

Ramadan in the UK:

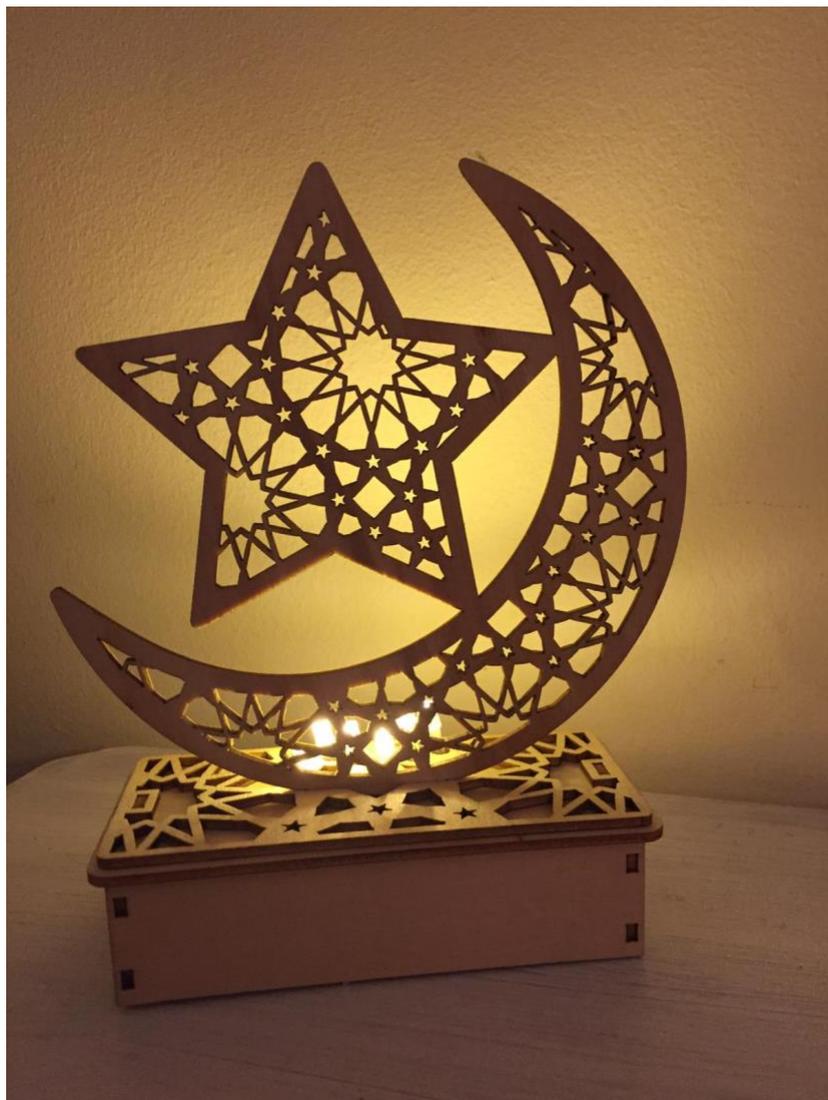
A Month of Ambiguity

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SUMMARY

This thesis provides an empirical account of Ramadan in 2020 expressed through solicited photo diaries and semi-structured interviews from Muslim participants across the UK. It argues that Ramadan can be conceived as a ‘month of ambiguity’ following Bauer’s (2021) theory of “cultural ambiguity”. I present three main findings chapters, the first focused on worship and spirituality, the second on sacredness and the third on food. I demonstrate how perceptions towards the individual/communal elements of worship, understandings of sacredness, and attitudes and practices related to food during the month can all be conceived in terms of paradoxes and ambiguities.

Regarding the contribution of my research, my findings complicate Bauer’s (2021) key argument that a “tolerance” of ambiguity is diminishing in Muslim societies today due to the detrimental impact of modern, Western ideas. Rather, my research demonstrates how ambiguous ideas and practices seem to have been maintained from early expressions of Islam. My focus on ‘everyday’ religion illuminates discussions about Islam in the modern world providing insights which might be missed when exploring Islam from more textual and discursive perspectives like Bauer. Secondly, my innovative and flexible methods help give agency to participants and are especially useful in addressing power imbalances within the research process and in wider society. Finally, this project is one of the few sociological, in-depth studies of Ramadan, particularly in the UK. Since Ramadan is such an important occasion in the Islamic calendar, this thesis provides a starting point for others who wish to explore Muslim perspectives on ritual, fasting and sacredness as well as providing an insight into the lived religion of Muslims in Britain.

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GLOSSARY

This glossary includes any non-English words not in common usage that have been included in this thesis. Their meanings are derived from my existing understandings of them as well as understandings of my participants and other researchers. They are largely Arabic or Arabic-derived terms. I have not always specified the language given the overlap and lending of words between cultures but have indicated where words seem to be specific to a particular culture. I have largely avoided diacritical marks except in a few places. Any words without an English dictionary definition have been italicised in this thesis. However, in places where participants included such words in their diaries (or other researchers used them in their work), I have maintained the original spelling and format (often non-italicised).

Ajr – Often translated as religious merit. Muslims often refer to *ajr* as ‘reward’ in English meaning a reward that is given by God for actions done in life. This reward is usually seen as something that will be apparent in the afterlife rather than a tangible reward received in their present life.

Ajwa’ – Translates as ‘atmosphere’. Used by Anderson’s (2018) participants to refer to the Ramadan atmosphere (*ajwa’ al-Ramadan*).

Ashra – From the word meaning ‘ten’ in Arabic. Term used for each of the three ten-day periods that Ramadan is split into i.e. the first *’ashra*, the second *’ashra*, the third *’ashra*.

Bakhoor – Predominantly Arabic term used for ‘incense’. Used to scent homes and mosques, especially on a Friday (the day of the special congregational prayer).

Baraka – Translated as ‘blessing’. *Baraka* comes from God and can be applied to people, places, objects and times. Linked to ideas of increase and abundance as also described in Anderson’s (2018) work. Further discussed in Chapter 6.

Buka puasa – Indonesian term for *’iftar*’, the time of breaking the fast. Used in Hellman’s (2008) work.

Dar ul Uloom – An Islamic seminary for training Muslim scholars. Discussed further by Sidat (2018; 2019).

Dastarkhan – A large mat or tablecloth that is spread on the floor for eating from.

Dawat – Meaning ‘invitation’. A term often used by South Asians referring to when someone invites you to their house to eat, an especially common event during Ramadan.

Desi - South Asian term used to refer to things or people that are ‘traditionally’ South Asian.

Dhikr – Translates as ‘remembrance’. Refers to repeated phrases that are recited in praise of God or remembering the Prophet Muhammad (e.g. ‘Alhamdulillah’ – all praise to Allah; ‘Allahu akbar’ – Allah is greatest). Can be done individually or in a *dhikr* circle (i.e. collective gathering for reciting *dhikr*).

Dhul-Hijjah – The twelfth and last month of the Islamic year during which the *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Makkah) takes place.

Dua – A supplication or prayer made to God that is less formal and structured than *salah*. While *duas* with specific wordings are mentioned in the Quran and *hadith*, supplicants can use any words or language to make *dua*. *Dua* is not a religious obligation (in contrast to *salah*) but is recommended and seen as an act of devotion.

Dunya – Can be translated as ‘the world’ or ‘worldly life’. Refers to temporal life in this world as opposed to life in the Hereafter (after death) which is eternal. Can also refer to things that are seen as ‘worldly’.

Eid-ul-Fitr – The day of celebration (Eid) which takes place immediately after Ramadan on the first of Shawwal (the Islamic month after Ramadan).

Fajr – One of the five daily prayers (*salah*) which takes place between dawn and the beginning of sunrise. In Ramadan, the start of *Fajr* time also signals the beginning of the fast each day.

Fard – Something is described as *fard* if it is classed as a religious obligation under Islamic jurisprudence (compared to other acts which may be recommended or optional). For example, fasting during Ramadan and praying the five daily *salah* are considered *fard*. *Fard* acts can be categorised under the two categories in the following entries.

Fard ‘ayn – An individual obligation under Islamic jurisprudence (e.g. fasting in Ramadan).

Fard kifayah – A collective obligation which is not compulsory upon every individual. Some members of the community are required to fulfil acts of this type so that the whole community is not held responsible by God. Examples include conducting the funeral prayer for Muslims who have passed away.

Hadith (pl. *ahadith* or *hadiths*) – A narration about sayings or actions of the Prophet Muhammad. Transmitted from the time of the Prophet’s life. Muslims refer to *ahadith* as a source of guidance in their day-to-day life in a similar way to the Quran.

Hajj – The pilgrimage to Makkah and the fifth ‘pillar’ of Islam. Mature, healthy Muslims who can afford it are required to do the Hajj at least once in their life.

Halaqa – Translates as ‘circle’. Refers to a religious study circle where people meet together to learn about Islamic teachings, the Qur’an etc.

Haram – Translates as ‘forbidden’. Meaning anything that is forbidden according to Islamic law. Includes things like consuming pork or drinking alcohol.

Hayrat – Translated as ‘perplexity’ by Shahab Ahmed (2016). An Islamic concept related to ambiguity, paradoxes and contradictions that bears similarities with Bauer’s (2021) idea of “cultural ambiguity”.

Hijabi – A Muslim woman who wears the hijab or headscarf.

Hijama – *Hijama* is a form of cupping, a process of removing blood from the body in order to bring health benefits. Some Muslims adopt the practice regarding it as recommended by the prophet Muhammad.

Hrira – A Moroccan soup traditionally eaten during Ramadan. Discussed by Buitelaar (1993) in her ethnography of Ramadan in Morocco.

Huffaz – Plural of *hafiz* meaning a person who has memorised the whole Quran. Referred to by Gent (2016) and Gent and Muhammad (2019).

Ibadah – Usually translated as ‘worship’. *Ibadah* includes the main worship rituals of Islam including fasting in Ramadan, going on Hajj and the five daily prayers (*salah*). While participants largely referred to *ibadah* as explicit acts of worship (like praying, or reading the Quran), the term is expansive and can refer to any action done with the intention to please God.

Iftar – Literally meaning ‘the breaking of the fast’. *Iftar* refers to the time when Muslims can break their fast at sunset as well as to the meal eaten at this time.

Imam - The imam is the person appointed to lead the *salah*. While it is a term often applied to a religious leader or scholar associated with a mosque, others who do not have an extensive Islamic education can be appointed the imam for a particular prayer (in the mosque, at home, or elsewhere).

Itikaf – A period of ritual seclusion that predominantly takes place during the last ten days of Ramadan. During *itikaf* men will stay in the mosque whereas women usually undertake the practice in an area of their home (e.g. a room). The practice is optional but follows a recommendation of the Prophet Muhammad. The purpose of *itikaf* is to focus on one's devotion to God and pay less attention to worldly matters.

Jama'ah – Meaning a congregation or group of people. Largely used when describing praying congregationally e.g. "We prayed in *jama'ah*".

Jummah – Linked to *jama'ah* in meaning referring to a congregation or group of people. *Jummah* is the name given to the weekly congregational prayer that takes place in mosques at the time of the noon prayer on a Friday.

Jihad – Often translated as 'struggle', *jihad* can refer to any sort of striving usually for the sake of God. The terms usage includes references to a spiritual struggle or military action.

Khanqah – Used by Rytter (2016) to refer to a "Sufi lodge". A place for Sufi gatherings or retreats.

Langar – A type of food prepared and distributed by Sufi groups for charitable purposes. Rytter (2016) refers to *langar* as "the name given to food prepared by Sufi brothers performing *zikr* (commemoration of God) and distributed by a *shaykh* [religious scholar or leader] in his *khanqah*" (p.46).

Laylatul Qadr – Often translated as 'The Night of Power' or 'The Night of Destiny'. Seen as one of the most sacred nights of the Islamic calendar and described in the Quran as "better than a thousand months" (97:3, Saheeh International). Thought to take place during the last ten nights of Ramadan. *Laylatul Qadr* is discussed in depth in Chapter 6. Various spellings of the term exist in English.

Maghrib – The name of one of the five daily prayers performed just after sunset. *Maghrib* also coincides with the time of *iftar*.

Masjid – Arabic term for 'mosque'.

Mawlid – A celebration of the anniversary of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad. However, the ways of marking this date are contentious and debated, as discussed by Katz (2007).

Muslimah – Referring to a female Muslim specifically (the feminine form of 'Muslim').

Mutakif – A person undertaking *itikaf* (ritual seclusion).

Nafil/Nawafil – Meaning optional or voluntary. *Nafil* refers to acts of worship (including formal prayers) which are worthy of religious merit (*ajr*) but not considered compulsory under Islamic jurisprudence. *Nawafil* is the plural of *nafl*.

