a cognitive frame in which I'tikāf becomes a counter-concept to such suffering. This theme resonated with my own account of I'tikāf, and specifically answers my second research question in greater detail. The third theme that I explored was I'tikāf as a transformative ritual, which I analysed through a structure-agency framework. Transformation was expressed through Mu'takifs praying more, and attempting to negotiate emergent challenges. This also corroborates my own experience of I'tikāf influencing how I negotiated my identities. Finally, in my discussion chapter, I explored how my account of I'tikāf is the first study of I'tikāf. I defined I'tikāf as a ritual that expresses both an underlying conviction and a desire to engage in a positive spiritual feedback loop during an especially sacred time that can generate patterned spiritual and social activity, often to seek the Night of Power, which takes place in the sacred space of a mosque. I aimed to uncover the broader significance of my findings by reflecting on how a combination of Geertzian symbols, and concentric structure-agent relationships suggest that exclusive and particular spiritual experiences should be researched because they contain symbols with the most implicative significance. I further argued that the discursive tradition can function as a structure to spiritual activity. Crucially, however, I argued that the discursive tradition is not to be taken as a one-to-one mapping of spiritual activity, but should instead unlock insights into how the discursive tradition is negotiated through the prism of social behaviour. Finally, I presented a 4-fold typology summarising conflicts in niyyah along a spectrum of conflict and non-conflict. This tied into an exploration of the usefulness of auto-ethnography for capturing the uniquely personal nature of spiritual encounters.

Much can be said about what I have *not* discussed in this thesis. I should firstly say that I am staggered at just how much can be said about I'tikāf. There were many nodes of data that I have not been able to discuss, including: the various actors and characters in the mosque; the interpersonal dimensions of I'tikāf (I remain in contact with most of those I did I'tikāf with); the Ḥuffāz and their dedication to memorisation, which I personally observed; intergenerational interactions; the training and transmission of the future leaders of the mosque, and; improvements of mosque

institutionalisation in light of Covid-19. What I have opted to include in this thesis has been chosen based on attempting to maximise the utility of auto-ethnography.

I also note that since this is the first study of I'tikāf, I can say very little about how various associations of the mosque influenced my experience. I know of other Deobandi mosques which confiscate phones and ban electronics. Did I witness a Deobandi I'tikāf? An inner-city I'tikāf? A South-Asian I'tikāf? Or perhaps a post-Covid one? I cannot say, because there is nothing to make a comparison against. Optimistically, this creates significant future research potential. More or less any future study on I'tikāf will be extremely productive because it can serve as a comparison against what I have presented. With more studies into I'tikāf and Ramadan, a sharper understanding of what factors shape experiences of I'tikāf can be ascertained. Moreover, the I'tikāf I did was a male-only I'tikāf; I did not see a woman for 10 days. What would I'tikāf be like for women? How would differences in Islamic Law inflect on this experience?

I would like to end with a broader reflection. Prophet Muhammad first encountered revelation in solitude; the Sleepers of the Cave sought solitude away from persecution; Mary is revered by Christians and Muslims for her time spent in devotional solitude. There seems to be a premium placed on solitude in both Christianity and Islam. Perhaps in solitude, in stillness, and inactivity, one can be present with the perennial divine rhythms that animate existence. I have not mentioned other faiths throughout this thesis, but in this conclusion, I think it is apt to mention this. The Arabic words, the imposing mosque building – perhaps this obfuscates what really happens in I'tikāf. As we do with work or study, we take breaks. We move away from one space, to another, knowing that we will return, but still need some time to recalibrate. At its core, this is what I'tikāf does. Other faiths acknowledge this need for a break. Each faith of course aligns this need with its own ontological structures. But underneath it all is the very human idea of taking a break.

I want to end on this note because my motivation in wanting to research I'tikāf is to be able to provide a real, human account of the spiritual encounters of British Muslims. In an era of increasing polarity, perhaps we could all benefit from learning about one another's depths and emotions, in the hope that we might all seem more human to each other. Despite my criticisms of British Muslim Studies, I happily acknowledge that we have investigative tools to capture a kaleidoscopic array of experiences. The auto-ethnographic enterprise can play an extraordinary role here. I hope that this thesis can be among those scholarly efforts that seek to humanise one another.

Bibliography

- Abbas, Tahir. *Islamic Political Radicalism: A European Perspective*. Edinburgh, UNITED KINGDOM: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cardiff/detail.action?docID=286986>.
- Ahmed A.-A. 'Conceptualising Mosque Diversity'. *J. Muslims Eur. Journal of Muslims in Europe* 8, no. 2 (2019): 138–58.
- Ahmed, Abdul-Azim. 'The Other Ethical Approval: The Importance of Being "Islamic"'. *Fieldwork in Religion* 12, no. 2 (2018): 204–22. <https://doi.org/10.1558/firn.35668>.
- Anderson, Leon. 'Analytic Autoethnography - Leon Anderson, 2006'. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 26 July 2016. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0891241605280449>.
- Atkinson, Paul. 'Narrative Turn or Blind Alley? - Paul Atkinson, 1997'. *Qualitative Health Research*, 1 July 2016. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/104973239700700302>.
- Bi, Suriyah. 'More than "Multiple Jeopardy": Navigating the Legal System as a British-Muslim-Woman-Litigant-in-Person'. *J. Muslims Eur. Journal of Muslims in Europe* 8, no. 3 (2019): 247–64.
- Brown, K. 'The Promise and Perils of Women's Participation in UK Mosques: The Impact of Securitisation Agendas on Identity, Gender and Community'. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 10, no. 3 (2008): 472–91. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2008.00324.x>.
- Buitelaar, Marjo. *Fasting and Feasting in Morocco: Women's Participation in Ramadan*, 1993.
- Cantrell, Michael A. 'Must a Scholar of Religion Be Methodologically Atheistic or Agnostic?' *The Question of Methodological Naturalism*, 1 January 2018, 222–50.
https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004372436_011.
- Coffey, Amanda. *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity*. London: SAGE, 2011.
- Cox, Michele, Geoff Dickson, and Barbara Cox. 'Lifting the Veil on Allowing Headscarves in Football: A Co-Constructed and Analytical Autoethnography'. *Sport Management Review* 20, no. 5 (1 November 2017): 522–34. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2017.08.005>.
- Daly Metcalf, Barbara. *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*. Reprint 2019. *Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies* 22. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520917439>.
- Delamont, Sara. 'The Only Honest Thing: Autoethnography, Reflexivity and Small Crises in Fieldwork'. *Ethnography and Education* 4, no. 1 (1 March 2009): 51–63.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17457820802703507>.
- Ellis, Carolyn. *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*, 2004.
<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780759100510/The-Ethnographic-I-A-Methodological-Novel-about-Autoethnography>.
- Ewing, Katherine P. 'Dreams from a Saint: Anthropological Atheism and the Temptation to Believe'. *American Anthropologist* 96, no. 3 (1994): 571–83.
- Fitzgerald, James. 'Why Me? An Autoethnographic Account of the Bizarre Logic of Counterterrorism'. *Critical Studies on Terrorism Critical Studies on Terrorism* 8, no. 1 (2015): 163–80.

- Gilliat-Ray, Sophie. 'Closed Worlds: (Not) Accessing Deobandi Dar Ul-Uloom in Britain'. *FIRN Fieldwork in Religion* 1, no. 1 (2005): 7–33.
- . 'Mosques'. Muslims in Britain, June 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511780233.011>.
- Hammersley, Martyn, and Paul Atkinson. *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, 2019.
- Hayano, David M. 'Auto-Ethnography: Paradigms, Problems, and Prospects'. *Human Organization* 38, no. 1 (1979): 99–104.
- Innes, Robert Alexander. "'Wait a Second. Who Are You Anyways?": The Insider/Outsider Debate and American Indian Studies'. *aiq The American Indian Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (2009): 440–61.
- Jeffrey, Bob, and Geoff Troman. 'Time for Ethnography'. *British Educational Research Journal* 30, no. 4 (2004): 535–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192042000237220>.
- Kanuha, Valli Kalei. "'Being" Native versus "Going Native": Conducting Social Work Research as an Insider'. *Social Work* 45, no. 5 (2000): 439–47.
- Katz, Marion Holmes. *The Birth of the Prophet Muhammad: Devotional Piety in Sunni Islam*. London: Routledge, 2007.
- Lukens-Bull, Ronald. 'Lost in a Sea of Subjectivity: The Subject Position of the Researcher in the Anthropology of Islam'. *Contemporary Islam* 1, no. 2 (1 August 2007): 173–92. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-007-0014-y>.
- Madden, Raymond. *Being Ethnographic - a Guide to the Theory and Practice of Ethnography.*, 2017.
- McLoughlin, S. 'Mosques and the Public Space: Conflict and Cooperation in Bradford'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31, no. 6 (2005): 1045–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830500282832>.
- Metcalf, Barbara D. 'Remaking Ourselves: Islamic Self-Fashioning in a Global Movement of Spiritual Renewal'. In *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Metcalf, Barbara Daly. *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900*. Princeton University Press, 1982. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7zvmm2>.
- Möller, André. 'Islam and Traweh Prayers in Java: Unity, Diversity, and Cultural Smoothness'. *Indonesia and the Malay World* 33, no. 95 (1 March 2005): 37–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639810500192541>.
- Narayan, Kirin. 'How Native Is a "Native" Anthropologist?' *American Anthropologist : Journal of the American Anthropological Association*, 1993.
- Naylor, S., and J.R. Ryan. 'The Mosque in the Suburbs: Negotiating Religion and Ethnicity in South London'. *Social and Cultural Geography* 3, no. 1 (2002): 39–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649360120114134>.
- Parfitt, Tudor, and Yulia Egorova. *Jews, Muslims, and Mass Media Mediating the 'Other'*. RoutledgeCurzon Jewish Studies Series. London ; RoutledgeCurzon, 2005.
- Roth, Wolff-Michael. 'Auto/Ethnography and the Question of Ethics'. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 10, no. 1 (2009). <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-10.1.1213>.

Rytter, Mikkel. 'Burger Jihad: Fatal Attractions at a Sufi Lodge in Pakistan'. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 36, no. 1 (2016): 46–61.

Smith, Claire. 'Epistemological Intimacy: A Move to Autoethnography'. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 4, no. 2 (1 June 2005): 68–76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690500400206>.

Spradley, James P. *Participant Observation*, 2016.