Nafs – Often translated as the 'self' or 'desires'. *Nafs* refers to one of the metaphysical levels of the self in Islamic conceptions of human nature. While the *nafs* itself has different levels, *nafs* is often used to refer to one's base or animalistic desires, such as the desire for food or sex. It was often used in this sense amongst my participants.

Nafsu – Alternative word for *nafs* used by Hellman's (2008) participants based in Java, Indonesia.

Nasheed – An Islamic devotional song.

Niqab – A veil covering the head and most or all of the face worn by some Muslim women. Like the *hijab* (covering the hair and, often, neck), the *niqab* is worn in public and in front of men who are not relatives.

Penya – A vermicelli-like food which, according to the participant who discussed it, is soaked in milk overnight and eaten hot or cold. It was a traditional *suhoor* food in her family who originate from Pakistan. She described it as “similar to sevayya [a pudding made of vermicelli boiled in milk, sugar and spices] but... in function it's similar to cereal” (Noor, Diary, Entry 25).

Qibla – Word used to refer to the direction to face during *salah* (formal prayer). The *qibla* points towards Makkah.

Rahmat – Often translated as ‘mercy’ sometimes spelt ‘*rahma*’ in English. *Rahma* refers to God’s mercy which is distributed throughout creation. Mentioned by Moller (2005).

Sahur – Alternative word for *suhoor* (see definition below), more commonly used in South East Asia.

Sadaqah – Refers to charitable acts, including but not limited to giving money. There is an understanding that Muslims should strive to do *sadaqah* throughout their lives by helping others which will be rewarded by God. Different to *zakat* which is considered a religious obligation, *sadaqah* is voluntary.

Salah – The formal, ritual prayer that follows a set pattern of words and actions. *Salah* is considered a religious obligation that should be conducted five times a day and is the second ‘pillar’ of Islam. The five daily prayers are called *Fajr*, *Zuhr*, *Asr*, *Maghrib* and *Isha*. There are also optional or recommended *salah* that are not obligatory. Different to *dua* which is a more informal supplication.

Seerah – Referring to the life story of the Prophet Muhammad. There are many books available which tell the *seerah*. Muslims often read such books as a form of religious devotion and to implement lessons in their lives.

Sehri – Alternative word for *suhoor* (see definition below), more commonly in South Asian.

Shabakya - Moroccan biscuits that are traditionally made during Ramadan. Often deep fried and then coated in syrup (as described by participant Sabrina).

Shahada – The declaration of faith stating that “There is no God but Allah. Muhammad is Allah’s Messenger”. The *shahada* is considered the first ‘pillar’ of Islam.

Sharbat – A fruit-based drink (various flavours) popular in Iran, Turkey and South Asia especially during Ramadan.

SubhanAllah – Exclamation meaning ‘glory to Allah’. Muslims often use this phrase when expressing wonder or responding to good or bad news.

Suhoor – The meal eaten before the fast begins at dawn. This meal is emphasised as there are hadiths encouraging Muslims to partake in it.

Sunnah – The habits and practices of Prophet Muhammad as described in the *hadith*. The *sunnah* is understood as an example for other Muslims to follow in their day-to-day lives.

Tafseer – An explanation or commentary of the Quran which may be delivered via classes, books or videos (e.g. YouTube). Muslims often study the *tafseer* as a devotional act and to understand and implement the Quran in their lives.

Tahajjud – An optional prayer (*salah*) that takes place in the portion of the night before dawn (before *Fajr* prayer). The period of *tahajjud* is considered especially sacred and Muslims are also encouraged to make *dua* at this time.

Tahara – Meaning ‘purity’. *Tahara* often refers to a ritual and physical purification of the body. Buitelaar (1993) sees *tahara* as a key concept in Ramadan linked to the way in which her participants purified themselves (e.g. through a ritual bath) in preparation for the month.

Taqwa - Islamic term meaning God-consciousness or awareness of God. Achieving *taqwa* is described in the Quran as one of the goals of fasting (2:183, Saheeh International).

Taraweeh – An extended night prayer specific to Ramadan. Takes place after *Isha* prayer every night, often in congregation in a mosque. Can also be performed at home either alone or with others. In mosques, imams often try to complete a recitation of the whole Quran during the month-long performance of *taraweeh*. Not a religious obligation but an important practice that many try to observe.

Tasbeeh – Prayer beads used to do *dhikr*. The beads help to count the supplications or phrases said in remembrance and praise of God or the Prophet Muhammad which are recited a specific number of times.

Tawhid – An Islamic theological concept referring to the ‘oneness’ of God. Buitelaar (1993) extends this meaning to refer to the “unification” process inherent in fasting - unification of the body and mind, of this life and the afterlife, and of the Muslim community (p.178).

Thawab – A very similar term to *ajr*, meaning religious merit (see separate entry). Used by Anderson’s (2018) participants.

Umma – A term referring to the Muslim community across the world who are seen to be united by their shared beliefs and practices. A key theme in Buitelaar’s (1993) work. Alternatively spelled ‘*ummah*’.

Wudu – The ritual washing that is required before performing *salah*.

Zakat – A form of charitable giving which is an annual religious obligation on those who meet certain criteria. *Zakat* is the third pillar of Islam and Muslims often donate their *zakat* during Ramadan.

Zikr – Alternative word for *dhikr* (see definition above).

NOTES ON REFERENCING

A Harvard referencing system has been used. For sources with a less standardised referencing format, the following conventions have been followed:

The Quran:

(Chapter number: Verse number, Translation) e.g. (27:3, Saheeh International)

Hadith:

(Hadith collection, Book number, Hadith number) e.g. (Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 1, Hadith 1)

If no book number is available, only the hadith number is included. A footnote indicates the online source of the hadith and date accessed.

Participant Interviews:

(Participant pseudonym, Interview) e.g. (Elizabeth, Interview)

Participant Diaries:

(Participant pseudonym, Diary, Entry number) e.g. (Sulaiman, Diary, Entry 27)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

***“He who does not thank the people is not thankful to Allah”
(Sunan Abi Dawud, Book 43, Hadith 39)***

You would think after years of writing this thesis that writing a few acknowledgements would be easy. But I will have to be content with the fact that this section will never be enough to thank all those who have supported me through this exciting, difficult and transformative journey.

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

1. RESEARCHING RAMADAN – RATIONALE

Ramadan *is* a big thing, but I feel like it doesn't exist in people's consciousnesses that this thing happens. But it's just this huge phenomenon. (Noor, Interview)

Ramadan is my favourite month of the year. While recently it has become more difficult for me to manage fasting alongside mothering and studying responsibilities, it remains one of the religious practices I cherish most; one which physically and spiritually enriches me. My love for Ramadan was inevitably one of my key motivations for undertaking this research. However, I was convinced that other Muslims felt the same. As expressed by my participants in the coming chapters, Ramadan is often seen as the highlight of the Islamic calendar and an important time for rituals that are central to Islamic practice and spirituality. It is the month of fasting, during which Muslims abstain from food and drink between dawn and sunset. It is also the month of the Quran, during which the Quran was thought to be first revealed. It is a month of *ibadah* (worship), a time when mosques overflow and Muslims focus their efforts on connecting with God through embodied practices. These include the aforementioned fasting and reciting the Quran, but also extend to *salah* (ritual prayer), *du'a* (supplications) and giving to charity to name but a few. As participant Abdullah described:

During this month of Ramadan, your mind is on the five basic pillars of Islam...shahada, salah and zakat, and fasting. Except Hajj. But as soon as Ramadan finishes, the Hajj season starts. (Abdullah, Interview)

While I knew Ramadan was important to me, I wanted to know why it was important to others, and how they experienced the month in similar or different ways to myself.

I also felt discussions on the significance and practice of Ramadan were severely lacking in existing literature. To my knowledge, there has been no in-depth academic study of Ramadan in the UK to date. The exception is medical research which focuses on the risks and implications of fasting on the physical body, a trend which spans studies of Ramadan globally as is outlined in my Literature Review. I was surprised that such a significant occasion for Muslims had not been given more prominence in existing literature and this sentiment was echoed by one of my participants:

I think it's important that Muslims are understood generally, and I think there's not enough focus on our religious life, because that is really the most important part of being Muslim for the vast majority of us... Muslims are being studied for all sorts of reasons but not why we pray or what Ramadan means for us and things like that. (Will, Interview)

Will's statement reinforced my feeling that a study exploring the meaning and experience of Ramadan for British Muslims was needed and would be valued by those who observed the month and its rituals.

Ramadan is also becoming increasingly prominent in the wider British public sphere. UK politicians now almost routinely post Ramadan and Eid greetings on their social media accounts¹, there is a 'boom' in news articles about the occasion around the time Ramadan begins, and British supermarkets and clothes outlets advertise offers and special collections in anticipation of the month. In 2022, for example, several supermarket magazines had features on Ramadan and Eid (Tesco Magazine 2022a, 2022b; Waitrose Food Magazine 2022 – Figure 1) and Marks and Spencer produced an advent-style 'Countdown to Eid' calendar (Marks and Spencer 2022). I also received a number of requests to discuss the occasion in schools in 2022.

While these activities can be seen to be embracing Ramadan (albeit sometimes in the name of profits), more negative portrayals still exist. In 2020, the year of my fieldwork during which the COVID-19 lockdown was introduced in the UK, *The Sunday Times* reported on the threat of "a spike in UK coronavirus cases during Ramadan" (Hellen et al. 2020) due to the supposed gathering of Muslims who would break lockdown regulations to maintain Ramadan traditions. Additionally, children I spoke to in one school had clear misunderstandings about the faith and very limited knowledge of Ramadan. While not explicitly focusing on Ramadan's role in the wider public sphere, for reasons I will make clear below, I hope this thesis can inform wider discussions of the occasion and address some of the stereotypes and prejudices that exist about the holy month and Muslims more generally. Indeed, my participants again felt that some of these wider discussions were lacking and that their contribution to this thesis might improve the situation:

I get really surprised at the fact that within the community at large, there isn't really much acknowledgement of the fact that there are hundreds of thousands of people walking around whose entire days and the pattern of their day and everything they're doing in their day has completely shifted within that month. Um, and I know the Prime Minister will come out with 'Happy Ramadan' and there is acknowledgment of the fact that Ramadan is currently

¹ Stanton (2022) notes similarly the "media attention on White House iftars and presidential Ramadan greetings" (p.11) in the US in her article on Congressional Resolutions about Ramadan.

underway. But I just think that there is still so much more that we need the society at large to know. (Leena, Interview)

Indeed, the wider impact of this thesis has already started to come to fruition through my engagement with schools and the media (Appendix 1), something I endeavour to continue.

Leena also touches on another reason for my exploration of Ramadan in this thesis, namely the way in which the month impacts on various aspects of daily life. It thus provides the perfect opportunity to explore lived religion in a British context. While my participants emphasised *ibadah* in Ramadan, they also discussed the 'everyday'. Motherhood, work, study and health were all explored through participants' Ramadan diaries as well as my conversations with them. They described the ways they managed their various responsibilities while dealing with the physical effects of fasting, as well as discussing how they tried to maintain a balance between their worldly duties and their devotion to God. As Leena implied, some of the fundamental rituals which structure daily life outside Ramadan – eating and sleeping – were upended by the requirements of the fast, meaning Ramadan felt tangibly different to the rest of the year. It was this intertwining of religion with the everyday, and this coming together of the physical and the spiritual in Ramadan that made it an appealing study for me as someone interested in the sociological study of religion and its everyday manifestations.



FIGURE 1- SCREENSHOT OF WAITROSE'S MAGAZINE ARTICLE ABOUT RAMADAN TITLED "HOLDING FAST" (WAITROSE FOOD MAGAZINE 2022) IMAGE FROM: [HTTPS://DIGITAL.WAITROSEFOODMAGAZINE.COM/HTML5/READER/PRODUCTION/DEFAULT.ASPX?PUBNAME=&EDID=679EB53B-FCAF-4A9E-9B9C-E32A079F502C](https://digital.waitrosefoodmagazine.com/html5/reader/production/default.aspx?pubname=&edid=679EB53B-FCAF-4A9E-9B9C-E32A079F502C)

2. RESEARCH DECISIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Before introducing how this thesis is structured, it is important to outline some key decisions I had to make in the process of conducting the research. The first was in relation to narrowing the scope of the project. I have suggested above how research on Ramadan has the potential to explore a vast range of fields. Initially, I had hoped to explore media coverage of Ramadan, marketing of the month by mainstream businesses, collective events, personal experiences, and perceptions of the wider public. I soon realised however, this was far beyond the scope of a single PhD. I eventually chose to focus on lived religion in the context of Ramadan, with an emphasis on the significance of and practices associated with the month. I wanted to know what Ramadan meant to others and how it intertwined with their daily lives. This approach reflects my inclination towards ethnographic research which demonstrates “a commitment to the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting” (Atkinson et al. 2001, p.4) although I didn’t adopt the ‘traditional’ ethnographic method of observation in this instance. While my ethnographic focus on significance and meaning was inspired by Geertz (1973), I felt this focus would help portray Ramadan from an emic perspective which seemed important since research on the month was so sparse. While others have argued that existing sociological and anthropological works on Ramadan (albeit not in the UK) focus too much on

religious aspects (Salamandra 2004, p.94), I felt that a discussion of such pious practices alongside more everyday elements would be valued by Muslims - Will's comments above reinforced this idea - as well as beneficial to the research field.