Taber, Nancy. 'Institutional Ethnography, Autoethnography, and Narrative: An Argument for Incorporating Multiple Methodologies - Nancy Taber, 2010'. *Qualitative Research*, 15 February 2010. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1468794109348680>.

Werbner, Pnina. 'Stamping the Earth with the Name of Allāh: Zikr and the Sacralizing of Space among British Muslims'. *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (1996): 309–38. <https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1996.11.3.02a00020>.

Wilson, T. 'Ramadan in Liverpool'. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23, no. 2 (2012): 149–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2012.649584>.

Winchester, Daniel. 'Embodying the Faith: Religious Practice and the Making of a Muslim Moral Habitus'. *Social Forces* 86, no. 4 (June 2008): 1753–80. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.0.0038>.

Zaman, Muhammad Qasim. *Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi: Islam in Modern South Asia*. Makers of the Muslim World. Oxford: Oneworld, 2008.

Zempi, Irene. 'Researching Victimisation Using Auto-Ethnography: Wearing the Muslim Veil in Public'. *Methodological Innovations* 10, no. 1 (1 January 2017): 2059799117720617. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059799117720617>.

Appendices

An average day in I'tikāf

Here, I present a typical day in I'tikāf based on my field notes. I construct this day based on various experiences and interactions. Since I'tikāf has its own sacred rhythm in seeking the Night of Power, there is some element of choice in constructing a typical day. In order to provide a holistic view of the peaks and troughs of the sacred rhythms that a typical day might miss, I will present particular episodes after I document the typical day. These episodes will be:

- (1) Ramadan's Endgame: Completing the Qur'ān and Awaiting Eid
- (1) How Life Springs Anew: Completing I'tikāf and Leaving the Mosque

Open Your Heart: A Typical Day in I'tikāf

My alarm wakes me at 10:05am. I pull my eye mask off and am greeted by an amorphous morning light pouring through a blurred window just to my right. I find that I wake on my right side. This gladdens me; the night before, I expressly intended to sleep on my right side, as this was the practice of the Prophet Muhammad. As I push my body upright, I realise my right side also feels battered; it aches. Although I sleep on an additional duvet, the mosque carpet underneath feels very hard, and is distinctly less comfortable than my bed at home. I am accustomed to this carpet providing some sense of warmth when my forehead and nose touch it in prostration. When I sleep upon it, however, it feels quite different. The entire mosque feels different, now that I am living within it. Perhaps I should have brought a foldable bed, as one of my fellow Mu'takifs (people doing I'tikāf) did. Or perhaps, were I a renowned Hanafi jurist who happened to be visiting the mosque, I would have been given a mattress, and my tent would have been wider.

I get up and begin to roll up my duvet and pillow into a tight bundle. I am careful not to make too much noise. A reasonably thick curtain separates my tent and my neighbours. He occasionally snores at night, but is otherwise a steady sleeper, and a pleasant neighbour. I exit my tent, and see Angry, a fellow Mu'takif, slowly pacing up and down the prayer hall, with a digital rosary counter wrapped around his finger. He is a thin man in his 50s, dressed in a *thobe* and wears a *topi* (hat). My guess is that he is from India. I wave at him, and he responds with a wave back. I refer to him as Angry because he does seem rather fiery at first. Two nights ago, he offered to make me *karak chai*, which I happily agreed to, anticipating a long night of worship. He emerged from the kitchen with a cup and

walked right up to me. He pinched the tea bag and picked it up from the cup and thrust it in my hand, and told me to squeeze it. I tried to squeeze it, but it was too hot, so I dropped it back in the cup with a splash. He angrily said something in what I assume was Gujrati and did it himself. In any case, the chai was delicious. Thus I call him Angry. He seems to be warming to me.

I begin to make my way to the wuḍū' room. I push open the door, knowing that I am exiting the Safe Zone. Here, I can only walk; I mustn't stop. Were I to stop here, my I'tikāf would be rendered invalid – I have exited the part of the mosque that the Imam designated as the main space for prayer when the mosque was built. I try to move briskly. Before taking the flight of stairs, I pass by a window. I see a glorious day, a ripe blue sky with a handful of elegant clouds. I am entranced, but I must keep walking. This glimpse, fleeting as it may be, makes me realise that the walls of the mosque have become my entire world. Though I have been here for a matter of days, I realise what an extraordinary sight a sunny day is. I realise that the moments of worship and contemplative reflection that make up my days have shifted my energy inwards. The physical distance that I have from windows that are not blurred intensifies this inwardness. My field of sight no longer contains blue skies, cars passing by, pedestrians, cats, or the evening news. It is the blue carpets, the marbled walls and the hushed sounds of prayer that make up my world now.

Descending two flights of stairs, I arrive in the basement. I enter the toilet chambers, seeing the doors of all 6 cubicles wide open. It looks freshly washed, and I smell bleach. 2 of the toilets I notice are subcontinental toilets; these are to be squatted over, rather than sat upon. The rest are 'English' toilets, which I opt to use. Despite the differences between the two types of toilets here, I realise that both are united by the humble *lota*. The *lota* is a small pot used for pouring water over one's private parts after using the toilet. I find this an interesting commonality and symbolically ripe: on the one hand, the difference in cultural context has birthed a difference that is significantly deep so as to create a different manner of excretion. But on the other, there is a common regard for a particular approach to cleanliness, inspired by the conditions of Islamic Law.

I then make wuḍū' (ablution) in preparation to begin my worship. I use water liberally, scrubbing my face hard with soap, hoping that the accumulated sweat may peel away after days of not bathing. When it comes to wiping over my head, I again use plentiful water as I run my hand through my long locks. I complete my wuḍū', and return upstairs again, being attentive to walk briskly. I change my clothes, brush my hair back and put in a hairband, which keeps greasy hair from falling over my forehead. This provides some semblance of relief from not having washed my hair for a few days, but is no replacement from my hair hygiene diet of TRESemmé shampoo and conditioner.

The worst of my physical discomforts abated, I collect my copy of the Qur'ān and head downstairs into the ground floor prayer hall. As I enter, I see that the two sets of double-doors that lead directly to a classroom are wide open. The classroom functions as an extension of the main prayer hall. The carpet of the main prayer hall continues right into it. The doors are only ever shut when there is actually a class ongoing. In the classroom, I see that the windows are not blurred, letting in glorious light, and offering another fleeting glimpse of the outside world. But I must not venture into the classroom: it is not of the designated area of worship, and so my I'tikāf would be rendered invalid were I to go there. I recall two years prior, two fellow Mu'takifs casually strolled there. Two others had done the same downstairs. And one other decided to take a shower, for no reason other than he felt like it. That only left me with my I'tikāf intact. As far as I could tell, I had successfully completed I'tikāf that year, earning the moniker 'Hero of the Town' for having completed the ritual on behalf of the town.

I walk towards the front of the prayer hall. I am the only one here. The entire hall, which can usually house around 500 people, is empty. I sit down in the front row and begin to worship. I begin to practice *dhikr* (remembrance of God). I do by saying various praises and glorifications of God in a low voice: *SubhanAllāh* (glory be to God); *Alḥadulillāh* (praise and gratitude be to God); *Allāh hu Akbar* (God is greater). I continue to do this for some time. My head slowly dips, and my back hunches forward. My head is hanging down, whilst I continue to utter words of *dhikr*. I slowly find that my head begins to sway gently, left and right. I find myself saying God's name, over and over; *Allāh, Allāh, Allāh*. This metronomic pattern is interrupted by a burst of passion; *Yā Nūr al-Samāwāti wa al-'Arḍ* (O Light of the Heavens and Earth)! *Yā Rab al-'Ālamīn* (O Sustainer of All the Worlds)! *Ya Arḥama Rāḥimīn* (O Most Merciful of all)! I chant these words, still in a low and quiet voice, but they boom and echo within my *ṣadr* (chest). I feel emblazoned by uttering these names of God, and I want to say them more and more. And so, I continue and continue.

Eventually, my neck and back tire. My brain begins to wander hither and thither, remembering friends and family, work, studies and all manner of things. I decide I have spent myself in this particular type of worship. I consider switching to a different type of worship. I debate between reciting the Qur'ān, and praying the additional *Duha* prayer. The words of Mufti Saab⁴ ring in my head: "Try to finish the Qur'ān at least twice in the last few days of Ramadan". The Qur'ān is split into 30 parts; it takes me around 40 minutes to finish one part. So, the expectation is to spend around 2,400 minutes, that is around 40 hours over the next few days to finish the Qur'ān twice. By finish, he means to complete reading the Qur'ān from start to finish, cover to cover. This is a weighty task. I doubt I can manage it. But still, the more times one can finish reciting the Qur'ān in Ramadan, the better the spiritual merit.

⁴ Saab is an honorific attached at the end of a name or title to convey respect in the Subcontinent

There is a large emphasis on finishing the Qur'ān as many times as possible in this mosque. So, I begin to recite the Qur'ān. I am actually only in the first half of my first reading of the entire month of Ramadan. This relatively modest amount of reading is because I prefer to engage the meaning of the Qur'ān, and often find myself lost in pondering over the nested systems of meanings in each verse. But Mufti Saab, who has joined us this year as the mosque's special guest, is a Mufti after all. A Mufti is an Islamic theologian who has completed the standard training to become an *'ālim* (scholar) of the faith, which is typically around 6 years of full-time study, and then has completed the *iftā'* training on top of this – a type of training that specifically trains a theologian to issue Islamic legal rulings. Contemporary issues such as mortgages, cryptocurrencies, organ transplants, even praying on the moon, are all part of the kaleidoscopic array of questions that the Mufti must provide decisive rulings upon. But more than that, this particular Mufti, I find to be a man of heart, strength and piety. His words land in my heart. And so I witness a change in what I might have otherwise have done at the behest of the *nasīḥa* (sincere advice) that the Mufti imparted to us yesterday.

My intermediate level of Arabic gives me an infrequent insight into what I am actually reading. I am reading Surah Yusuf, an especially moving chapter in the Qur'ān which imparts the story of Yusuf (Joseph); how he was betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, falsely accused of *zina* (adultery), imprisoned, but eventually was granted premiership, and he ruled the land into which he had entered as a slave. I am deeply moved by this story, and reflect on the difficulties and challenges that I have left behind. I feel a mixture of hope and fear: hope that, though I may be at the bottom of a well as Yusuf was, there is ease and relief awaiting. And *fear* that, if I am at the bottom of a well, then yet, there are much more challenges yet to come. But here and now, I am far away from all of that. I am in a sanctuary. My footsteps that seemed constrictive at first are now comforting; I am not out there. I am not out there with my challenges, burdens and strife. I am sheltered here, and I wallow in the simplicity of my life.

As time passes, I begin to tire. I am paying much less attention to the meaning of what I am reading, and am instead rushing through towards the end of the chapter. I am reciting quickly, and find some enjoyment in honing in on the various Arabic locutions; *tajwīd*, the science of precisely vocalising Arabic letters using the corresponding part of the mouth is something that I do enjoy. Nonetheless, the tiredness is setting in and I feel my recital of the Qur'ān becoming slightly monotonous.

I am interrupted by the droning sound of a large industrial size vacuum. A caretaker of the mosque is pushing around the vacuum with a degree of vigour. He is Arab, Algerian I assume, well-built, and is always very keen and passionate in how he tidies the mosque. I wave at him, and he waves back, placing his hand on his heart, a common gesture of respect and affection among Arabs. The mosque is very well-looked after; a fleet of caretakers is always in and around the mosque. Part of the silence

that I have grown to love in the off-peak hours of the mosque includes the pitter-patter of the caretakers, walking around, mopping this, disinfecting that. They have a silent purposefulness to them; they walk with a sense of importance, and do not seem to be taking orders. Each knows what he is doing.

Soon, I am joined by a couple of other Mu'takifs in the main prayer hall. They seem to be the elders of the group and are usually up earlier than the younger members. I wave at them, and they reply with stoic nods and a brief smile. Angry is among them. He tends to sit on the right side of the hall, not quite at the front, but near there. The other, whom I call Pudding (he shared pudding with me that his family sent for him), sits near a pillar on the left-hand side of the hall. Everyone seems to have their favourite spot that they frequent.

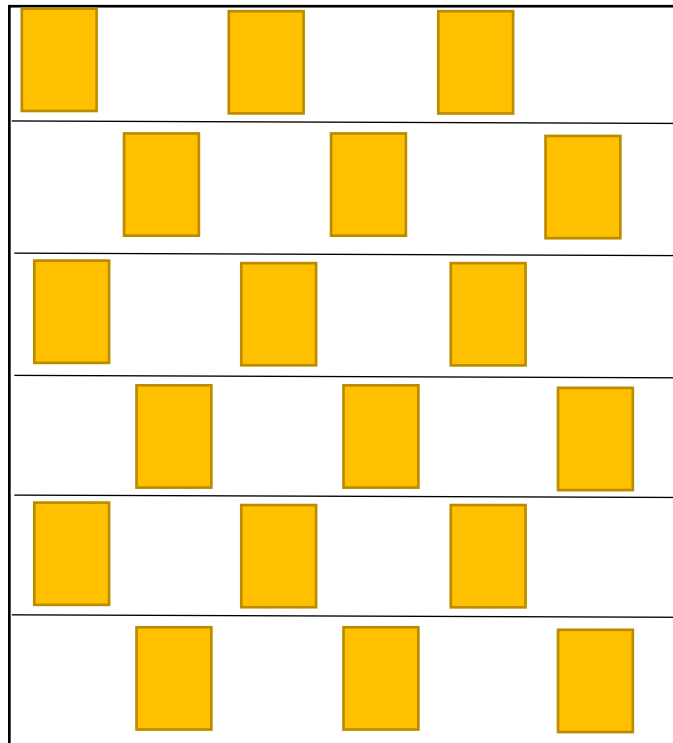
I continue to recite the Qur'ān, with tiredness and boredom wearing me down more and more. I wonder if it is my dopamine-filled life which has led to this inability to sit still. I have kept my phone with me in I'tikāf, but away in my bag. I have left it on, but have shut off WiFi, and only check for texts or calls once a day in case of emergency. The pings from WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and my fairly-inundated email inbox would typically give me a dopamine fix; each new text, alert or email, with the screen lighting up, would be a small source of joy. I only realise this when I have forcibly removed myself from it. I wonder – am I worshipping too hard here? Should I really be reading the Qur'ān if I am drained? I fear creating negative associations with God's Word. But I steel myself, and decide that this is precisely my opportunity to enter deeply into the present moment; to stop looking here and there for my next fix of dopamine, and instead, observe the decree of God unfolding in every moment. I take a deep breath, and continue, noting the current feelings in my mind as unproductive forays outside of the present moment.

As the clock hits 12pm, a handful of regular attendees begin to enter into the mosque. They tend to be the same group of people every day who arrive at the mosque significantly earlier than others. After the Mu'takifs, and the helpers, it is these group of people who tend to spend the most time in the mosque. I think of them as 'Mu'takif Lite'. They spend long periods of time in the mosque, before and after prayer times, and even throughout the night. Often, they will join us for Suhoor, the pre-dawn meal. One Mu'takif Lite, who I have not seen yet during my stay, approaches me. He asks me if I am doing I'tikāf this year. I reply in the affirmative. He places his hand on his chest and asks me to remember him in my prayers. I have had similar encounters several times since entering I'tikāf: others excitedly ask me to pray for them, and to remember them in my prayers. They seem to think that my prayers hold a particular weight for them. I hope they do, but I feel wholly out of place being treated as a miniature saint.

At around quarter to one, Mufti Saab arrives downstairs. I am alerted to his presence when I hear another Mu'takif shout "Assalamu alaykum Mufti Saab!". The Mufti heartily replies with "Walaykum salaam". Mufti Saab is a well-built man, with a thick, salt-and-pepper beard. He has rugged good looks and is very approachable. He sees me and says "Assalamu alaykum young man!". I respond. He is sociable and relatable. He wears a turquoise *thobe* and a grey waistcoat. He settles at the front row of the prayer hall, just slightly behind the Imam's prayer rug. He throws a white scarf over his head and begins to recite the Qur'ān. He is reciting quickly, staying true to the advice that he had given us yesterday.

A clique of 3 other Mu'takifs arrive together in the prayer hall. They seem to have pre-existing relationships; they all speak to each other frequently, in Gujrati, and tend to sit at the front right-hand side of the hall. By this point, the numbers in the prayer hall have stabilised; it seems to be a dedicated vanguard consisting of the Mu'takifs, the Mu'takif Lite, and Helpers. As the clock hits 1pm, the mosque officially opens; it opens 30 mins before the main congregational prayer, and closes 30 mins after the congregational prayer. More people begin to filter in and begin to settle in the prayer hall. Some people lean against the walls, others against the pillars. Some like to sit in the places where they will stand to pray when the congregational prayer begins; they place their prayer mat down and sit. A Mu'takif Lite gets up and pushes a switch on the wall. This switch is connected to a sign that is attached to the ceiling of the prayer hall. It reads, "Zawaal time: do not pray". Zawāl is a brief period of time from the Sun's zenith to the start of Zuhr time (the time interval in which the early-afternoon prayer can be offered), in which prayer is forbidden. The sign switches off, so the sign is no longer visible, meaning that the Zawāl time has elapsed, and prayers can now be performed. The Mu'takif Lite acted without instruction, and isn't a formal caretaker of the mosque, suggesting that the Mu'takif Lite are also a network of informed, experienced mosque volunteers; their seriousness around being in the mosque early would suggest that their voluntary service springs forth from their spiritual dedication.

Covid-19 has meant that worshippers have to bring their own prayer mats, and pray in a socially distanced pattern. This pattern is chequered, looking something like the following:



This arrangement creates a spectrum of choice that the worshipper necessarily engages in: they can choose their own prayer rug, and then position their items and belongings to their left or right. The mosque marks which spaces can be prayed in with a strip of tape. One of the Mu'takifs, a particularly jovial Indian middle-aged man that I have named Funny, uses a prayer mat that can be folded into a support that can be leaned upon. The existence of such a prayer mat suggests that the need for such a product is sufficiently widespread so as to reify into a marketable item. I personally use a foldable plastic prayer mat, one that can easily fit into my pocket once I am finished.

A congregant waves at me from afar, before swiftly walking over to me. He asks me if I'm in I'tikāf. I assume that he noticed my rugged appearance that has accumulated over my stay and associates that with I'tikāf. I reply in the affirmative, and a similar conversation ensues, in which he congratulates me and asks me to pray for him. I place my hand on my heart and tell him that I will. He then adds, somewhat forcefully, "*pray for me by name!*". Typically, I like to make a catch-all supplication for those who ask me to pray for them, in which I say "O Allāh bless all of those who asked me to pray for them..." as a way to dispense of my obligation to stay true to my word. I picked up this method from my own interactions with the Imam. Whenever I would ask him to pray for me, he would immediately say "May Allāh bless you and enlighten you". In the supplications that he would make out loud in front of the entire congregation he would similarly say, "O Allāh bless all those who asked me to pray for them". It thus seemed to me that fulfilling a request for a prayer from somebody else was a serious matter, and so I adopted a catch-all prayer. But this congregant seems to know the tricks

of the trade, and wants me to explicitly mention his name. I had received similar requests before entering I'tikāf from friends and family, and had written down names and requests for prayers in a small notebook. It does feel strange to carry the expectation of others as someone perceived as having especially powerful prayers.

At 1:15pm precisely, the microphone is switched on, letting off a singular, loud noise that echoes through the hall. Immediately, Qur'āns are closed, and rosaries are paused. A hushed 'Bismillahi Al-Rahman Al-Raheem' (in the name of God, the most merciful, the most compassionate) by the Mua'ddhin (the one who gives the call to prayer). The Adhān (call to prayer) is given by the mua'ddhin. After hearing his voice, I now realise that he is the same Helper who was using the industrial-sized vacuum earlier – an Algerian giving the Adhān in a predominantly South Asian mosque says something about the culture of the mosque.

As the Adhān finishes, some people immediately stand to offer their Sunnah prayers. These are recommended prayers that are attached to a main, obligatory prayer. Outside of Ramadan, I would usually arrive at the mosque just slightly before the start of the main congregational prayer. But here in Ramadan, and in I'tikāf, there is no question that I rise to offer this recommended prayer. Before I rise, I offer a recommended du'ā (supplication) after the Adhān; I raise my hands and recite the du'ā, which essentially asks God to confer great salutations and peace upon the Prophet Muhammad. Once done with this, I stand and offer my Sunnah prayers. My mind feels somewhat worn in these prayers; I wonder, was it my commitment to continue reciting the Qur'ān that has weakened my capacity for heartfelt prayer? Is this spiritual stamina that I am contending with, or is it me confronting my dopamine reliance?