In conjunction with my decision to explore lived religion, I chose Ramadan photo diaries as a key research method which would bring to life the various activities of Ramadan and shed light on material culture associated with it. The decision to use digital photo diaries perhaps even came before my conscious focus on lived religion having seen people use Ramadan diaries in a devotional sense outside the context of research. I felt then that participants might be familiar with keeping a diary in Ramadan, or at least that the concept would make sense to them. Additionally, I knew there were visual elements of the month – decorations, food, worship items - that could be highlighted through images. The use of photo diaries, and my flexibility in employing them, however, meant their contents were extremely variable. I supplemented the diaries with follow-up interviews to contextualise the diaries and focus down more on the research questions I was trying to answer.

It is important to note that my decision to use photo diaries came before the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in the UK. Fortunately for me however, they were an ideal method to use when face-to-face fieldwork was extremely limited. As such, this method gave me an insight into the homes and lives of individuals during this very atypical period. I used the case of Ramadan during the pandemic to explore the month more broadly in the lives of my participants, although elsewhere I have elaborated on the particularities of Ramadan in lockdown (Jones-Ahmed 2022a). Nonetheless, the pandemic had an impact on the findings in this thesis. For example, none of the typical face-to-face communal events such as group *iftars*, *taraweeh* prayers, or charity events were captured in participant diaries although these were somewhat discussed in interviews. Additionally, the ways participants reflected on individual and communal facets of religion and spirituality (Chapter 5) seemed to be a framing that was influenced by the fact they were suddenly isolated without access to many collective practices associated with the month. While I see my work as a study of Ramadan in the UK (rather than Ramadan in lockdown) it is inevitably embedded in the highly unusual scenario of the national lockdown in 2020.

I also want to explain the way I have chosen to structure the thesis. The Literature Review largely addresses research explicitly related to Ramadan while other literature is introduced in findings chapters. Through the process of this PhD, I found that existing work on Ramadan was so diverse that it spanned an array of academic fields – from the scientific, to the economic, to the sociological, to the religious. This meant that theorising Ramadan was a difficult task as there was no clear theoretical thread that ran throughout the literature. Even in sociological works, there was little theoretical

consistency. Buitelaar's (1993) ethnography of Ramadan in Morocco, for example, draws upon heavily upon Turner's ideas of liminality and *communitas*, while also employing emic Islamic frames like *ajr* (religious merit), *tahara* (purity) and *umma* (the global Muslim community). Others have utilised theories of embodiment, morality and habitus (Winchester 2008) or critically engaged with Weber's argument about the disenchantment of modern life (Anderson 2018). Saad Aly's (2010) thesis on female experiences of Ramadan in Egypt draws on a range of themes including piety (*taqwa*), the *umma* and authenticity to discuss the occasion in the context of modernity, capitalism and the nation state. Schielke (2009) interestingly looks at ideas of moral ambivalence and ambiguity engaging especially with Saba Mahmood's work (2005). This diverse application of theory however, meant that my own theorisation emerged after collecting my research data, something consistent with my grounded theory approach. Aside from an introductory discussion of "cultural ambiguity" (Bauer 2021) – which is a major theme in this thesis – in the Literature Review, I have left discussion of other theories until later. As such, each findings chapter (Chapters 5, 6 and 7) begins with a section outlining existing literature relevant to those findings and these are revisited in the Discussion chapter (Chapter 8).

Before outlining my chapters, I want to summarise the key contributions of this work. The empirical contribution of this thesis is that it provides an account of Ramadan in the UK in 2020 - during the COVID-19 lockdown – gathered through qualitative diary, visual and interview methods with over 50 participants. My chapters highlight important aspects of Ramadan including *ibadah* (worship) and spirituality (Chapter 5), sacredness and time (Chapter 6), and food (Chapter 7). These findings chapters do not encompass *all* the important elements of Ramadan, but the sprawling nature of the month and its practices meant I had to make decisions about what to include and what not to include. An exploration of the Quran's significance, for example, is not extensive (although I do touch upon this in Chapter 6) yet was a significant part of participant's conceptualisation of and engagement with Ramadan and something I argue is worthy of further research (see Conclusion).

My methodological contribution lies in my use of solicited photo diaries (including both text/audio descriptions and images) which were collected via a variety of platforms – WhatsApp, email and other social media – and semi-structured interviews conducted largely via an online video platform (Zoom). While I had planned to collect photo diaries digitally before the onset of the pandemic, I had hoped more of the interviews would be in-person but the circumstances meant the

vast majority shifted to Zoom.² I also included an element of photo elicitation interviewing to bring the photo diary and interview stages together. These methods were innovative through the use of social media, as well as being multi-platform and substantially participant-led. While much of my data collection can be described as ‘digital’, these diverse methods in the context of the lockdown enabled me to capture the private, domestic lives of Muslim that went far beyond the online sphere. I argue that this open ethnographic approach can capture rich data related to practices which straddle the public-private divide. I further argue these methods empowered my participants and gave them agency in the process of data creation.

Finally, my thesis has three main theoretical contributions. First, it provides a case study of “cultural ambiguity” (Bauer 2021) in a contemporary Muslim context (albeit in a wider Muslim-minority setting) which runs throughout forthcoming chapters. Second, it develops the theorisation of Islamic sacredness which has started to be explored by others (Akkach 2005; A. Ahmed 2016; Gottschalk 2013) and especially features in Chapter 6 in this thesis. Third, my thesis questions the extent of the impact of modernity on lived religion today through complicating some of the binaries in the study of religion which emerged out of the Enlightenment. This is demonstrated especially in Chapter 5 but also through my broader exploration of ambiguity which runs throughout participant discussions of Ramadan but diverges from a post-Enlightenment emphasis on certainty. Overall, I argue that Ramadan can be viewed as a month of ambiguity, the maintenance of a pre-modern tradition that embraces paradox and contradiction. Rather than being diminished by the overwhelming influence of modernity, the paradoxical elements of Ramadan have continued into the contemporary period by people who may be seen as otherwise ‘modernised’. The participants I interviewed were not isolated from society but were part and parcel of contemporary, capitalist, British society. Their rejection of a modern emphasis on certainty however, as well as the way they complicated binaries between the physical and the spiritual, the individual and the communal, represented the maintenance of an Islamic tradition that stems back before modernity emerged and counters conceptualisations of religion that emerged in modernity.

3. THESIS STRUCTURE

After this introduction, the remaining chapters will set out my findings and their contributions as follows. Chapter 2, my Literature Review, has two main aims: 1) to introduce readers to existing

² I had also planned to do participant observation of communal events such as mosque *iftars* and prayers, charity fundraisers, and inter-faith events. This was not possible due to the pandemic and is discussed in Chapter 3, Section 3.1.

literature on Ramadan; 2) to introduce Bauer's (2021) theory of cultural ambiguity which I draw upon heavily in this thesis.

The Literature Review begins by introducing my methodology for identifying resources before focusing on how Ramadan has been constructed in existing academic literature. First, I argue there has been a predominant focus on physical aspects of the month particularly through vast amounts of medical literature which display a Cartesian distinction between the physical and the spiritual. Second, I outline studies which suggest Ramadan is a 'month of harm' in various ways, corresponding with dominant negative portrayals of Islam more broadly. Amidst this, I highlight how fasting practices are construed as harmful both through depriving the body of food as well as indulging it, something I return to in my Discussion chapter. Third, I outline a smaller yet significant number of studies that have looked at Ramadan sociologically and emphasise the communal spirit of the month which concurs with my findings especially in Chapter 5. Fourth, I demonstrate how existing studies suggest that, especially in Muslim-minority contexts, Muslims become more 'visible' to the wider public in Ramadan. Fifth, I discuss the sparse number of studies that prioritise the religious and spiritual significance of Ramadan from a sociological perspective locating my own thesis amongst these. Sixth, I give an overview of literature on religion and Ramadan during the pandemic.

The final section of my Literature Review focuses on Bauer's (2021) theory of cultural ambiguity. I first summarise Bauer's theory including concepts of tolerance, intolerance and domestication of ambiguity which are central to my arguments. I then return to existing research on Ramadan, highlighting how ideas about paradoxes, ambiguity and ambivalences have already begun to emerge. I conclude this chapter by explaining how my thesis goes beyond the Cartesian emphasis on the physical aspects of Ramadan by combining embodied and spiritual elements as outlined in Chapter 5. I further argue that Bauer's theory of cultural ambiguity may provide an interesting way forward for future studies of Ramadan, and potentially help counteract negative portrayals of the month which view it in terms of 'harm' and 'extremes'. Finally, I explain how my thesis pays attention to the communal and religious significance of Ramadan, aspects which are lacking in current literature.

Chapter 3, the Methodology, outlines my epistemological and ontological basis for the research as well as explaining to readers the precise methods used to capture data. I also begin to outline the methodological contribution of this research to academia more broadly. I begin (Section 2) by describing the theoretical underpinnings of my methods including my engagement with ethnography through Geertz's (1973) emphasis on meaning and Wolcott's (1999) ethnographic "way of seeing". I also touch upon elements of social constructionism, feminist methodologies and grounded theory that informed my work. I then elaborate on my own positionality and embodiment

and its relevance to the research. Next (Section 3), I outline the methods used and my rationale for doing so. This includes a brief introduction to the pandemic-based context of the research and an exploration of my key methods: solicited photo diaries and follow-up interviews, both of which were largely conducted online. In Section 4, I describe my approach to taking fieldnotes and transcribing interviews, before discussing my data analysis in more depth (Section 5). I then summarise the ethical considerations and processes involved in conducting my research (Section 6). I conclude by calling for a flexible approach to data collection and analysis which empowers participants and helps address the power imbalance between researcher and researched (Section 7). This chapter prepares the reader to appreciate the context and process behind the findings presented later, and emphasises my key methodological contribution, which is to adopt a flexible approach to how research participants communicate their experiences.

In Chapter 4, I 'set the scene' for the upcoming findings chapters to situate my research in its broader context. I first outline (Section 2) the highly unusual circumstances of Ramadan 2020 which happened early in the COVID-19 pandemic just after the UK went into a state of 'lockdown'. Within this section, I also introduce how Muslims responded to the pandemic in relation to Ramadan as well as discussing media interest in the occasion. Secondly (Section 3), I provide an overview of the demographics of my participants including some reflections on my own positionality. Finally (Section 4), I give readers an overview of the research data collected highlighting its diverse format and content which starts to introduce themes of the following findings chapters. This chapter provides vital contextual information that formed the basis of my fieldwork and is useful to contextualise the remainder of the thesis.

My first findings chapter, Chapter 5, focuses on embodied *ibadah* (worship) in Ramadan demonstrating how it challenges existing binaries in the study of religion, particularly the spiritual-physical and individual-communal. I start (Section 2) by outlining existing discussions of embodiment and spirituality in religious studies which are key themes in this chapter. I then go on to discuss *ibadah* in Ramadan (Section 3). I first outline the important role of *ibadah* during the month as emphasised by my participants before discussing three examples – fasting, *salah*, and *itikaf* – and how these manifest on individual and communal bases. Finally, I turn to spirituality during the month (Section 4), discussing first how this is intertwined with physical worship and then discussing communal and individual aspects of spirituality. To conclude (Section 5), I demonstrate how my findings complicate existing boundaries between physicality and materiality in the study of religion as well as contrasting an either/or approach to communal and individual religion. Such binaries have also been critiqued by

McGuire (2003) and Ammerman (2020) especially in the context of lived religion, whom I draw upon throughout this chapter.