I finish my Sunnah prayers, which usually takes me around 6 or 7 minutes. I have a few more minutes before the congregational prayer begins. I see that Mutfi Saab and some of the other Mu'takifs have returned to reciting the Qur'ān after completing their Sunnah prayers, staying true to their efforts to complete multiple readings of the Qur'ān. I opt to make additional supplications. I recall a hadith, a saying of the Prophet Muhammad, in which he said that the supplication made between the Adhān and the iqāmah (a swifter version of the Adhān pronounced right before the congregational prayer begins) is never rejected. I consider that I am here in the month of Ramadan, in the final ten days, its most scared period, in a mosque, in the ritual of I'tikāf, and finally in the time between the Adhān and iqāmah: a Russian doll of sacred spaces and times, folding upon each other, culminating and crystallising in my decision to supplicate to God, rather than continue to progress through my current reading of the Qur'ān. I ask God to bestow blessings, ease and acceptance on the congregant who asked me to pray for him earlier.

The Young Imam arrives in the mosque. This mosque has two Imams. One senior, experienced and from an Old-Garde of scholars who did their scholarly training abroad, in this case, in India. The other is younger, but still experienced. He is likely in his early 30s, and forms part of an Avant-Garde of scholars who study in the exported British chapters of the same institutes that the Old-Garde trained in. They are born in different spaces and decades apart, but there is a clear continuity, with the younger Imam existing within the same tradition of Deobandi scholarship.

The younger Imam walks forward through the prayer hall with a sense of purpose, criss-crossing the chequered pattern of worshipers like a bishop on a chess board. A few steps behind him is the *mua'ddhin*, who will also pronounce the *Iqāmah*. As the Imam reaches the front, he pauses to greet Mufti Saab. The forward march of the Imam and the *mua'ddhin* to the front of the mosque is usually a very purposeful and swift affair, so the pause to greet Mufti Saab is a significant marker of the respect that is afforded to him.

The *iqāmah* is given, and the entire hall, now filled with chequered congregants, rises to begin the prayer. The Imam begins the prayer. We collectively enter into this sacred experience, but are left to contend with our own streams of consciousness. The *Zuhr* prayer is a silent prayer, so the Imam does not recite any portion of the *Qur'ān* out loud. He also gives the *takbīr* (*Allāh hu Akbar*) out loud, which is said just before changing positions. I find silent prayers harder to focus in, because there isn't an external stimulus in the form of a melodious recitation that I am able to latch my focus onto. I instead try to sharpen my sense of presence and ponder over the wonders of God's creation; the night before, Mufti Saab had given a short lecture on the wonders of human communication. My wonder switches to an amount of guilt as I recall moments where my own communication has hurt others. I lower my head ashamedly, and intensify my concentration, hoping to earn forgiveness. As the prayer proceeds, my concentration wanes.

After the prayer concludes, a quiet wave of sighs sounds through the prayer hall, with the first few words of supplications for acceptance of the prayer and forgiveness being said out loud by some congregants, before they say the remainder in silence. The initial loudness is perhaps an expression of passion. Soon after, the Imam makes an announcement. He begins, "we have an important announcement to make"... my ears pike up... "Mufti Saab has joined us"... I stop paying attention. The same announcement has been made often over the last few days. The Imam announces that Mufti Saab is here. He is presented as a special feature of the last ten days of Ramadan; the Islamic equivalent of announcing which celebrity will host the Oscars. An elaborate programme of activity is announced; after 'Aṣr (late afternoon prayer), Mufti Saab will deliver an exegesis of *Surah Baqarah*, the second and longest *Surah* is the *Qur'ān*. Then, after *Fajr* (sunrise prayer), he will give a short *bayaan* (lecture) on the miracles of God's creation. On the weekend, he will give two seminars; the

first will be a deep exposition into the intricacies of moon-sighting. The second will be an open QA session. Mufti Saab had told me about the weekend programmes, and jokingly said that the mosque are not giving him a chance to rest.

The Imam makes another announcement that somebody is here to fundraise on behalf of an Islamic seminary in India. The Imam speaks very highly of this institute, and highlights that the Senior Imam had studied there. Again, I note streams of continuity, starting from distant times and places in India, finding manifestation in the particularities of my setting.

After the announcements, the Imam leaves, and congregants stand to individually conduct the Sunnah prayers that are recommended after the main congregational prayers. The main congregational prayer of course has a standardised pace to it; everybody begins, moves and ends in unison. But for the individual prayers, there are as many prayer speeds as there are people. Some pray quickly, hurtling from position to position. I often wonder how they manage to recite the requisite portions of the Qur'ān in such a brief period. Others have a slower pace. Judging by the number of people left in the prayer hall after I had finished my own Sunnah prayers, I would be among the slowest 20% of worshippers. I feel licence to pray slowly, deliberately and in a relaxed fashion because I know I have nothing to rush to. I have no meetings, assignments, or chores here. In that sense, there is no opportunity cost to praying slowly. I realise that my commitment to prayer and worship outside of I'tikāf is negotiated between my other responsibilities; here, in this space of isolation, I can perhaps access the richer depths of prayer with a deliberate slowness that helps me to experience khushu' (tranquillity).

Most congregants have left the mosque. The hall is largely empty again, but there is a hum in the air, a residual excitement left over from the room having been filled with passionate worshippers. Again, it is the Mu'takifs, the Mu'takif Lite, and the odd roaming helper that are here. Each is engaged in their own form of worship: some flick away at rosaries, many busily continue their readings of the Qur'ān, another reification of Mufti Saab's advice.

Slowly, the Mu'takif Lite start to leave the mosque, all except one. The Mu'takifs also slowly head back upstairs. I am engaged in reciting more Qur'ān, slightly more enthused towards it given the change of pace that the congregational prayer afforded me. I head upstairs after most of the Mu'takifs, and Mufti Saab. Angry remains downstairs, reciting Qur'ān on his own. I exit the Safe Zone and briskly traverse the Dafe Zone, arriving safely in the upstairs Safe Zone, where our tents were set up. Mufti Saab and the Mu'takifs have formed a circle near the front. Mufti Saab is giving some kind of address; as I approach and take a seat in the circle, I see that he is answering questions from the Mu'takifs. He does so with gusto and a great sense of humour. One Mu'takif asks a question about

isāli thawāb (passing on reward of a good deed to a deceased relative). He is asking whether it is possible for one to do a good deed, and ask God to apportion the reward of that good deed to a deceased relative. This is often done by Muslims in hope that they can assist their deceased relatives with additional reward from God, improving their prospects for salvation. Mufti Saab answers by stating that a number of opinions exist, showing that he is conversant with a breadth of viewpoints, before saying that “what *we* believe in is...”. There is an assumed “we” here – something that we all adhere to; although we have been with Mufti Saab for only a number of days, he has assumed a sharedness in belonging to a particular collective of thought. Between this and the streams of continuity to India and other seminaries, this mosque, and Mufti Saab, consciously belong to a particular cognate, which seems to be the Deobandi movement.

Soon after, the circle convenes. Most Mu'takifs retire to their tents for a nap, but Angry and some of the elders stay awake. I debate whether I should or should not go to sleep. Exhaustion is building up; my sleep is patchy and my body aches. I recall that it is the 25th night of Ramadan tonight. The Night of Power, the most important night in Ramadan, when Muslims believe the Qur'ān was first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, is said to occur on the one of the odd nights within the final ten nights of Ramadan. There is, however, no decisive answer as to exactly which night it occurs on. This creates an active pursuit – a *seeking* of the Night of Power. Hence Muslims intensify worship on the odd nights of Ramadan. Worshipping on that night earns one the reward of worshipping for 1,000 months – essentially a lifetime. It is highly sought after. Indeed, one of my motivations of being in I'tikāf is to guarantee that I am in a state of this worship whenever the Night may be. Since it is the 25th Night tonight, there is a chance that tonight might be it. I then decide that I should nap; this nap is with the intent that I preserve my energy to engage in worship throughout the night.

I enter my tent, and see that part of the curtain is not drawn. I see my cousin there, who is one of the mosque's longstanding volunteers. He is currently rendering a video of one of Mufti Saab's lectures to be uploaded. He takes care of the mosque's IT infrastructure. We converse briefly about how tired we both are, but how happy we are to be here, far away from the world and its various challenges. We are interrupted when Funny walks by; he approaches us and starts to complain that the Clique of Mu'takifs are talking far too loudly in the tent next to him, so he cannot sleep. He complains angrily that they talk more than women. Tension has been brewing between Funny and the Clique. It started the night before during Iftar. One of the members of the clique, whom I call Bradford (he seemed convinced that I was from Bradford before I had met him), had brought 3 of his favourite glass cups into I'tikāf with him. Bradford alleged that Funny had broken two of them, but Funny claimed that Bradford was drinking hot tea in them, which would cause the glass to break. Unable to resolve the conflict, Funny had moved his prayer mat from the left side of the prayer hall (where the Clique frequented) to the right side, nearer to Angry and I.

I slip on my eye mask – a necessity, given the amount of light pouring in on the 1st floor of the mosque. I fall asleep quickly – I tend to enjoy the afternoon naps more. It feels like the period from the morning to after *Zuhr* prayer isn't the start of the day, but is a period of waking sandwiched between two periods of sleep.

I am woken up by the sound of a Hoover at around 6:15pm. I exit my tent and see a Helper busily and energetically doing the Hoover. He usually does the Hoover irrespective of whether somebody has already done it or not. This aged Arab man is a relatively new Helper, but is zealous and has earned the trust of the other Helpers, indicated by him being trusted to pronounce the *Adhān* from time to time.

I head to the washroom and make *wuḍū'*, again careful to maintain a brisk pace in the Dafe Zone. I head upstairs, and place my prayer rug down on the front line, right side. I do this because I expect that the mosque remains busy from 'Aṣr (late afternoon prayer) right through until when the fast opens at Maghrib (sunset prayer). So I need to make sure that I stay nearer the front. In the first day of *I'tikāf*, I had sat nearer to the back of the hall, and one of the Helpers said to me that I should be in the front because I am in *I'tikāf*; for this Helper, *Mu'takifs* occupying the foremost rows, which hold greater virtue than the back rows, is such a common sight in the mosque, that doing so otherwise would warrant comment.

I resume reciting the *Qur'ān*, feeling more enthused after having recuperated with my afternoon nap. Similarly to *Zuhr* time, the *Mu'takif Lite* appear around a similar time to when the other *Mu'takif* begin to come downstairs and take up their positions across the prayer room. Again, there is a diversity of forms of worship: most seem to be investing in reciting the *Qur'ān*, but some are praying extra units of prayer, and others are working through rosaries, engaged in *Dhikr*. 30 minutes before the 'Aṣr congregational prayer begins, the mosque is officially opened, and the main hall slowly begins to fill, with worshippers settling and worshipping, organising themselves again in a chequered pattern.

15 minutes before prayer, the microphone again switches on, and the *muedhḥin* sounds the *Adhān*. Promptly again, many stand to offer their *Sunnah* prayers. Outside of *I'tikāf*, I would tend to arrive at the mosque shortly before the congregational prayer, but here in *I'tikāf*, I gird my spiritual stamina and perform the *Sunnah* prayers. For the remaining time before congregational prayer, I engage in supplications, conscious of the Russian doll of sacred spaces and times that I inhabit. Once more, the Young Imam emerges and leads the prayer. I feel I can concentrate better in this prayer; my fatigue is not quite as overbearing as it had been at *Zuhr* time.

After the prayer, the Imam makes an announcement that Mufti Saab will be continuing his exegesis on Surah Baqarah. As soon as the Mufti rises to move forward, a fleet of Helpers descend; one pulls out a wooden floor desk, and places it where Mufti Saab will sit. Another pulls out a microphone and attaches it to Mufti Saab's turquoise thobe. A third sets up a tri-pod and a recorder. The fleet of Helpers evidently consists of experienced, autonomous, and zealous assistants who rush to help Mufti Saab.

The lecture is about the verses of Surah Baqarah which discuss the qibla (the direction of prayer). It is delivered in fluent English – the Mufti was born in the UK. The Mufti highlights how Islam differs from Judaism and Christianity – he is well versed in both faiths and is able to distinguish between sects within each faith. He speaks of Islam as a moderate religion, mentioning other worldviews as an example. He somehow talks briefly about gender roles – specifically the permissibility around tasting food to gauge flavour for a fasting woman if she fears anger from her husband, complaining in a tongue-in-cheek fashion that this is the only rule men seem to know about, and they get angry after a whole day of fasting – he stresses how common this is. This is a male space and he is speaking to men, but a concern for women is clearly present. The Mufti doesn't seem to be hostage to any sentiments on this matter either – he speaks brazenly and openly about this contentious area. The whole talk is filled with impromptu jokes and audience interactions. 30 minutes whizz by – he is an engaging speaker. He mentions during the talk that we are not Qur'ānists – we are Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l Jamā'ah (the fuller name of Sunni Islam) – a concern for orthodoxy, and an assumed shared identity – implies that there is a perceived, known and shared identity that the Mufti is appealing to. The entire lecture is to great effect. As he drops gems of wisdom, people bow their heads, shaking their heads, uttering sighs of grief and kissing their teeth. They are moved. But it seems only the older attendees are making such audible gestures of impact; younger attendees tend to remain quieter.

Since it is now 7:45pm, there is around an hour left until Maghrib. Many people opt to stay in the mosque between 'Aṣr and Maghrib to listen to the Mufti's address, and to worship in the mosque, in the relatively short interval between the two prayers. Most people are reciting the Qur'ān. The chorus of low humming recitation creates a distinct buzz, foregrounded by excited chatter, by Helpers, children playing, and people talking. From where I am sat in the front row, I see the utility door swing open, and two Helpers heave in a crate with packed food packages. I remember all of a sudden that the mosque gives out food packages for free at the side entrance every day in Ramadan. It was an initiative that they had started during Covid-19. But I am struck that I had completely forgotten about this whilst being in I'tikāf. I am truly *inside* the mosque, to an extent such that I lost awareness of the outward-facing activity of the mosque.

I sit down to engage in Dhikr. I take out my notepad, and begin to recite a litany that I had listed before I entered I'tikāf. My mind wanders quite a lot. I realise that I am quite stressed, because I am clasp my head, holding a clump of hair. When I am given the chance to pause and ponder, emotions surface. They have always been there, but have otherwise been muffled by the stream of activity and busyness that would constitute my days.

I realise that there is not too much longer to go until Maghrib time. I head upstairs to tidy up my tent and pack up. This is something we must do every day before Tarāwih (an additional, optional but highly emphasised prayer conducted during the night in Ramadan), because the mosque is usually at full capacity. As I exit the Safe Zone and head upstairs, I see a friend who pauses to greet me. Whilst still in walking, I shake his hand, and say to him "I'm in I'tikāf, I cannot stop here!". He shouts after me, asking me to pray for him.

Whilst I am tidying my tent, I see Angry sitting upstairs on his own, his hands raised in supplication, and he is weeping. The time before Maghrib prayer is especially valuable and is a time when supplications are readily accepted by God. It isn't unusual to see somebody hunched over, hands held up, weeping and beseeching God.

I return downstairs and take up my seat at the front of the prayer hall. I see a Mu'takif Lite next to me. He turns around and looks at me, and greets me. He walks over, picks up my water bottle – I carry around a 2.2 litre gym keg – and he heads off to fill it up. The water fountain is in the Dafe Zone, so he has formed a habit of filling it up for me. I asked him to on the first day of I'tikāf, and he has since taken to habitually filling it up. This kind of treatment isn't unusual. It feels like being a Mu'takif makes one a kind of celebrity in the mosque. Helpers and congregants flock to doing khidma (service and assistance) for us. They usually ask us to pray for them as well.

Soon after, a congregant settles for prayer next to me. I call him Kufi because he wears a kufi, a West African-style hat. I assume he is also from there. He greets me warmly. I have not seen him around before, but he has been consistently attending the mosque since I've been in I'tikāf. What had started with a nod of acknowledge has blossomed into a friendly handshake and mutual assistance. Yesterday I was late in coming downstairs after 'Aṣr, and I worried that I would miss my spot near the front. Lo and behold, Kufi had placed his jacket on a prayer spot to reserve a space for me.

Around 15 minutes before Maghrib begins, the hall quietens into a hushed hum. More Qur'āns are closed, and more hands rise in supplication. The moments before Iftar (the sunset meal which breaks the fast) are said to be an important time of acceptance, so it is typical to see people focus on supplication during this time. I raise my own hands and engage in supplication as well. I supplicate

with strong emotion for around 10 minutes, before I begin to feel my spiritual stamina deplete. I decide to swap to dhikr instead. I reason that since it is potentially the Night of Power, I will need to save my most heartfelt prayers for this night, rather than burn out at a comparatively less sacred time. I seem to apportion my spiritual stamina vis-à-vis a hierarchy of sacred time. This seems to be true for the mosque as a whole, with far more attendees being in the hall on odd nights (when it may be the Night of Power) than otherwise.

There are mere minutes left until it is time to break our fast. The microphone switches on. A sure sign that the Adhān is about to be given and the fast will be broken. The murmurs dull down to near silence, except for a caretaker ushering the children into the prayer hall. Then the Adhān is sounded, signalling that Maghrib time has begun, and we may now eat. A chorus of rustling erupts, as people start unwrapping their dates and other brief starters. They do this exactly where they are sat, in the rows for praying.

A great date exchange ensues. Kufi leans over to me and hands me a date. I accept, and offer him one, not out of a desire to pay him back, but as a marker of affection. I give him a Medjool date, a large, soft and moist date that are especially popular. The one that I have is from Palestine: I tend to buy Palestinian dates in Ramadan, as do many other Muslims, in support of Palestinian farmers. A transnational phenomenon, the Israel-Palestine conflict, finds expression in this small bit of fruit I now hold in my hand. The date that Kufi gave me was a Halawy date, a sweet, comparatively smaller date, with a caramel-like flavour that originated in Mesopotamia. This date exchange is happening all across the hall; I receive at least 3 additional dates from those around me. Yet, we wear masks and pray in a socially distanced manner. It seems that the fear of Covid-19 hasn't quite quashed this one social phenomenon. In being part of this exchange, I feel part of a common social fabric. People around me, dressed in different ways, of different ages and ethnicities, find common expression in dates. The choice of date is of course inspired by the Prophet Muhammad's recommendation to break a fast with a date. Thus, the common fabric that unites us here is an adherence to a Prophetic past, and the sharedness of having fasted for a day. Yet the lives that we all lead are even more diverse than the dates we exchange. I am here in I'tikāf, a Mu'takif Lite is to my right, Kufi, a congregant is to my left. Mufti Saab is two spaces away from me, and a Helper is behind me. There is diversity here, then there is unity through the dates as a symbol of adherence to a Prophetic past, and then there is yet more diversity nested within this unity that represents the multifarious ways in which this Prophetic past is actualised; some through the gooey-goodness of the Medjool date, and others through the honey-caramel tenderness of the Halawy date. I feel part of something here.

Before eating the date, I utter a specific supplication, declaring to Allāh that I fasted for Him, and that I believed in Him, and I trusted in Him, and with His rizq (provision and providence), I now break my

fast. I can hold a date with but two fingers, but it has become an archetype of the ritual of fasting. If fasting is the absence of food, the symbol of the counterpoint to the absence of food is the date. As I bite it, I am stunned by how sweet it is, how enriching it feels, and how good it is to merely chew something. The very first thing that I eat after fasting for a day is always the most delicious food that I have ever tasted, inside or outside of Ramadan.

I quickly start to drink from my 2.2 litre gym keg. I aim to get through the entire bottle throughout the non-fasting hours. But currently, there is another presence that I feel. Since it is now past sunset, which in Islamic terms constitutes the start of the night, it could well be the Night of Power; the Night that contains therein the virtue of 1,000 months. This particular Night represents an especially intense confluence of sacred times and spaces: it is Ramadan, in the last ten nights, on an odd night, in the mosque, during the ritual of I'tikāf. This sacred constellation that I occupy invokes the memory of the first revelation to the Prophet Muhammad to the present day. This memory of the first revelation of the Qur'ān to the Prophet Muhammad is a sacred memory that is potent so as to create successive sacred moments in the last ten nights of Ramadan, every year, itself commanding the edifice of the mosque orient itself and its congregants to seeking this sacred ritual. What comes through here, then, is the strength of the connectedness to this memory of the first revelation, and inseparably to this, the character of the Prophet Muhammad, who was the avatar unto which this initial revelation was first experienced. 1,400 years later, on a little island far away from the Arabian Peninsula, sits an agglomeration of believers, substantially inconveniencing themselves to catch an echo of this moment. All of the Mu'takifs here have taken 10 full days to seek this moment, and the crowded buzz of the mosque suggests that many more in this congregation are trying to do the same. The Night of Power is thus an especially grand phenomenon, in that it commands with such deft the actions of congregants.