My second findings chapter, Chapter 6, outlines a conception of Islamic sacredness in the context of Ramadan as experienced by my participants. Amidst this, I highlight the ambiguity of sacredness during the month – the ways in which sacredness was perceived as diffuse, expansive and abundant - as well as describing ways in which this ambiguity was “domesticated” (following Bauer 2021). I start by outlining existing literature on sacredness and ambiguity (Section 2) which provides a basis for my findings. I then outline the fundamentals of sacredness from the views of participants including the importance of emic concepts like *ajr* (religious merit), *baraka* (blessings) and the commemoration of religious-historical events (Section 3). Section 4 argues that participants understood sacredness as an ambiguous concept giving two examples of a temporal nature. These are the determining of sacred months via moonsighting as well as the ‘unknowability’ of arguably the most sacred period of the year, *Laylatul Qadr*. Section 5 describes conversely how such ambiguity was ‘domesticated’ through the structuring of sacred time in Ramadan, particularly through a hierarchy of sacredness. Section 6 discusses the way in which the abundance of sacredness was domesticated through prioritising certain actions during the holy month. This section gives particular attention to the negotiation between *ibadah* and ‘domestic’ duties in relation to motherhood and children. I conclude this chapter by describing how my findings support the idea of a “sacred without a profane” (Akkach 2005, p.164) complicating existing sacred-profane binaries, as well as demonstrating a form of “cultural ambiguity” (Bauer 2021) through the ways my participants understood and responded to the sacredness of time in Ramadan.

My final findings chapter, Chapter 7, demonstrates the ways in which food was both rejected and rejoiced in during the month of Ramadan. This represented a paradox which was maintained by participants as an example of a “tolerance” of ambiguity that Bauer (2021) describes. I begin this chapter with an introduction to relevant theoretical literature (Section 2), extending my previous discussions of Islam and ambiguity and reviewing Weber’s writings on the Protestant Ethic (2001 [1930]). I then introduce fasting in Ramadan, outlining the basic rules of the practice, its deeper meanings in relation to spirituality and the *nafs*, and the sociological and communal elements of fasting and eating (Section 3). The next section (Section 4) focuses on the ways food is rejected during the month through attitudes and practices of abstinence, simplicity, anti-wastefulness and healthiness. Section 5 then turns to the other side of the paradox, the celebration of food, through communal food practices, family food traditions and sharing food with others. In Section 6, I focus on challenges related to these paradoxical ideas through three participant case studies. These examples

show that while the paradox was maintained and “tolerated” (Bauer 2021) there were also areas in which participants struggled to deal with these competing attitudes towards food reflecting a less ambiguous approach. Overall however, I conclude (Section 7) by explaining how the ambiguous approach to food in Ramadan complicates existing theories which cite the dominant influence of modernity on religion today. This includes Bauer’s (2021) argument that modern Muslims have become increasingly *intolerant* of ambiguity as well as Weber’s (2001[1930]) discussion of how modern (Protestant) asceticism shuns sociability and the frivolous enjoyment of worldly pleasures (p.104)³. Rather my participants largely demonstrated a tolerance of ambiguity in relation to food, laying emphasis on both the rejection and celebration of the *dunya* (worldly life).

My Discussion, Chapter 8, outlines this broader contribution of my work through four themes. Section 2 discusses how my thesis enhances the academic study of Ramadan and Islamic rituals which have been somewhat neglected in sociological research. I also argue the thesis provides a more holistic perspective of the month than existing studies and counters negative portrayals of Muslims that have emerged from them. Secondly (Section 3), I outline how my work contributes to the development of new paradigms for Islamic Studies including the themes of paradox, ambiguity and contraction, the conceptualisation of Islamic sacredness, and the questioning of the extent of the impact of modernity. Third (Section 4), I describe how I have provided a unique snapshot of lived religion during the pandemic that goes beyond other studies of religion and Ramadan in the context of COVID-19. Particularly, I move past the predominant focus on health, oppose negative stereotyping of Muslims once again, and demonstrate the adaptation of religion beyond ‘going online’. Section 5 largely outlines the methodological contribution of this thesis and my argument for an ambiguous methodological approach which gives participants agency in the construction and submission of data and does not stick rigidly to ‘traditional’ methods. I particularly outline the advantages of digital methods for exploring non-digital research fields. In concluding my discussion, I note the inter-disciplinarity of my research and its relevance to an array of research fields.

Finally, my concluding chapter (Chapter 9) outlines future directions for research on Ramadan in the UK, including aspects of lived religion which are less extensive in this thesis, the way in which Ramadan may be being ‘mainstreamed’ in the UK, and additional distinctly ‘British’ phenomena. I end

³ While Weber’s (2001 [1930]) depiction of Protestant asceticism (which he links to capitalism) encourages the accumulation of wealth, the enjoyment of and indulgence in material things is reprimanded. As Weber notes, “this worldly Protestant asceticism...acted powerfully against the spontaneous enjoyment of possession; it restricted consumption, especially of luxuries” (p.115). Rather, wealth and possessions were to be used for doing good work in the world; Weber argues it was perceived that a person with wealth should use their possessions “for necessary and practical things” (p.115).

by summing up the way in which Ramadan can be deemed a month of ambiguity representing the maintenance of a tradition that stems back well before modernity's emphasis on certainty and unequivocalty emerged.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

1. INTRODUCTION

In this literature review, I discuss the varying ways in which the month of Ramadan has been constructed in academic literature so far. Given that Ramadan is such a significant part of Muslim religious practice – being one of the five ‘pillars’ of Islam – it is surprising that sociological and theological literature on the month is sparse. This is especially true in the British context in which there has not yet been a sociological or theological study dedicated to this holy occasion. For this reason, I draw largely on works studying Ramadan in countries other than the UK. That said, there is a body of literature which discusses Ramadan from a medical or health perspective both in the UK and elsewhere as well as research on Ramadan in other academic fields. As such, I will elaborate on research in these varying fields in this chapter to start to make sense of the academic picture of Ramadan thus far. I furthermore argue that the theory I apply extensively in this thesis – Bauer’s (2021) “cultural ambiguity” - can helpfully enhance our academic understanding of the month.

By way of overview, this chapter has two main parts. The first (Section 2) describes and analyses how Ramadan has been discussed and framed in existing literature spanning a broad range of fields (health, economics, social sciences etc.). The second part (Section 3) of this chapter focuses down on Thomas Bauer’s (2021) theory of “cultural ambiguity” which is drawn on extensively in this thesis. In Section 2, I discuss how research on Ramadan has been predominantly focused on physical aspects of the month and how Ramadan has been framed as a ‘month of harm’ in multiple ways. I also demonstrate, in sociological works, the emphasis on communal aspects of the month, ways there is an increased visibility of Muslims (Ramadan in the public sphere), and elaborations on the religious significance of the occasion. I include a section about research on Ramadan/religion and the pandemic which again spanned a variety of fields. I conclude Section 2 by highlighting areas of importance which have been overlooked in the literature and need further exploration, something my study attempts to address. In Section 3, I first introduce Bauer’s theory of cultural ambiguity before outlining how discussions of ambivalences, ambiguities and paradoxes (which resemble Bauer’s work) have already started to emerge in research on Ramadan. This serves as a theoretical introduction to later findings chapters as well as preliminarily demonstrating how Bauer’s work might be useful in elaborating on the contemporary enactment of the holy month. I conclude (Section 4) by highlighting how Bauer’s theory may make a valuable contribution to studies of Ramadan. Before this, however, I outline my methodology for searching and identifying literature on Ramadan.

1.1 METHODOLOGY FOR IDENTIFYING SOURCES

There were several considerations I made to identify research on Ramadan. This included variant spellings of the occasion, the academic fields that were most relevant to my work and the fact that 'Ramadan' can appear as a name. I initially searched for the following terms on Cardiff University's Library Search: *ramadan OR ramadhan OR ramazan OR ramzan*. This resulted in publications which made reference to Ramadan in titles, abstracts or chapter headings. I also selected key texts on Muslims in Britain from Cardiff University's library resources and manually searched for references to Ramadan (looking in the index, contents, or scanning the book). I widened my search beyond Cardiff University resources by searching Web of Science (though only under the following collections to exclude more scientific works: Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) --1956-present, Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI) --1975-present, Conference Proceedings Citation Index- Social Science & Humanities (CPCI-SSH) --1990-present, Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI) --2015-present) and I used the following terms in all fields: (*ramadan OR ramadhan OR ramazan OR ramzan*) AND ("*united kingdom*" OR *UK OR brit**) – I included the UK/Britain in this search to narrow down the extensive results obtained. I conducted a more in-depth search of the literature via the Scopus database using the following terms in the title, abstract and keywords fields to highlight the most relevant results (and exclude, as far as possible, any articles with authors with the name Ramadan): (*ramadan OR ramadhan OR ramazan OR ramzan OR ramadaan OR ramazaan OR ramzaan OR ramadhaan*). I also used Scopus's search analysis tool to identify trends in the literature which are discussed below.

There are some papers which were brought to my attention by colleagues familiar with my research, via social media or word-of-mouth. This has been helpful as one recommendation (Rytter 2016) doesn't mention Ramadan in the title or abstract but looks ethnographically at the practice of *itikaf*, or ritual seclusion, during the month. This helped me refine my searches and add additional terms like '*itikaf*'. I also did some searches for 'fasting' to explore relevant works discussing the practice in other religions, one of which is discussed below (Malara 2017). Furthermore, I have included a small number of non-academic sources which demonstrate the arguments made in this chapter, making it clear when non-academic sources are referenced.

2. HOW HAS RAMADAN BEEN CONSTRUCTED IN THE LITERATURE ?

Below I discuss various themes I have identified from reviewing the academic literature related to Ramadan. I argue that some of these themes seem to reinforce Orientalist/Islamophobic narratives about Muslims. Others, however, have started to explore Ramadan from a more emic perspective emphasising communal elements of the month and its religious significance. I also provide an overview of literature related to Ramadan and the pandemic which somewhat echoes the themes

I have discussed. I start this section by outlining how there has been a focus on physical (largely medical) aspects of Ramadan in the literature which overlooks the occasion's metaphysical and spiritual significance.

2.1 THE FOCUS ON THE PHYSICAL

The overwhelming majority of studies about Ramadan look at the subject from a health or medical perspective. This became clear to me from reviewing the bibliography produced by a Scopus search, but also by the in-depth Scopus analysis which highlighted that 1405 out of 1948 articles on Ramadan were broadly in the field of medicine or health⁴. This suggests most studies on Ramadan focus on its physical impacts, something that somewhat contrasts emic understandings of Ramadan. There are ample *hadiths* (narrations of Prophet Muhammad), for example, that stress that abstaining from food and drink are not the primary goal of fasting and Ramadan such as the following:

The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "Whoever does not give up forged speech and evil actions, Allah is not in need of his leaving his food and drink (i.e. Allah will not accept his fasting.)" (Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 30, Hadith 13⁵).

As will be described in coming chapters too, while physicality was evident in Ramadan, spirituality was something Muslims really valued and saw as one of the most important aspects of the occasion.

Aside from the predominant medical literature, other areas of study about Ramadan also fit into this 'physical' category, including the role of Ramadan in economics, transport systems and warfare, some of which are discussed in Section 2.2 below. All these works can be seen to view and study Ramadan from a Cartesian perspective; the research is underpinned by a more scientific, rational epistemology - as is common in medical literature - but also views fasting as a predominantly physical process with physical impacts on human beings and the world. Conversely, elaborations on spirituality and metaphysicality in Ramadan are far less common. I argue that emic understandings of Ramadan recognise both its physical and metaphysical elements and there is a need to redress the balance in the current literature. This thesis attempts to do this by exploring Ramadan from a holistic perspective – addressing both the physical and the spiritual, the individual and the communal, for example. There is a need for research that focuses less on 'measurable', quantifiable effects of the fasting month that have been portrayed extensively in medical and other literature, and more on its qualitative elements. The qualitative research I undertake and my focus on meaning and significance

⁴ Searched on 28/12/2018.

⁵ Available at <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:1903> (Accessed: 4 July 2022).

following Geertz (1973) will help go beyond the emphasis on physicality displayed in the existing studies described here.

2.2 RAMADAN AS A MONTH OF HARM

Another angle that is pronounced in existing academic literature on Ramadan is the harm caused by the holy month. This apparently manifests in various ways with studies examining physical, social and even spiritual harm that arises during the occasion with research spanning the fields of medicine, economics and war studies as will be discussed below. I argue that much of this literature depicting Ramadan as harmful is influenced by wider negative narratives about Islam that view the religion as harmful, especially in terms of Islam being outdated and unsuitable for the modern context as well as inherently violent. These studies impose an external framing on Ramadan that is somewhat divorced from the experience of Muslims who participate in it. I take a thematic approach to discussing the 'harm' deriving from Ramadan in existing literature before moving on to how academic works have analysed Ramadan in other ways.