Aware of the potential magnanimity of this moment, I do not waste time indulging myself with more dates. I break into more supplication, uttering specifically a supplication that has been recommended for the Night of Power: *O Allāh indeed you are the Effacer of Sins, and you love to efface sins, so efface my sins.* My brow furrows as I direct my attention towards continually reciting this supplication.

The Imam steps forward to lead the prayer, and another rustling of bags erupts as people pack away their dates and water bottles. The Young Imam leads with a deliberate swiftness. Ordinarily, he would take pauses between the verses of Surah Fātiḥa (the chapter of the Qur'ān that must be recited in every unit of every prayer). But now he does not, because he knows that this prayer is what stands between a hall full of hungry congregants and their Iftar. Accordingly, he recites shorter portions of the Qur'ān.

As the prayer finishes, a considerable number of people immediately leave the mosque, not staying to pray their Sunnah prayers, probably because they are extremely hungry. However, many do stay to pray their Sunnah prayers, more than usual. This is because it could be the Night of Power. This year, the mosque is not providing free Iftar for congregants because of Covid-19; Iftar is only provided for Mu'takifs. Usually, most of us assemble downstairs quickly for food, except for Angry who is always the last one down, as he is always engaged in deep supplication. But today, we are all much slower heading downstairs to our meal. We are praying our Sunnah prayers slowly, deliberately. Once I have finished praying my Sunnah prayers, I begin to supplicate. These moments could be moments in which I acquire salvation: such is the magnanimity of Night of Power; I intend to use this night as rigorously as possible. It is in pursuit of the Night of Power that I enter I'tikāf to begin with; it is to catch that night which is more sacred than 1,000 months. I feel hunger pangs stirring sharply: the dates I ate whetted my appetite. Yet I quite intentionally decide to sit and supplicate for longer. This is *the* night to stretch my spiritual stamina and bask in the 1,000 months condensed into mere hours.

I eventually head downstairs. I am the third latest downstairs to eat. A Mu'takif Lite joins us for food, followed by Angry. I am greeted by a banquet: there is a Turkish meat platter, lasagne, chicken popcorn, chicken nuggets, drumsticks, and pakoras. Somebody grabs my plate and heaps chips and chicken onto it. They are a group of friends who have organised this, and they have strong connections between them. They refer to me as 'the I'tikāf brother', and continually check on me, lovingly bemoaning how little I eat, though I reassure them that I've eaten enough. The lasagne is vegetarian, and they say it is delicious but that they never usually eat vegetarian food. They all ask me for du'ā, and du'ā I joke and say that "keep the food coming, and I will keep making du'ā". I am then handed a dessert, a tidy cheesecake. Then I am handed a Krispy Kreme doughnut. I insist that I make tea for some of the people who treated me; they tell me to sit, insisting that they should be doing *Khidmah* (service) for me instead. I insist and go and make them tea. When I come back, I find my doughnut is missing! The culture of sharing and giving has claimed a victim. I hand out tea and am warmly thanked. There is a shared tidy-up operation, but the group of friends does most of it. I then thank them profusely and promise them that I will supplicate for them. They insist that supplication is all that they ask for. They seem extremely keen to help, and this is not the first time that they have brought food. People outside of I'tikāf seem to form a satellite of *Khidmah* around the Mu'takifs, to absorb the potential for virtuous deeds; the Mu'takif Lite, the Helpers, and now this group of friends orbit around us. Somebody then reads out a text from the Imam: "don't bring food tomorrow; I will bring Haleem, naan, spring rolls, and fries." Haleem is meat stew, something of a delicacy.

Although I intended to eat quickly and then head upstairs for more worship, I am slowed by the mass of food and the party-like atmosphere engendered by the lively group of friends. I am slightly

frustrated at myself for this, and it shows that even in this highly enclaved space in the mosque, my swaying nafs (lower self) still finds expression. I head upstairs and take up my place near the front. I place my hoody down in the space next to me; Kufi asked me to reserve a spot for him after Maghrib prayer. The scarcity of the prayer spaces is causing an economy of the *ṣufūf* (prayer rows) to emerge.

I begin to engage in dhikr. I did not want to tire myself for the long night of prayer that awaited me, so I recited litanies. The prayer hall began to fill rapidly, such that three-quarters of the hall was full before the ‘Ishā’ (night-time prayer) *Adhān* (15 minutes before the congregation). The intensity of the mosque activity here was explained by the possibility of it being the Night of Power. As the *Adhān* was given, I stood and offered by Sunnah prayers, thereafter continuing to engage in litanies. The Imam arrived, and ‘Ishā’ congregational prayer was performed. Although the congregational prayers of the five daily prayers are legally the most important, here it seems like the additional *Tarāwīḥ* prayer is the highlight of the mosque’s activity. The ‘Ishā’ congregational prayer is led in a similar swift fashion to the Maghrib congregational prayer – the Young Imam leads and does not pause between verses, suggesting that this prayer is worth offering somewhat quickly for whatever is to come. For Maghrib prayer, what was to come was the long-awaited iftar. But here for ‘Ishā’ prayer, what was to come was the *Tarāwīḥ* prayer. The *Tarāwīḥ* prayer is an optional but highly recommended prayer that is conducted after the ‘Ishā’ prayer, specifically in Ramadan. It is common for the entire *Qur’ān* to be recited over the course of successive *Tarāwīḥ* prayers in Ramadan, with the completion of the *Qur’ān* to be coincided with an odd night, thus deliberately aligning the sacred times of completing the *Qur’ān* with the possible sacred time of the Night of Power.

Soon after ‘Ishā’ congregational prayers are offered, the *Ḥuffāz* arrive. A *ḥāfīz* (plural *Ḥuffāz*) is someone who has committed the entirety of the *Qur’ān*, verbatim, to memory. Since *Tarāwīḥ* prayer includes reciting long portions of the *Qur’ān* every night, a vanguard of *Ḥuffāz* are positioned immediately behind where the Imam prays so that, should any mistakes be made during the recitation of the *Qur’ān* that forms part of the prayer, it can quickly be corrected. The way in which the correction is done is if the *Ḥāfīz* mis-recites a verse, one of the *Ḥuffāz* (or anybody else that happens to know that portion of the *Qur’ān*) will repeat the correct version out loud.

They form a relay of sorts; each *Ḥāfīz* recites part of the total prayer; *Tarāwīḥ* can last over 90 mins, so it is a demanding affair. They take up their positions that have been reserved for them near the front. The front two rows thus include the *Mu’takifs* and the *Ḥuffāz*. It seems that the economy of the *ṣufūf* that has emerged from the scarcity of the prayer spaces has its currency – spiritual capital.

Each *Ḥāfīz* read chunks of 4, until the last four, wherein it was split into chunks of two. The reciters varied in proficiency but were all experts. The more elderly *Ḥāfīz* were far more proficient, making

no mistakes. When a younger Ḥāfīz leads, he is corrected but does not repeat the correction. After the unit of prayer concludes, there are a few nervous seconds of conversation between several ḥuffaz and the senior ḥuffaz. The Senior Imam takes the microphone, and tells everyone that a mistake was made and that it will need to be corrected. That particular portion of the Qur'ān will have to be recited again. There is a commitment to perfection.

The final two units of prayer were given to the Imam. He was saved to the end, rather than being plonked in the middle somewhere. There was a kind of finality to that, a natural significance, given that he had been the Imam of the mosque for some 20 years or so. His recitation was passionate, it had a sense of desperation, and he didn't make a single mistake in the duration of his recitation. He is reduced to tears on verses about heaven and hell. He tries to hold it back but eventually is overcome, and he must pause. When he continues in the second unit of prayer, he sounds like a defeated man. Some other congregants begin to cry as well. I do feel a weighty emotion, but not sufficient to move me to tears.

Once the Tarāwīḥ prayer concludes, the Senior Imam makes a supplication. It lasts around 5 minutes; he makes asks for forgiveness for the entire congregation, and peace across the world. He specifically makes du'ā for Masjid Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem, for it to be liberated and freed from oppression.

Following this, the Senior Imam makes an announcement: one is to make du'ā for the people of Palestine – he says that you will have seen the videos being sent around, and make special du'ā for them tonight, recite 2 units of prayer for them as well. I have not seen these videos, as my phone has been off, but I am perturbed to hear this. I do not know the nature of what has happened but I assume it is part of the cycle of violence that has sadly come to characterise what is otherwise the city of the Abrahamic soul. His second announcement is that the Qur'ān is being completed soon in Tarāwīḥ, and he says that the mosque has been overwhelmed with visitors. He asks the newer visitors to go to other mosques, and let those who have been here from the start of the month to stay during the completion of the Qur'ān. The impact of Covid here has created a premium on space in the mosque, which has created an economy to manage this scarcity – the currency in this economy is Eventbrite tickets. But the regular attendees of the mosque are to be given a higher priority here.

The Tarāwīḥ prayer thus concludes, and congregants quite rapidly disperse. Some remain behind to engage in extra worship. I remain seated and pray some more litanies, which I feel a particular attachment to. I have developed a routine for my nights. They are solitary affairs, and I like them this way. All the Mu'takifs and Mufti Saab head upstairs and talk for some time before dispersing for worship. I choose not to and instead want to spend the time in isolation. There is something more solitary about the night that makes me feel in deep seclusion. I first make tea, because I expect myself

to be up until at least 4:30am, and it has just passed 11:30pm. I am reminded that I am invoking the progenitors of coffee – the Sufis – who used caffeine to support their night-time devotions. A strong tea culture is present here: there are several varieties of tea, and considerable attention is given to providing tea; Carnation milk is there, we have a bona fide *chai wala* (a tea maker), and a vat of tea is prepared for the Mufti which becomes a distinct gathering point.

I then start reciting the Qur’ān. I become deeply engrossed in it. My knowledge of Arabic is enough to give me some amount of meaning. My head starts swinging. I recite louder and faster, reciting approximately a 15th of the Qur’ān in an hour. It is thoroughly enjoyable. I love being here, alone, and loud. The tranquillity of the space, and how engrossing the recitation is, is thoroughly enjoyable. I want to be here. Then I treat myself to a bar of chocolate because I plan to swap to a more intense form of worship. I head upstairs to get my phone, which I will use to recite the Qur’ān. I see that some people are asleep. I return to the main prayer hall, where I revise what I have memorised of the Qur’ān. I aspire to be a Ḥāfiẓ one day.

As I do my memorising, I try to imagine ascending through the heavens as I memorise – the reward for those who memorise the Qur’ān as conveyed in a hadith. This does make me quite emotional. I then pray some *nafl* (supererogatory prayers) nearer the front. I recite from what I have memorised and then spend quite a while in prostration. I am probably there for around 20 minutes. My supplication is split into: me, immediate family, wider family, friends, and the Ummah. My prayers about me are filled with admissions of guilt, and I feel a rush of mistakes, bursts of anger, acts of injustice, and moral sloppiness heap upon me. I am not able to even articulate all of them, and feel my tongue knot. Thus I just end up saying *Allāh* over and over again, overwhelmed by my flaws. Then a strange sense of hope comes into me, as I start saying to Allāh that if He had forsaken me, I would have been consumed by the earth, or the sea would’ve boiled over, or he would’ve snatched away my oxygen. What I am saying now is an indicator of how deep the Mufti’s lectures on gratitude have penetrated me. Thus I say that Allāh has brought me here, and I beg Him to not let me leave. I ask Him to take me into Him and to hollow me out of everything that is not for Him. I reminisce about what this may mean, the aspects of life that I may have to give up and change. There is hesitancy in my heart now. But I lean into this, and began saying ‘no matter what’ several times over. This is an important development for me, because I am being me, flaws and warts and all, before Allāh, and this is becoming my fount of supplication. I feel more content, and conclude, feeling the carpet having left a mark on my forehead. My hair has flopped over my head by now.

It is nearly 2am. I should consider heading downstairs to have *Sehri*, the pre-dawn meal. I continue to worship, wanting to make the most of this night. I am late down for *Sehri*. But I do not care. I briefly consider skipping *Sehri* altogether, but I decide that this isn’t a good idea, and that I should eat for the

day ahead. I feel a deep need to change. I am anxious to return to the world so that I can mend my ways and change and be better, because I really feel that I need to!

I head downstairs and see Mufti Saab eating Shreddies. The Mufti laughs and says I am walking like a zombie. He says I've been walking like a Zombie since day one. The group has developed enough to make jokes with each other like this. I have cereal, and somebody makes me tea. Someone mentions that the Counter-Terror Police foiled a plot to bomb a mosque in Yorkshire. I am quite rocked by this. I remark that there will be more of such things. I am shocked because, the event is shocking, but also that, I have hardly thought about the outside world at all. I have not used Whatsapp, social media, and I haven't checked the news. And it feels that this one bit of news causes a rush of thoughts and emotions, of the challenges that are still out there, waiting.

Fajr (the dawn prayer) is swiftly approaching, and I must complete my meal and make sure I have enough water before then. I head up, do the usual routine of medication, toothbrush, and then settle downstairs in the main prayer hall. I sit near the front as usual, but do not reserve any seats around me – Kufi does not come to Fajr prayer.

As the time for Fajr congregation approaches, the prayer hall is around three-quarters full. The congregational prayer is held. It proceeds as usual until the Young Imam initiates an additional supplication within the prayer that is specifically done during a time of difficulty or conflict. I am surprised by this, but soon realise that this is likely in response to the situation in Palestine. Thus does an international event find a localised manifestation in the form of an adjustment to prayer.

After the prayer, Mufti Saab does another lecture as part of his series on gratitude. The lecture is well-attended, given that it is around 3am. Mufti then gives his talk on insects and how essential they are to human living. The lecture is filled with statistics and interesting facts. He then gives a poem on the departing of Ramadan. This is something clearly in the air now, and people are thinking about it, and talk of Eid is increasing. After the talk concludes, people stay behind and socialise, including many of the Mu'takifs. I do not really have anybody that I could socialise with, so I position myself slightly further away and continue to recite the Qur'ān. I tire and go upstairs to sleep. I am exhausted but fulfilled. Thus ends my day in I'tikāf.

Ramadan's Endgame: Completing the Qur'ān

Tonight is the night that the recitation of the Qur'ān will be completed in the Tarāwih prayers. It is also the 29th night of Ramadan, an odd night, and therefore it might be the Night of Power. This night thus represents a deliberate confluence of the completion of the Qur'ān with a possible Night of

Power. The end of Ramadan is nigh, and a sense of finality hangs heavy in the air. This is the last odd night of Ramadan, and tomorrow might be the last day of Ramadan. I will be out of I'tikāf perhaps in less than 24 hours.

After Iftar, all of the Mu'takifs head upstairs quickly. It is perhaps the climax of Ramadan, at least for this mosque. This is evident in who is here. I recognise my old Qur'ān teacher, and he used to lead Tarāwiḥ here. He is here, and others are here; friends of the mosque from old are near the front. The front two rows are all reserved out. I take my place there. I see many of the main Helpers stepping forward, and the Imam waves at someone whom I don't recognise, but who is evidently important since he takes up a reserved spot. Then the Ḥuffāz emerge, and they look great. They wear turbans and special garbs. They are dressed for the occasion. There is more space made. A former Imam at the mosque is also here. It feels like the Avengers Endgame. Everyone is here, showing up, in spectacular fashion, dressed well, gathering around the central figure, the Imam, as they stand in rows, ready to commence the prayer, to finish the Qur'ān, on what might be one of the most important nights of the year. This is the peak of Ramadan, concentrated down to this mosque, in these rows. The atmosphere is buzzing and charged; reverent and excited. The prayer commences. We head from the 30th Juz of the Qur'ān, one of the most immediately recognisable portions of the Qur'ān. A few people begin to cry as we approach the end. The Senior Imam takes the lead right at the end. He concludes the Qur'ān in the first rakat, and then recites the first few verses of Surah Baqarah in the second, holding back tears as he recites. His voice wobbles. Others begin to cry more. Then the Tarāwiḥ concludes. The Imam tells everyone to recite the durood sharif. The lights are then switched off, and the Imam begins the du'ā. Somebody in the front row starts crying immediately. The first portion of the du'ā is in Arabic. I consider if I should take notes, but I decide to be present with this moment instead. The Imam prays for forgiveness repeatedly, for pardon on the Day of Judgement, from being saved from the punishment of the grave, for forgiveness for deceived relatives, for acceptance of deeds. He uses mostly Prophetic prayers. He also makes du'ā for Palestine and the state of Muslims around the world, and he says *Masjid al-Aqsa* which solicits very loud amens. The congregation tend to say amen every time the Imam briefly pauses. They do not know Arabic evidently, because of the demographic, and secondly because they say amen when they aren't supposed to and are merely going by the audio cue. The Imam soon starts whimpering and sobbing as he speaks. More people also start to cry. Around me, it seems as though a quarter of the people are crying, but I am at the front and so there is a self-selection bias. This first part of the du'ā in Arabic goes on for around 20 minutes. The Imam then switches to Urdu, in which the amens become louder, and more people start crying. He makes similar prayers, but they seem more improvised here as well. At some point, it seems as if the Imam won't be able to continue speaking because of how much he is crying. He makes more du'ā for Palestine, Covid-19, Cancer patients, and right at the end, acceptance for the Mu'takifs. Once this

concludes, the new person from earlier comes forward to lead the Witr prayer; it seems he has been called down for the occasion.

And that is what it is: an occasion. Afterward, the mosque takes longer to clear out; *methai*⁵ boxes are handed out to everyone. The Huffāz and many others start hugging each other and congratulating one another. I join in because I feel indebted to them. I have sat close to them and have seen how hard they have worked. I have tried to memorise the Qur'ān and have struggled. I see how much work and preparation goes into this, and how multiple generations of people have been continually trained to continue this institution; that it takes several people dedicating not just their full-time lives to this, but on occasion, several decades of learning. There is a celebratory atmosphere in the air.

How Life Springs Anew: Leaving the Mosque

I then sit there, wondering about returning to the world. It makes me feel frightened and anxious. There is a profound simplicity to the way that I've been living. Waking up, praying, praying more, praying what I like, sleeping, being fed wonderful food. When I put it like that, what I've been doing has been significantly easier than regular living. Yet there is still an intensity to it that comes with confronting the self, the side of me that rebels and does not want to sit still. I feel that maybe I have spent enough time with that part of myself, and now after several days, I have been able to tame that part, and realise what lies beyond that, to be in the simple grace of worshipping Allāh.

But that isn't what life is to be. Otherwise, Allāh would have ordained this for us at all amounts. The fulfilled Viceroy of Allāh is he who confronts his place in this world, through rain or sunshine, snow or sleet, and into the very eye of the storm. If feels that I have been moving towards the storm, or am within it, and I've taken some refuge here in Allāh's house. But I realise I must exit this refuge and back toward the eye of the storm. Gone will be these simple days of the prayer of the isolated. The continual prayer, the continual obedience to Allāh, that can only ever truly be done in and among the people, through the storm. You may take an umbrella or a coat, but in the storm is where we must be, and where we are always meant to be. Herein lies the valiance of the spiritual warrior.

I must go back to this world. I must go back to what I fear and what I sought refuge from, and confront it. It has gone nowhere. Those blights have slipped their tentacles into this refuge, and into my mind. I fear what the source of these tentacles may be, and it is that which I am now to confront, in a few moments. *Tick tock*, the chains will unlock.

⁵ South Asian confectionary

I am not sure if I should sleep or stay up. I feel the time slipping away, but am very tired indeed. I do decide to nap in the end, hoping that I have a sound intention. Most are asleep. I am awoken by the Hoover. I continue to feel that fear; not wanting Ramadan and I'tikāf to go. The world feels so heavy. I don't want to go.

We tidy up our bedding, noting that this could be it, the last time. After 'Aṣr, there is a distinct sense of finality. The Imam announces that an attempt for moonsighting will be made. The Mufti's talk also is a preparation for the end of Ramadan.

After 'Aṣr, I recite Qur'ān, only making it just past the halfway mark. The mosque quiets faster, and more hands are up making du'ā. There is a heavy finality in the air. Some people are quietly crying. My own prayers are becoming desperate. In the last few minutes, I start making du'ā very quickly, trying to gather as much reward I can from the departing month.

Then the mic opens, and I feel emotional, thinking "*is that it? Has it gone?*". The Imam announces after Maghrib salah that they will now try to sight the moon, and an announcement will be made. An uncertainty hangs in the air, yet it does not dispel the finality.

We head down for iftar, which could be the very last time. A feast awaits; from the same chicken place that we have been having for the last few days. We eagerly talk about what may or may not come to pass. The Mufti looks at his phone and quietly says, 'Oh well it's done then'. He then says he isn't supposed to announce anything and laughs cheekily. I then say in a deliberately loud voice, 'What was that Mufti Saab?' We laugh, and the Mufti says, 'Oh I was just saying how well done this chicken is!', then one of the others says that, 'yeah it's got a great *Moroccan* flavour to it', a tongue-in-cheek reference to the fact that the moon has been sighted in Morocco. We all laugh. We have developed a bond and it is evident. The knowledge of Morocco as being used by the local mosque is well diffused among us.