2.2.1 HARM TO THE BODY – DEPRIVATION

As already mentioned, there is a huge emphasis on the health impact of fasting in existing literature and much of this highlights the stress that Ramadan places on the physical body. Even studies that highlight potentially positive effects of fasting seem underpinned by concerns that fasting is harmful for human beings. Langford et al. (1994) highlight how this manifests in Britain, comparing Accident and Emergency admissions at a UK hospital before, during and after Ramadan. They find that the number of Muslims admitted, especially resulting from non-accidents, significantly increases during the month compared to their non-Muslim counterparts. This study is a good example of how external concerns (good hospital management, in this case) are often applied in the study of Ramadan, demonstrating little analysis and engagement with Ramadan as a phenomenon. Additionally, the study suggests a negative impact on British Muslims' health during the month which is indicative of conclusions drawn by many later studies. Such articles explore medical conditions and concerns related to Ramadan and fasting as summarised below.

Diabetes plays a prominent role in this body of literature, largely associated with the risks of fasting to diabetes sufferers. Salti et al.'s (2004) clinical investigation with over 12,000 diabetic participants from various Muslim-majority countries demonstrates this well. The authors conclude that there was a significant increase in severe hypoglycaemic episodes in Ramadan compared to other months, putting patients at risk. Tourkmani et al's (2018) paper summarises other studies which have highlighted similar risks to fasting diabetic patients including issues around taking medication appropriately (pp.793-794). Additionally, the wealth of articles discussing diabetes management

strategies during Ramadan (Almansour et al. 2017; Raveendran and Zargar 2017; Sadikot et al. 2017; Hassanein et al. 2017) show there is a general consensus of increased risk to diabetes sufferers who fast during the month.

Studies of fasting during pregnancy also feature frequently. A review of literature on pregnancy and fasting in both Jewish and Muslim traditions, for example, highlights detrimental biological effects of fasting on pregnant women (Adler-Lazarovits and Weintraub 2019). The authors also surveyed medical practitioners in Israel who overwhelmingly advised against fasting during pregnancy. Despite this, the authors state that the effect of fasting “on the clinical outcome such as pregnancy loss or PTD [preterm delivery] rate have not yet been proven” (p.79) and call for further scientific evidence on the subject. Their conclusions suggest that such perceptions of the negative impact of fasting on pregnancy may be unfounded.

Other studies have investigated sleep in relation to healthy individuals who fast Ramadan. Qasrawi et al.’s (2017) review article explains that current studies of Ramadan fasting have generally shown that the occasion causes disturbances and a reduction in sleep and changes in circadian rhythm. Despite the authors’ critique that these studies do not take into account environmental factors such as changes in daily routine, the studies they cite have generally reported negative consequences of Ramadan (including both fasting and lifestyle changes of the month). Thus, even healthy individuals are perceived to experience some detriments as a result of the month.

A final sub-section of articles which are linked to physical health and the body are those concerned with Muslim athletes who fast Ramadan. It is worth noting that this type of article seemed to peak in 2012⁶, the year when the London 2012 Olympics coincided with Ramadan but also the year in which the *Journal of Sports Sciences* published a special edition on Ramadan and Football (Volume 30, Supplement 1)⁷. The edition itself highlights the concern of the impact of Ramadan on sports, also reflected in the *Asian Journal of Sports Medicine’s* special edition on Ramadan in 2011 (Volume 2, Issue 3)⁸. Opening the special issue on Ramadan and Football, Zerguini et al. (2012) summarise some of the “challenges” arising from previous studies. While the authors suggest previous studies don’t conclusively prove a negative impact of fasting on football players they do highlight potential issues such as a lack of sleep (p.S5), problems with circadian rhythms (p.S7) and slight dehydration (p.S5).

⁶ According to a Scopus search on 31/01/2019.

⁷ Special edition available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rjsp20/30/sup1> (Accessed: 4 July 2022).

⁸ Special edition available at: <https://brieflands.com/journals/asian-journal-of-sports-medicine/issue/1299.html> (Accessed: 04 July 2022).

They also report that players subjectively felt “‘slightly less ready’ to train during the Ramadan fast” (p.55) and had asked academics and practitioners for advice on coping with fasting and playing. Overall, the paper presents Ramadan as a problem to be managed in the footballing world, a sense echoed by other articles in the edition. This idea is reflected more widely in sports literature – Nikfarjad and Memari’s (2016) editorial demonstrates this by posing questions for future research on athletes in any sport, including:

- “To what extent athletes will experience diminished cognitive performances (e.g., vigilance, memory or attention) in response to Ramadan fasting?”
- “Which time period of Ramadan fasting (early vs. late days) poses a greater threat to athletes’ performance?”
- “While there has been a negative outlook towards the effects of Ramadan fasting on athletic performances, what is the main characteristic or feature of an intervention that may enhance performance of athletes during Ramadan?”

Once again, though they say existing research outcomes on sportspeople’s performance in Ramadan is “inconsistent”, Ramadan and fasting are presented as obstacles to physical output that require “intervention”. Though most of the studies on sports and Ramadan have been conducted in Muslim-majority contexts (likely due to the increased availability of suitable participants), they have an international outlook and approach in their conclusions and recommendations and are therefore relevant to Muslims in Britain.

That said, there are articles that oppose these ideas and demonstrate positive health impacts of fasting. Faris et al.’s (2019) review of 12 studies measuring particular chemicals produced by the body, concludes that Ramadan seems to have a slight positive and protective effect on healthy individuals. Though none of the studies reviewed were based in the UK, they looked at both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority contexts including Europe. Similarly, Mzoughi et al. (2018) conclude that fasting Ramadan can have a positive and potentially protective effect on those with high blood pressure. Many of these articles are quite recent and locate themselves amongst the general idea of fasting as detrimental to health and emphasise their aim to critique these ideas which have gained prevalence in medical research. This is reinforced by the way in which authors in other studies try to counteract the idea of Ramadan as harmful. This includes aforementioned works, such as Adler-Lazarovits and Weintraub’s (2019) claim that there is no reliable link between fasting and pregnancy loss and Nikfarjad and Memari’s argument (2016) that fasting has not been proven to detrimentally impact sports performance. However, Ramadan is generally framed as being harmful to the human body despite these exceptions.

Although much of the primary research on the clinical impacts of Ramadan seems to have been conducted abroad, there is certainly a concern of the month's impact in the UK. UK-based scholars and clinicians have reviewed existing literature on diabetes and Ramadan (Hui and Devendra 2010) and provided advice on managing diabetes (Hui et al. 2010) and other health issues to fellow practitioners, including concerns around the performance of fasting medical staff during the month (Mughal 2014). Furthermore, an education programme for British diabetes sufferers about Ramadan has been developed and tested (Hassanein et al. 2009; Bravis et al. 2010). At the time of conducting fieldwork during Ramadan in 2020, I was also notified of a study being run by British-based charity the South Asian Health Foundation to analyse experiences of Ramadan and COVID-19 from a health perspective. This again suggests that Ramadan constitutes some form of physical harm to individuals.

Looking beyond the health field, similar ideas are present about the negative impact of fasting-related deprivation elsewhere. Fazakarley's (2017) sociological exploration of Muslims in England, for example, highlights how British employers and educational bodies in the 1960s-1980s viewed fasting as an impediment to productivity. Ramadan was also discussed as a form of weakness by British author Clare Sheridan (1936), as she remarks scathingly in her travel journals in Algeria. She comments that fasting reduces Muslims to the "lowest physical condition" noting the following examples:

I have seen them with raging fever, stricken like an animal that crawls away to die, refusing to take medication until the sun has set.

Women prefer to lose a new-born child than take food that would preserve the milk in their breasts. Pregnant women resign themselves to a still-born child or to giving birth to a weakling. (p.234)

The issues mentioned by Sheridan bear a resemblance to topics investigated in the studies above which include pregnancy. Remarking on her experience of fasting Ramadan as a non-Muslim in Algeria⁹, Sheridan further highlights the perceived problems that face healthy individuals saying that she is "terribly tired and depleted" (p.235) and "incapable of any mental effort" (p.236). Sheridan summarises her views towards the month as "a torture" expressing that the Prophet Muhammad "dealt the Orient a staggering blow when he instituted Ramadan" (p.233).

⁹ It is not totally clear why Sheridan chose to fast during Ramadan but it seems likely she wanted to try out this practice to understand the culture she was embedded in (Sheridan 1936, pp.233-242).

While the attitudes towards Ramadan in the academic studies described in this section do not come across as strongly or as scathingly as Sheridan's, the similarities in approach are evident. I argue it is likely that long-standing Orientalist narratives about Muslims have influenced current studies on Ramadan and thus, there is a need for further studies which try to avoid and challenge such assumptions. My thesis attempts to address this issue and foreground the perspectives of Muslims themselves in order to provide balance to the existing focus on the 'harm' of Ramadan.

2.2.2 HARM TO THE BODY - INDULGENCE AND EXCESS

Another way in which detriments of Ramadan have been emphasised in the literature is through viewing the month as a time of indulgence and excess. This largely manifests as indulgence through physical consumption especially food. Like the previous section, this can be seen as a harm to the body but, contrastingly and perhaps paradoxically, due to excess rather than deprivation.

Two important sociological studies of Ramadan highlight this aspect of the month. The first is Rytter's (2016) ethnographic study of Danish Muslims who travel to a Sufi lodge in Pakistan to undertake *itikaf* – a form of seclusion which is a common Muslim ritual in the last ten days of Ramadan. The focus of his article is a series of burger incidents, which he terms "burger jihad", in which the *mutakifs* (those undertaking *itikaf*) fail in "a fight against the *nafs*" (p.56). According to Rytter, who is not a Muslim but accompanies the *mutakifs* on their journey, "the very idea of *itikaf* is to fight your *nafs*, the lower self, with its unruly desires like the craving for food or sleep" (p.47). The fact that the *mutakifs* opted for take-away burgers instead of the pure food (*langar*) of the lodge is interpreted by the author as follows:

Again and again they gave in to their lust and desires, almost as if hypnotized by the illuminated Hardee's¹⁰ sign shining in the dark night, which came to represent all the things they were supposed not to think about during *itikaf*. (p.56)

Rytter describes the month here in terms of indulgence in food and harm against the body and soul, in contrast to its proposed theological emphasis on abstention and discipline. While his account is intriguing in exploring the spiritual and social significance of food in such a ritual – something I feel has been neglected in research about Ramadan and hope to include in my own work – I am unsure how far Rytter's interpretations reflect those of his participants. While he discusses speeches of religious leaders in the lodge, Rytter rarely references the words of his fellow *mutakifs*, and sometimes perhaps misinterprets them, as in the following passage:

¹⁰ Name of the burger restaurant the *mutakifs* ordered burgers from.

The next day [after having burgers for *iftar*], many suffered from moral hangovers. Sajid complained that the burgers of the night before had made his mouth extra dry during the warm sunny day's fast. (p.55)

While Rytter interprets Sajid's complaint as a "moral hangover", it is not clear whether morality has a prominent role to play, or whether Sajid is simply commenting on his physical struggle with fasting. Rytter's later comments are telling of why he perhaps interpreted the incidents in this way. He says the burger incidents "confirmed the sacred-mundane divide" of the lodge (p.57) implying the burger outlet was on one side (physically and metaphorically) and the lodge on the other. I would argue that Rytter is imposing a Western understanding of religion, namely the sacred-mundane dichotomy, in an Islamic context where it does not necessarily work; others have similarly argued the sacred-mundane framework does not always fit neatly with Islamic practice (A. Ahmed 2016, pp.171-172) and I elaborate on this further in Chapter 6.

Another, and perhaps the most in-depth, ethnographic study on Ramadan also discusses over-indulgence during the month, though this is not a major focus as in Rytter's work. Buitelaar (1993) gives an account of "everyday life" (pp.55-62) during the month in her ethnography of Ramadan in Morocco for which she spent several extended periods living with Muslim families in the country over a few years. She describes how Moroccans reduce their working hours, wake up later and take daytime naps during Ramadan, and says this is largely seen as an acceptable way to cope with waking up during the night to eat, with the exception of daytime sleeping which may be seen as a weakness in certain circumstances (pp.55-57). Buitelaar emphasises the "lavish meals" prepared during Ramadan – which are greater in quantity and quality, exceeding "the quantity needed to fill the stomach" (p.58). Buitelaar is more cautious than Rytter to judge these practices as reprehensible, highlighting one reason for such excess is to share food with others during the month. However, she does admit there is a desire "of making sure the family can indulge in excessive consumption" (p.58). This acknowledgement seems to be one echoed by her participants, as Buitelaar demonstrates with Moroccan cartoons which highlight the paradoxical "preoccupation with food" during the month (pp.184-185).

Despite this mention of indulgence during the month, Buitelaar's Chapter 5 and quote from a participant that "Ramadan makes one healthy" highlights a general consensus amongst her participants that fasting overwhelmingly provides benefits physically, spiritually and societally. Thus the mention of indulgence is balanced (and perhaps complicated) with the idea of the health benefits of Ramadan - this is helpful given the preponderance of studies to view Ramadan as harmful to the body as highlighted above. This bears similarities to Hellman's (2008) reflections based on

ethnographic work during Ramadan in Java. While his participants justified their eating “as much as they could” during Ramadan meals in order to strengthen them for the day’s work (p.210), Hellman argues the communal meals also represent “the successful domestication of desire (*nafsu*)” (p.221). This provides an interesting contrast to Rytter’s (2016) study which implies the opposite, namely eating as succumbing to one’s *nafs* or desires.

It is worth commenting on studies which look at trade and economics during Ramadan, since one might expect them to reflect the excesses in consumption outlined above. Indeed, some studies suggest Ramadan stimulates financial consumption - Hossain et al. (2018) describe increased global sugar prices due to pre-Ramadan demand, Ahmed (1999, p.265) notes the inflated prices and demand for some items in his Addis Ababa case-study, and Sandikci and Omeraki (2007) analyse the commodification of Ramadan in Turkey. While these somewhat imply excesses in consumption, many studies looking at economics in Ramadan discuss something called the ‘Ramadan effect’ or the idea that investors in Muslim countries get increased returns on their stocks during Ramadan. This effect is discussed in a review article by Sonjaya and Wahyudi (2016) who summarise the reasons for this including positive mood, more rational decision-making, saving for the end of Ramadan, and the impact of religious teachings (pp.55-56). Haruvy et al. (2018) further highlight the increased generosity of individuals, in terms of financial giving, during their Ramadan fasts and Anderson (2018) elaborates sociologically on practices and understandings of Ramadan charity in Syria. These studies largely imply spending is not indulgent during the month but measured and considerate of the needs of others.

Nonetheless, narratives outlined here about indulgence in Ramadan are echoed, again, by Sheridan (1936) in her travel writings. She comments upon meetings between an Algerian and his American girlfriend during Ramadan where he counts down the seconds to sunset so he can “liberate the Moslem conscience” since, Sheridan states, women are “forbidden” during the fasting day (pp.159-160). More explicitly, Salter (1873) in his ethnographic/anthropological work on Asians in England describes a scene of high-class Muslims flouting the rules of the holy month:

It is the Ramazan with Mohammedans, a fast which they pretend, in the royal suite, strictly to observe, when eating, drinking, and smoking are prohibited in the daytime; but here they are intoxicated with opium, or smoking and drinking *ad libitum*.” (pp.203-204)

The discussion of indulgence in Ramadan in some current studies is interesting and often comes across as judgemental of Muslims’ behaviour in relation to religious ideals about Ramadan. I argue again that these ideas are repeating wider negative narratives about Muslims, such as those narrated by Salter (1873). On the other hand, financial studies of the ‘Ramadan effect’ and Muslim charitable giving (Haruvy et al. 2018), as well as ideas about the ameliorative effects of Ramadan in existing literature

(Buitelaar 1993) suggest the picture is more complex and that there is a sense of restraint in terms of consumption during the month. My findings chapter on food (Chapter 7) explores the paradoxical status of consumption in Ramadan in more depth.

2.2.3 A MONTH OF VIOLENCE

Following dominant ideas around Islam as a religion which promotes terrorism and violence, another way in which the harm of Ramadan has been emphasised in academia is via studies describing Ramadan as a time of increased violence and aggression. Existing studies have highlighted how Muslims in Britain tend to be securitised in various ways (Bonino 2016; Croft 2012; Jones 2021, pp.3-5) and some studies of Ramadan – based in the various contexts - seem to follow this trend. Carter (2011) uses secondary quantitative data of fatalities amongst US and allied troops in Afghanistan (2001-2008) to conclude that “the month of Ramadan is a significantly more dangerous time for coalition soldiers” (p.115). He argues this is linked to the Taliban’s calls to violence during the month not necessarily to religious observance (p.113), though in his abstract states he has found “significant evidence linking factors unexamined in most civil war research, such as religious observance (the month of Ramadan)... to these fatal events” (p.108). I would argue that Carter’s claims need further investigation since it is too simplistic to conclude religious observance, or indeed “religion” as he claims elsewhere (p.114), is the cause of such conflict without highlighting the intertwined nature of politics and religion in the context he investigates.

Other papers put forward similar ideas about violence in Ramadan. In an introduction to a paper on the terrorist group Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb, Guidère (2011) describes Ramadan 2011 in Algeria as “the deadliest month”¹¹ since the organisation’s inception. Other articles, less explicitly investigating war and conflict, echo the idea of Ramadan as a violent month; Bashir’s (2015) work partially titled “The Holy Month of Violence” documents the prevalence of gender-based violence in an Egyptian Ramadan TV series, while Leone (2016) though not explicitly drawing a link between violence and the holy month, explores an Iranian-originating holiday held during Ramadan which has “brought about demonstrations that have often degenerated into overt and violent conflicts” (p.120). Such ideas repeat common perceptions of Islam as a violent religion, and in Carter (2011) and Guidère’s (2011) case, of Muslims as violent terrorists.

It is worth noting that academic literature analysing the British context doesn’t seem to discuss violence in Ramadan as in the aforementioned studies. It is perhaps not as easy to do this since

¹¹ While the full paper is referenced in the bibliography, this quote is taken from an introduction to the paper which can be found here: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-maghreb-machrek-2011-2-page-59.htm?contenu=resume> [Accessed: 16 June 2020].

there is no large-scale armed conflict currently ongoing in the UK. However, Miller (2017), writing for a US news outlet, suggests the month could be a time of increased violence in the UK in relation to terror attacks that happened in and around Ramadan that year. He writes that “for radical Muslims, Ramadan is another inspiration to fulfil their obligation to perform violent jihad¹²”. While not discussing violence, other works I’ve described in this chapter depict Ramadan as more dangerous in some ways in the UK – e.g. a “greater risk of accidents” amongst Muslim employees (Fazakarley 2017, pp.154-155), and increased accident and emergency admissions of Muslims (Langford et al. 1994) – but there is not yet a clear argument in academia that Ramadan results in violence in Britain. However, as described in Section 2.6 below, British media articles about Ramadan and the pandemic echo the idea of Ramadan as dangerous in terms of an increased risk of COVID-19 (Hellen et al. 2020).

There are other academics who critique ideas of Ramadan as a violent month. Reese et al.’s (2017) paper challenges the fact that wider negative perceptions of Muslims, particularly the linking of violence to religious occasions, have permeated into academia. The authors discuss how “policymakers and journalists often assert that Islamic militants time their strikes to coincide with important Islamic holidays” (p.439) and question “why practitioners and scholars have devoted so much more attention to the idea of a surge of violence during the month of Ramadan rather than the suppression of violence on religious public holidays” (p.458). The evidence from their statistical analysis of 10 years’ conflict data from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq finds no link between Islamic religious occasions and increased violence and shows a reduction in violence when the occasion coincides with a public holiday. The authors suspect this is due to a societal expectation to behave in a certain way on such days. Similarly, Vaezi and Kashkoli (2014) claim crime rates are reduced in Ramadan (p.508) in their paper discussing religious teachings’ role in crime prevention, though they fail to provide adequate details or references to support this.

Nevertheless, Reese et al. (2017) suppose that the predominance of studies arguing violence increases in Ramadan is due to “cognitive attention bias” – i.e. scholars are simply confirming “their existing belief in a Ramadan surge” (p.458). This argument is convincing given repeated messages of violence, terrorism and radicalisation amongst Muslims in the media and public sphere. I would argue then that the portrayal of Ramadan as a month of violence in academic studies, should be countered by further exploration of emic Muslim understandings of the holy month rather than repeating

¹² *Jihad* is an Islamic term referring to struggles one goes through in life, including spiritual struggles. Here, the author uses the term in reference to war, one of its many connotations, linking it to terror attacks.

negative stereotyping. My own qualitative, ethnographic PhD project which researches the significance of Ramadan from a Geertzian perspective is well-placed to take on this task.

2.2.4 THE RISK OF ROAD ACCIDENTS

A final way in which Ramadan is construed as a harmful month in the literature is via quantitative studies of road accidents in Muslim-majority countries, many of which suggest the risk of incidents is greater during Ramadan. Radin et al. (1996), for example, report a 41% increase in motorcycle accidents in Malaysia during the month (p.331), while Al-Houqani et al. (2013) and Tahir et al. (2013) similarly report increased incidences of certain road accidents in Ramadan. Supporting this, Tlemissof et al. (2017, p.71) and Mehmood et al. (2015) reported that more vulnerable road users (often elderly) were affected by road accidents during Ramadan, though there was no overall increase in accidents during the month. Some put this down to the presence of Ramadan 'rush hours' around *taraweeh* and *iftar* (Radin et al. 1996, p.331, Tahir et al. 2013, p.S150), but there also comes across a sense that there is some fault on the part of fasting drivers; for example Yildirim-Yenier et al.'s (2016) findings that there was increased horn-honking and decreased seat-belt use during Ramadan in Ankara, Turkey, and Al-Houqani et al.'s (2013) focus on sleep-related accidents. Conversely, other studies have suggested Ramadan does not affect the number of traffic accidents (Alnasser et al. 2012) or can even have a positive effect, with a reduced average driving speed reported in Yildirim-Yenier et al.'s (2016) study and Khammash and Al-Shouha's (2006, p.21) claim that the impact of the "religious and spiritual atmosphere" of the month could contribute Jordan's decreased rate of accidents. Nonetheless, many of these traffic-based studies of Ramadan suggest the month, or the actions of Muslims during it are harmful to others and to communities.

I have described here the ways in which existing academic literature seems to have been dominated by studies looking at negative consequences of the month, much of which, I argue, is influenced by existing negative narratives around Muslims. As such, I intend my study to take a different approach. By conducting an in-depth ethnographic study of Ramadan in Britain, I hope to foreground emic perspectives of the month. By using a Geertzian emphasis on significance, I hope to explore the fundamental meanings of the month for British Muslims, something which has been overlooked in the above studies which often discuss peripheral issues. Next, I explore further themes that have arisen in research about Ramadan so far, particularly those themes which feed more directly into my own doctoral study.

2.3 THE COMMUNITY SPIRIT

In the few studies which have analysed Ramadan anthropologically or sociologically, the communal nature of the month is present. This is highlighted through studies of collective practices

such as *itikaf*¹³ (Rytter 2016) and *taraweeh* prayers, the night prayers that are specific to Ramadan (Moller 2005a). Rytter (2016) in his ethnographic work on *itikaf* discusses the idea of *communitas* throughout and how his participants bonded through talking about food (p.53) although his main focus is Islamic ideas of the self, desires and spiritual development. He also remarks on the sociological idea of *communitas* in a negative sense with regards to his fieldwork arguing that the incidents of ordering burgers for *iftar* “had challenged the *communitas* of the spiritual brothers” (p.56) by causing arguments. Moller (2005a) similarly discusses an issue of conflict in relation to Ramadan in Java. He discusses the differences between “modernists” and “traditionalists” in the way they perform the *taraweeh* prayer and highlights the disputes involved. He does, however, reflexively recognise that academics tend to focus on disputes (p.50) while Moller chooses to prioritise the sense of “unity” surrounding these issues highlighted in his paper’s sub-title, “*unity, diversity, and cultural smoothness*”. He evidences this as follows:

I have observed how smoothly Javanese Muslims handle their differences, and how easily such differences are overcome. Differences of opinion are common, but the way they are handled pre-empts large-scale conflicts in society (p.49)

Moller also highlights areas of agreement surrounding the prayers, particularly the importance placed on them by Muslims in Java (p.49). It could be said that Moller’s conflicts, and even those highlighted in Rytter’s (2016) paper above, themselves signify a sense of communality amongst the participants since they emphasise that practices surrounding *taraweeh* and *itikaf* are important to research participants. This is an idea supported by the ethnographer Van Velsen who states that an “individual’s conflicting loyalties to different groups, based on different principles of organisation, may ultimately contribute to social cohesion” (Van Velsen 1967, p.139). Additionally, Shahab Ahmed’s (2016) attempt to define Islam – which bears similarities with Bauer’s (2021) theory discussed later – describes searching for intra-religious tensions, and emphasises the need “to conceptualize those tensions and contradictions as Islam” (p.211). Ahmed’s statement similarly suggests that disagreement has a role in uniting Muslims.