Soon, a somewhat heated debate emerges being the appropriateness of using Morocco between two of the Helpers. The Mufti then swiftly heads upstairs to join the meeting between several scholars to decide officially when Eid will be. I'tikāf has been a unique insight to the inner workings of the masjid, across several levels: the mosque as a localised institution, as part of its broader transnational cognate (in this case Deobandi), as part of an attempted national institutionalisation (e.g. MCB posters), and other institutionalisation attempts (e.g. Wifaq). Inter-generational transmission of religious duties, I have been able to see very clearly.

After a while, one of the Mu'takifs comes running downstairs shouting, "*Azaadi Azaadi!*" ("Freedom freedom!"). A committee member comes down, and we ask him to confirm and he says he cannot until the official announcement comes, but he does confirm it in a tongue-in-cheek way. We see a hierarchy of decision-making, and I am able to observe this at a very close level. Then the official confirmation comes. Happiness comes upon all of our faces, and we begin to congratulate each other at the sighting of the moon. Some of the others head up quickly, and I tidy up. I text my father and tell him that we are finished here. I switch on my phone and WiFi. I have 96 WhatsApp chats to check. My brother messages me, saying that dad is on the way, and I become a bit emotional at having heard from him after such a while.

We head up and begin moving our stuff. Angry insists that we make a du'ā together. So we sit down, the 10 of us, a few Helpers, Imam and Mufti, and we make a heartfelt du'ā to conclude our experience. We then stand and begin hugging, and ask each other for forgiveness.

Then it is 'Ishā' time, so we pray. Thereafter, we start heading out. Mufti meets Dad, and he says I'm a fantastic lad. We hug tightly and we say we will keep in touch. After 'Ishā', we tidy up the curtains and are helped by others in the mosque. There are still quite a lot of people at the mosque for 'Ishā'.

We quickly pull the curtains down. I am feeling really eager to go now. So I help and then head out, waving my salaams to everyone. On the way down, I pause to greet the Senior Imam. I do not speak to him often, but I wanted to thank him because in truth I feel really grateful for all the effort he puts into holding the mosque together. I hug him, and I thank him for the nihari, and he laughs and asks me to make du'ā. I was asked by another to make du'ā and am congratulated by several people walking around.

I then put my shoes on, the first time I have worn shoes in 10 days. And gradually step outside. It is a beautiful night. I haven't been outside in 10 days. The air smells so sweet, and I love the night air. Everything looks so still and calm and beautiful. The outside world is captivating.

I arrive home, and I greet my family. It is wonderful to see them and we speak happily. However, I find I am very swiftly overwhelmed. Old problems surface again – facial expressions of stress, reports of ill family members are all still there. I've been gone 10 days, but it feels like I have been gone for ages. So I am jarred by seeing the same problems emerge again. And then the big one – Israel and Palestine violence. I am overwhelmed by this completely. It feels extraordinarily heavy to go on social media and speak with family, to hear everything about: bombings, lynchings, escalating violence, dead children. It feels like too much, and I want to go back. It hurts, the world hurts. I hate it.

I take a shower, one of the things that I most look forward to; I spend perhaps an hour showering, and this is thoroughly enjoyable. I feel fresh and clean. I like it. I settle into bed and find that it feels extremely soft. And my body feels battered. Sleeping on the floor has left my body feeling battered and bruised. I struggle to sleep, I expect because I am usually awake at this time. It feels like the I'tikāf routine was so long-lasting that my body has adapted to it. It felt like a whole new world to occupy. It was such a sudden shock, a sudden change. I start catching up with some messages and watching some YouTube videos. I usually enjoy doing this before bed. But I think very distinctly – what am I do? I am shocked at how little enjoyment I get from this. I find it pointless, a time waste, and not enjoyable at all.

As I reacquaint myself with the pressures of the world, I realise that I had been wrong in thinking that I'tikāf was surrendering my freedom. I now realise that I'tikāf *was* freedom.

Methodological appendices

Information sheet

Centre for the Study of Islam in the UK
School of History, Archaeology and Religion
Cardiff University
Cardiff, CF10 3EU



INFORMATION SHEET FOR A RESEARCH PROJECT ON

'Itikāf: A British Muslim's Spiritual Sojourn

This information sheet invites you to participate in a research study. To help you decide whether or not you wish to take part, you may find it helpful to know what the research aims to achieve and what it will involve. I would be grateful if you would read the information below carefully. Do not hesitate to ask if you would like more information and please feel free to take time to decide whether or not you wish to participate.

The project has been reviewed and approved by the School of History, Archaeology and Religion's 'School Research Ethics Committee' based at Cardiff University.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to document the 'Itikāf experience in academic terms. British Muslims have received considerable academic and media attention. Discourse has been mainly on the topics of radicalisation and integration, which inadvertently exceptionalises Muslims, and neglects their lived experiences. A consequence of this is that very little academic research has been conducted on fundamental experiences of British Muslims such as Ramadan. Almost no research has been conducted on 'Itikāf.

I will document the main features of 'Itikāf (i.e. staying in the mosque, engaging in all congregational prayers etc.), explore why Muslims participate in 'Itikāf, and how the activity of the mosque changes during 'Itikāf.

What do you have to do?

Nothing. I would like to reflect on my own experience and observe mosque activity. I may approach you to arrange an interview after 'Itikāf concludes, but besides this I will simply be partaking in 'Itikāf. As part of conducting ethical research, I am obliged to receive explicit permission from the Imam and the Mosque Committee. I will likewise seek explicit permission from any attendees of the mosque that I directly interact with after or during 'Itikāf for the purposes of research (see section *Do I have to take part*).

What will I be doing as a researcher?

To investigate 'Itikāf in a robust fashion, I will do the following:

1. Participate in 'Itikāf for the last 10 days of Ramadan. During this, I will observe the activities of the mosque, fellow participants of 'Itikāf, and wider attendees of the mosque. I will carry a small notepad to briefly write down observations, which I will then type up in more detail in a Microsoft Word document. I will do this after Fajr Jamaat, after other 'Itikāf participants have gone to sleep. This is so that I do not disturb the sanctity of the mosque for others.

1. I will potentially interview other 'Itikāf members after 'Itikāf has concluded, with approved consent from them.

What will happen to the information about mosque attendees?

All data I gather will be treated in the strictest confidence, and everybody will be anonymised as well as the mosque itself. I will do my utmost that no participant is recognisable from reading my research. If anyone does not want to be included in the research, they are very welcome to inform me, and I will omit all mention of them. All data will be securely stored and only be available to me.

The recording of any interviews conducted after 'Itikāf will be written up into what is called a 'transcript'. This will allow me to read what you've said again. Written notes made will be typed up as a Microsoft Word file and will only be available to me.

After completing my data collection, I will analyse the data for my final thesis. This will be read and marked by my supervisor.

Do I have to take part?

According to guidelines for conducting ethical research, I am obliged to obtain consent from the Imam(s) and mosque committee, and inform fellow 'Itikāf participants, and the wider congregation. If you provide me with permission to conduct research, I will inform other 'Itikāf participants that I am conducting research. It is entirely their discretion if they would like to be included in their research. I will also place a message on the mosque notice board letting attendees know that I am conducting research.

If anybody does decide to participate, they will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign a consent form. They are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. They can also ask for more information before making a decision.

Who is the researcher?

The researcher is Hamzah Zahid. He is studying MA Islam in Contemporary Britain at Cardiff University of London in the School of History, Archaeology and Religion. He is being supervised by Dr. Riyaz Timol.

Contact information

If you would like any more information, you are welcome to contact me or my supervisor.

- Hamzah Zahid. Email: H-Zahid@hotmail.co.uk. Telephone: 07427545356
- Dr. Riyaz Timol. Email: timolr1@cardiff.ac.uk.

Thank you reading this information sheet.

Consent form

<p><u>'Itikāf: A British Muslim's Spiritual Sojourn</u></p> <p>Consent to take part in research</p>	
<p>I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.</p>	
<p>I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.</p>	
<p>I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data pertaining to me within two weeks after Itikhaf, in which case the material will be deleted.</p>	
<p>I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.</p>	
<p>I understand that participation involves the researcher participating in Itikhaf as a Muslim, observing mosque activity and possibly interviewing other Itikhaf participants after Itikhaf is over.</p>	
<p>I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.</p>	
<p>I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.</p>	
<p>I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.</p>	
<p>I understand that disguised extracts from any formal/informal interviews may be quoted in the final dissertation, which will be publicly available.</p>	
<p>I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.</p>	
<p>I understand that signed consent forms in a secure location until the exam board confirms the results of the dissertation.</p>	
<p>I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.</p>	
<p>I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.</p>	
<p><i>Signature of research participant</i></p> <p>.....</p>	<p><i>Date</i></p> <p>.....</p>
<p><i>Signature of researcher</i></p> <p>.....</p>	<p><i>Date</i></p> <p>.....</p>

Interview questions

1. Why are you doing I'tikāf?
2. What has I'tikāf been like for you so far?
3. What kind of emotions have you felt?
4. What does I'tikāf mean to you?
5. What have your interactions with the outside world been?
6. What responsibilities are you leaving behind?
7. What is your favourite type of worship to engage in?
8. What has been your rough schedule, if any, in I'tikāf?
9. What have been your interactions with others during I'tikāf? Do you have any previous relationships with other people in the mosque?
10. What have you disliked about I'tikāf?
11. Have you felt yourself change over I'tikāf?
12. How has Covid-19 affected your experience of Ramadan?

Participant profiles

Pseudonym	Reason for pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Reason for doing I'tikāf	Interviewed?
Mufti Saab	Commonly called Mufti Saab	Late 40s	Pashtun	Practice murāqabah	Informal
Funny	Jovial in nature	Late 40s	Indian, Gujrati	Get away from the world	Formal
Shower	Was extremely happy when he had to do ghusl	Late 20s	Pakistani	Needed a break from the world	Formal
Angry	Seemed fiery in nature	Late 50s	Indian, Gujrati	Unknown	No
Pudding	Gave me pudding	Early 50s	Indian, Gujrati	Unknown	No
Bradford	Thought I was from Bradford	Early 40s	Indian, Gujrati	Unknown	No