Buitelaar’s ethnographic works on Ramadan reflect strongly on ideas of community too. One of the key three themes she outlines in her ethnography of Ramadan in Morocco (Buitelaar 1993) is “Umma (Islamic Community)” drawing on Turner’s (1969) concept of *communitas*. She further

¹³ Though *itikaf* literally translates as seclusion and is thus considered a period of private reflection, as demonstrated in Rytter’s (2016) work, men often undertake this practice in the mosque during the last ten days of Ramadan making it a communal practice.

discusses the shared practice of fasting, family spirit of the month, and Moroccan-specific traditions that are revived during this holy period. She concludes by arguing that “the fast unifies the Islamic community” (Buitelaar 1993, pp.179-180).

In a later chapter on Ramadan in the Netherlands, Buitelaar (2006) reflects on how Muslims of Moroccan descent feel that Ramadan was much more “social” (p.78) in Morocco and miss celebrating the holy month in their country of origin (p.78). Despite her participants feeling that Ramadan is more communal in Morocco, Buitelaar highlights how Ramadan in the Netherlands is celebrated via events which bring together Muslim and non-Muslim members of society providing a sense of unity and cohesion in a different way. I previously analysed similar events that took place in a British mosque discussing the ways in which non-Muslims were welcomed into the Muslim community via series of open *iftars* during Ramadan (Jones 2017). Similarly, DeHanas (2016) highlights elements of communal solidarity and activism during Ramadan in examples of a Ramadan community radio station led by East London Mosque (pp.162-163) as well as an *iftar* event aimed at supporting the homeless in the local area (pp. 175-187). These studies suggest the communal spirit of Ramadan exists within and beyond the Muslim community and is something my participants reflect upon in later chapters.

Others have highlighted these sorts of community outreach initiatives during the month, further demonstrating how Ramadan acts as a way for Muslims and non-Muslims to come together and strengthen relationships. Sharaby (2008) discusses an interfaith initiative which celebrates festivals of the three Abrahamic faiths, including Ramadan, in Israel, while Fergusson (2017), a journalist who is not Muslim, provides a personal account of his involvement in Ramadan in Britain via his “Ramadan Diary” (pp.281-344) including fasting and breaking the fast with Muslim acquaintances and attending mosque-based open *iftars* and other Muslim-led events. Although this is not an academic work, it provides further evidence of the bridge-building nature of Ramadan and is valuable given that literature on Ramadan, especially in Britain, is sparse. While Lee (2018) uses a case study of Malaysian television to suggest Ramadan is a time when race relations may be damaged, and there is literature suggesting an increase in violence during the month, I have outlined critiques of such studies in the previous section (Section 2.2). Regardless, the way in which Ramadan can strengthen links between Muslims and non-Muslim is an emerging theme in literature about Muslims in minority contexts and warrants further exploration. The studies above hint towards the importance of community to the experience of Ramadan, something emphasised by my own participants and discussed further in Chapter 5.

2.4 RAMADAN IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

While Ramadan may be visibly celebrated in Muslim-majority contexts, there are various ways in which Ramadan brings Muslims more into the public consciousness in where they are in a minority. Supporting this, Buitelaar (2005) in her ethnographic work in Morocco states ““More than any other act of worship, fasting during Ramadan permeates all spheres of life, public and private” (pp.178-179) which may partly explain the increased visibility of Muslims during the month. Later however, she argues that “The biggest difference between Ramadan in Morocco and in the Netherlands is of course the lack of a typical Ramadan atmosphere in the Dutch public space” (2006, p.78). While minority contexts may not have access to the “typical Ramadan atmosphere” that Buitelaar discusses, there are ways in which Ramadan is becoming increasingly prominent in minority settings perhaps resulting in a different but nonetheless existent Ramadan atmosphere in such situations.

Several papers have highlighted how Muslims in diaspora are expected to respond to questions about their religion and the fasting month during Ramadan, perhaps due to the way in which Ramadan emphasises their Muslim identity. Buitelaar (2006) narrates how her participants based in the Netherlands talked about having to explain Islam to colleagues and their feeling of ‘standing out’ from their non-Muslim counterparts. They perceived this questioning negatively as a way of harassing them and expressed anxieties and attempts to hide their Muslim identity. A study with university staff in the UK (El-Sayed et al. 2015), also highlights the participants being asked about their religion, though this was perceived more positively with the authors suggesting Muslims feel more comfortable in their identity during the month:

Many workers spoke of the enjoyment of this period because this was the time when many non-Muslim workers would enquire about the fasting practice and then potentially ‘other’ elements of their religion. (p.45)

Despite the differences in these two experiences, both papers suggest Muslims become more prominent amongst the wider public during the holy month. This may be partly related to the way Muslims participate differently (or not at all) in social and work activities that involve food as mentioned by Buitelaar (2006).

Additionally, outreach events by Muslims, which involve non-Muslims in Ramadan festivities are a more direct and intentional way by which Muslims make themselves visible during the month. Buitelaar (2006) discusses public *iftars* held in the Netherlands and suggests “solidarity” as a key theme of the month (p.82). I previously researched a series of open *iftars* in a UK mosque which sought to break down stereotypes about Islam (Jones 2017). I argue that the Muslims involved in this event actively sought to increase their visibility amongst the wider public in order to involve non-Muslims in

a space and discourse normally reserved for Muslims. Part of the motivation for this was to increase Muslims' influence in the wider public sphere. As discussed in the previous section, Fergusson (2017) and Sharaby (2008) also highlight outward-facing Ramadan activities which demonstrate ways in which Muslims are perhaps increasingly visible to the wider public during the month.

There are other ways through which Ramadan's presence is increasing in the public sphere as I have highlighted in the introduction to this thesis though which have been less studied academically. These include the marketing of Ramadan by mainstream UK businesses, the presence of the month in news media and the discussion of the occasion by politicians. Hirschman's (2011) article provides some insight into the marketing of Ramadan in Muslim-minority contexts (though not the UK) and offers potential marketing recommendations. Stanton's (2022) article is relevant in highlighting the increasing presence of the holy month in political discussions, describing a series of U.S. Congressional resolutions that have been proposed in relation to Ramadan over the past twenty years. It is interesting to observe that while these were largely symbolic resolutions, as Stanton describes, only one of them was passed. While the author argues these resolutions represent an "effort to symbolically include Muslims in the national recognition of religious holidays" (p.22), their lack of success perhaps hints towards the way in which Muslim celebrations are not yet fully accepted as part of American society. Despite the increased presence of Ramadan in the public sphere then, it does not seem to be acknowledged to the same extent as celebrations like Christmas.

The increased public gaze on Muslims during Ramadan is an interesting avenue for further exploration which potentially has complex and competing consequences. My previous research suggests that Muslims' visibility in Ramadan is a way in which they can positively counteract stereotypes and further contribute to the wider public sphere (Jones 2017). On the other hand, the prominence of fasting Muslims perhaps leaves them open to greater scrutiny and discrimination as expressed by Buitelaar's (2006) participants in the Netherlands. These negative attitudes have existed in Britain too, as highlighted above through historical travel writings (Sheridan 1936) and poor treatment of fasting Muslims by British employers (Fazakarley 2017). The ways in which Muslims are made visible through Ramadan and the consequences this brings socially, individually and even spiritually are interesting topics of further study, albeit ones which are explored minimally in the current thesis.

2.5 THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF RAMADAN

Given Ramadan's prominent place in Islamic teachings as one of the five pillars of the religion, there is little academic exploration of its religious significance even within the sparse literature on the

holy month. This section will focus on works which start to get to the heart of what Ramadan means for Muslims, something that this thesis hopes to elaborate on further.

Buitelaar's study of Ramadan in Morocco (1993; 2005) arguably explores these ideas most extensively. Buitelaar frames her findings around three key theological ideas: "*umma*", "*tahara*" and "*ajr*" which highlight what is significant about Ramadan in the Moroccan context. Regarding the "*umma*" or community of believers, Buitelaar (2005) describes how the communal nature of the fast acts as a way of uniting her participants as part of the Muslim community and part of the Moroccan nation (pp. 178-179). She argues that the concept of *umma* during Ramadan is especially important for Muslim women in this context as their "participation is more manifest in the fast than in other collective rites, in which men appear to be the leading actors" (pp. 178-179). *Tahara* or purity, she argues, is significant because the fast is seen to physically purify the body and morally purify the mind (p.179). *Ajr* or religious merit is the third theme she outlines in the sense that Muslims seek to obtain such rewards from God in various ways during the month such as by giving charity or participating in *taraweeh* prayers. She describes that the ways Muslims seeks *ajr* have different emphases between women and men (p.179). Underlying these three themes however, is what Buitelaar terms "unification" or "*tawhid*" which in her view is the main purpose of fasting. She summarises this in her conclusion as follows:

I would argue that the entire practice of fasting can be interpreted as an exercise in unification...the fast unifies the Islamic community...in an example of unification of the body and mind...a kind of unification of life on earth and the afterlife in Paradise (pp.179-180)

Buitelaar's emphasis on the communal and unifying aspect of Ramadan is something worthy of further explanation particularly its overlap with emic conceptions of community. These are areas I explore further in Chapter 5.

Anderson's (2018) work based in Syria is also helpful in elaborating on Ramadan's religious significance. Anderson focuses particularly on charitable giving and describes his participants' understandings of "the ways in which *thawab*¹⁴ circulated and *baraka*¹⁵ was distributed" (p.619) during Ramadan. As such, Anderson's work shows similarities with Buitelaar's (1993; 2005) – the concepts of *thawab* and *ajr* being very similar – and the idea of *ajr* also emerged in my own findings. This will be linked to the conceptions of sacredness described in Chapter 6. Anderson (2018), like

¹⁴ Meaning religious merit and similar to the concept of *ajr*.

¹⁵ Can be translated as 'blessing'. Discussed further in Chapter 6.

Buitelaar (1993), also touches upon the idea of a particular “atmosphere” associated with the month which is a distinct part of its collective experience according to his participants (p.620), the communality of the month also being something I address in a later chapter (Chapter 5).

In a British context, a handful of studies elaborate on further meanings and important aspects of Ramadan. The importance of the Quran and the act of memorising and reciting it is highlighted by Gent’s study of British *huffaz* (2016) as well as Maurer’s individual case study with a British university student (2014) both of which refer to Ramadan sparingly. This is echoed in the Moroccan context (Buitelaar 1993, pp.64-68). The British participants interviewed by Maurer (2014) and Mondal (2008) further suggest the month is a time for renewal and revival of one’s faith. Additionally, Zahid’s (2021) Masters thesis provides a unique academic account of a British *itikaf* through which the author uses an auto-ethnographic approach to elaborate on the significance of the ritual. In particular, he elaborates on conceptions of sacred space and time during Ramadan and highlights a similar structuring to the month that I depict and discuss in Chapter 6. Abdul-Azim Ahmed’s (2016) ethnographic doctoral study of a British mosque outlines Ramadan’s religious significance, highlighting how it fits into a broader Islamic calendar of “sacred rhythms” during which the sacredness of different periods vary (pp.103-106) - a theme to which I return in Chapter 6. My work then provides a much-needed advancement to understanding the religious significance of Ramadan as a whole, and particularly for Muslims in the UK.

2.6 RELIGION, RAMADAN AND THE PANDEMIC

Since my fieldwork is set in the unusual context of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, it is worth drawing attention to studies related to the impact of the pandemic on Ramadan and religion more broadly, something also addressed in my article on Ramadan in lockdown (Jones-Ahmed 2022a). Again, research on Ramadan during this period is dominated by medical studies (Hanif et al. 2020; Abunada et al. 2020) including those exploring the occasion from a public health perspective in the UK (Hassan et al. 2021a; Hassan et al. 2021b). The confluence of Ramadan fasting with the pandemic understandably raised health concerns and the fact that ethnic minorities seemed more susceptible to the virus (Platt and Warwick 2020) likely made health studies of Ramadan at this time more pronounced. Nonetheless, the predominance of this medical research concurs with arguments I have made about the over-emphasis on physical aspects of the month and the ‘harm’ caused by Ramadan in research more broadly.

Several works suggested that COVID-19 encouraged an increase in “religiosity” (Bentzen 2021; Boguszewski et al. 2020), including a study of Indonesian Muslims and Ramadan (Fahrullah et al. 2020) and a UK-based report on Muslims (Mufti et al. 2021). These were largely based on

quantitative data. Other works on Ramadan and the pandemic seem more concerned with the spread of the virus and the following of restrictions (Alotaibi et al. 2021; Malik 2020) echoing wider discussions about the role of religious practices in the disease's transmission (Wildman et al. 2020). In these studies, however, Ramadan is somewhat peripheral and the focus is more on the transmission of COVID-19. More closely related to my research is Maravia et al.'s (2021) analysis of UK-based guidance issued by religious leaders and groups before Ramadan 2020 although the authors' conclusions are more about linguistic construction and the "symbolic capital" of such documents than Ramadan itself.

Malik's (2020) anthropological paper based on his experience of Ramadan in Pakistan conveys the interplay between theology, spirituality and social practice during Ramadan but also echoes narratives about the 'harm' of Ramadan (Section 2.2). Malik argues that "intimacy with God spread coronavirus in a country [Pakistan]" (p. 80) basing this on his assertion that "during Ramadan, mosques were crowded with people not following any SOPs [standard operating procedures] announced by the government" (p. 81). While such points *may* be valid, the article nonetheless reinforces ideas that religious observance in Ramadan is associated with harm, as discussed above, and that religious practice is linked to viral spread (Wildman et al. 2020). His argument that "intimacy with God" (p.80) caused the virus to spread, which is not possible to evidence, also comes across as polemical. Similar ideas about the risk of viral transmission during Ramadan were also apparent in UK news media which portrayed Ramadan 2020 as potentially accelerating the spread of the virus (Hellen et al. 2020) even before the month had begun.

Some academic works have started exploring the day-to-day impact of the pandemic on religious communities. Many of these discuss the online shift indirectly encouraged by coronavirus regulations likely because this was one of the most overt impacts of the pandemic and online methods were one of the few ways to conduct research at the height of the pandemic. Such studies include Vekemans' (2021) discussion of the "digital relocation" of activities by London-based Jain groups which the author bases on an analysis of websites and social media. Sabaté Gauxachs et al. (2021) similarly outline the shift online by Catholic groups in Spain through their analysis of survey data and an interview with a religious leader. Whilst I touch upon the digital implications of the pandemic on Ramadan in my article (Jones-Ahmed 2022a), discussions of digital religion are largely absent from this thesis. This was somewhat intentional as I wanted to highlight the impacts of the pandemic beyond 'going digital' but also because I intend in this thesis to highlight the significance of the holy month outside the impact of COVID-19. This thesis then adds to existing works on religion

and the pandemic by exploring some of the ways in which religion manifested and changed during the period apart from its prevalence online.

What is largely missing from this body of literature on religion and the pandemic is the in-person, everyday impact of the pandemic on religious practice, something explored in this thesis in Chapter 5¹⁶. Piela and Krotofil's (2021) survey-based research with Muslim women (from various countries including the UK and the US) starts to address this by examining the everyday implications of the pandemic on respondents' experiences of Ramadan. The authors' findings echo some of those in this thesis, such as the ways participants appreciated the solitude of Ramadan in lockdown, as well as the sense of loss felt by not being able to access the wider community in-person. My use of research diaries and photos helps to build a picture of the experience of Ramadan during the pandemic shedding light on the everyday manifestation of religion at a period during which it was difficult to capture such data through other means.

2.7 CONCLUSION: EXISTING THEMES RELATED TO RAMADAN

As outlined, academic literature on Ramadan is predominantly located in healthcare and medical disciplines at present, and beyond these fields there is still a tendency to focus on physical consequences of the month. I argue that there needs to be a turn towards the metaphysical and emotional aspects of Ramadan in academia something I address in my study while also recognising the embodied nature of fasting. This holistic perspective is needed because of the theological importance of spirituality during Ramadan as well as the ways my participants perceived spirituality as a primary goal of the month.

Secondly, the bias towards negative impacts, or the 'harm' caused by Ramadan is prevalent in current literature. I argue this is based in Orientalist and wider negative stereotyping of Muslims and Islam that should be challenged through studies which explore Ramadan from an emic perspective. Such studies should explore the significance of the month for Muslims, something that is particularly lacking in British-based studies of Ramadan. I apply a Geertzian perspective to my research when exploring the topic and attempt to foreground the perspectives of my Muslim participants to challenge negative narratives about Muslims that prevail in current literature and society more broadly.

As highlighted in Buitelaar's (1993) ethnography of Ramadan in Morocco, the communal aspect of Ramadan is important from a sociological and theological perspective. It is, however, largely absent from other research on Ramadan. I attempt to redress the balance by exploring communal

¹⁶ I explore this further in my journal article on Ramadan in lockdown (Jones-Ahmed 2022a).

aspects of the month especially in Chapter 5. While not all ‘typical’ communal practices of Ramadan are explored here – due to the impact of the pandemic – participant conceptions of communal worship and spirituality are explored at length. In keeping with my holistic approach to the topic, these discussions go alongside elaborations on more personalised, individual manifestations of such phenomenon, a conversation raised by participants particularly in light of their unusual social circumstances.

Works such as Buitelaar’s (1993) work and Anderson’s (2018) have also elaborated on the religious significance of Ramadan practices including fasting and charitable giving. I add to these existing works particularly through my exploration of sacredness in Ramadan in Chapter 6 but also in other chapters by examining the place of *ibadah* (acts of worship) during the holy month (Chapter 5) and the religious and spiritual aspects of the fast (Chapter 7). While this section has summarised how existing literature has portrayed Ramadan, I now move on to introduce the theory of “cultural ambiguity” (Bauer 2021) that is important throughout my own analysis and argue that existing studies have analysed the month in a way that concurs with Bauer’s theory.

3. INTRODUCING “CULTURAL AMBIGUITY”

In this section, I will focus on Bauer’s theory of “cultural ambiguity” (2021) which, while not addressing Ramadan directly, is a significant theory that I draw upon throughout this thesis. Bauer’s work does, however, focus on Muslim societies providing what he calls in his title “*An Alternative History of Islam*”. Following an introduction to cultural ambiguity, I observe how discussions of ambiguity, paradoxes and ambivalences have already begun to emerge in existing work on Ramadan. I draw on some of the sociological works already discussed in this chapter analysing them through the lens of ambiguity. This pattern was not something I initially observed when surveying the literature but after applying the theory to my own data, I noticed discussions of ambiguity in studies of the month. These studies thus support my own argument for how Ramadan can be conceived as a ‘month of ambiguity’.

3.1 BAUER AND CULTURAL AMBIGUITY

Bauer’s (2021) *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam* is a new work in English. The book was written in its original German ten years ago and has had a positive reception winning the Leibniz prize and being likened in its influence to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (Toral-Niehoff 2016). Bauer essentially argues that Islamic cultures have been historically characterized by an openness towards ambiguity in contrast to the modern West’s insistence on certainty and unequivocalty. This Western influence, according to the author, has resulted in an “intolerance” of ambiguity in modern

Muslim societies and brought “considerable devastation to the Islamic world” (Bauer 2021, p.16). More precisely, the author defines his theory as follows:

We may talk of the phenomenon of cultural ambiguity if, over a period of time, two contrary, or at least competing, clearly differing meanings are associated with one and the same term, act or object; or if a social group draws on contrary or strongly differing discourses for attributions of meaning to various realms of human life; or if one group simultaneously accepts different interpretations of a phenomenon, all of them entitled to equal validity. (Bauer 2021, p.10)

While this is a lengthy definition, the emphasis is on “contrary” or “competing” meanings associated with “a term, act or object” within one social group at the same time (p.10). If these meanings are not held simultaneously, Bauer deems it not to be cultural ambiguity but simply “competing norms” (p.10). Another quote Bauer uses that sheds light on his concept further is that of John D. Caputo who describes ambiguity as “an excess of meaning, a multiplication of too many meanings, so that we find ourselves drawn in several directions at once” (Caputo, J.D. 2005 in Bauer 2021, p.15). These ideas of excess and abundant meanings apply to my findings in later chapters.

To further explain his theory, Bauer gives a hypothetical example of a society that seeks medical treatment from both ‘magical healers’ and ‘trained physicians’. Bauer argues that the coexistence and validation of both types of treatment simultaneously in a particular group of people is classed as “cultural ambiguity” (p.10). Throughout his book he gives examples from Islamic societies including diverse and contrasting interpretations of the Quran (Chapter 3) and *hadith* (Chapter 4), as well as his argument that Islamic traditions have considered sexual desire in an ambiguous way, at least historically, in contrast with Western attempts to rigidly categorise sexuality (Chapter 7)¹⁷. These examples shed light on the way in which Bauer’s theory can be applied theologically and sociologically. While I won’t be using Bauer’s case studies in my own work, I will be applying his theory more broadly to several examples surrounding the British experience of Ramadan.

While Bauer (2021) considers himself a scholar of cultural studies and uses many historical examples, his chapter introducing the concept of “cultural ambiguity” (pp.9-29) demonstrates the diverse influences of his theory. Here, the author discusses works in the fields of linguistics,

¹⁷ I give a more comprehensive overview of Bauer’s work, as well as comparing it with Shahab Ahmed’s (2016) *What is Islam?*, in my book review (Jones-Ahmed 2022b).

philosophy, psychology and sociology. In relation to social sciences, he outlines his primary influence as follows:

The most important contribution of the social sciences to the problem of ambiguity was made by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who shaped the term *ambivalence* as central to his sociological theory without, however, distinguishing it from the term *ambiguity*. (p.18, italics in original)

While Bauer argues there are some differences between his work and Bauman's *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991), he asserts that Bauman's idea of ambivalence "comes very close to our concept of [cultural] ambiguity" (Bauer 2021, p.18). In a similar way to Bauer, Bauman (1991) describes modernity as "an era of particularly bitter and relentless war against ambivalence" (p.3) in which there is an emphasis on order, classification and dichotomy. This has consequently stimulated the development of further ambivalences (Chapter 1, pp.1-17). Bauman also elaborates on the "social construction of ambivalence" in his work (Bauman 1991, Chapter 2). Additionally, Bauer draws on Donald N. Levine's (1985) *The Flight from Ambiguity* (Bauer 2021, pp.19-20) which concentrates largely on the linguistic ambiguity prevalent amongst the Amharic people of Ethiopia with whom Levine spent several years doing fieldwork. While Levine has an interest in language, his findings have wider sociological significance as he outlines the social functions of ambiguity in his case study. These include the way the plurality of language has a "socially binding function" and is protective for individuals and communities (Levine 1985, pp.35-37). Levine's idea of social bonding through ambiguity will also be applied to my own findings in Chapters 6 and 7. This demonstrates the sociological relevance of Bauer's work.

It is helpful to introduce some terminology Bauer uses to discuss the ways in which ambiguity has been dealt with by people. These terms will also be applied in my own work. Firstly, Bauer discusses being "tolerant" or "intolerant" of ambiguity throughout his work to describe ways in which societies have accepted or rejected cultural ambiguity. He introduces these concepts as follows:

All cultures have to live with cultural ambiguity. Cultures differ, however, in how they deal with it. Ambiguity can be tolerated and consciously enacted through conventions of politeness and diplomacy, and through rites and works of art, thus performing important cultural functions. On the other hand, ambiguity can be avoided and opposed. In other words, cultures are different in relation to their *tolerance of ambiguity*. (p.3, italics in original)

While Bauer borrows the idea of "tolerance of ambiguity" from psychologists, he explains that he is applying it in a sociological sense (p.3), a usage I follow in this thesis.

While the tolerance/intolerance framing of ambiguity could be critiqued for being oversimplified (and perhaps unambiguous), Bauer nuances these ideas with discussion of the “domestication” of ambiguity. While he argues that Islamic cultures have been tolerant of ambiguity, it does not mean, for Bauer, that everything Muslims do or conceive is vague and open-ended. On the contrary, the Islamic tolerance of ambiguity has meant that strategies have been implemented in order to “domesticate” the ambiguity. Bauer outlines such a process in his chapter on the variant readings of the of the Quran (Chapter 2). He argues that the process begins with a “surplus of ambiguity” which leads to a “crisis of ambiguity” which leads to “a procedure of disambiguation aiming at a reduction of ambiguity, reinterpreting the text in such a way as to narrow down the surplus of ambiguity” (p.32). He argues that ambiguity is not eliminated but managed through this process resulting in a “*domesticated ambiguity*” which he describes as “a certain amount of ambiguity that has become open to assessment, and thus socially manageable” (p.32, italics in original). Some examples Bauer gives relate to the recitation and interpretation of the Quran which have variants that compete and contrast, but these variants exist within a widely accepted theological consensus (Chapters 2 and 3). I will apply the concept of domesticating ambiguity especially in Chapter 6.

As highlighted at the beginning of this section however, Bauer’s overarching argument is that such tolerance and acceptance of ambiguity has diminished in Muslim societies in the contemporary period. He particularly notes that he is referring largely to modern Salafi and reform movements which he feels have taken precedence over more traditional forms of Islam (p.8). He also argues that “intolerance of ambiguity in modern Islam is a phenomenon of modernity” (p.29), something I will draw upon later in my discussions of modernity in relation to participant attitudes towards food (Chapter 7) as well as my findings as a whole (Chapter 8). While Bauer’s argument is compelling, and he provides evidence of a growing intolerance of ambiguity throughout his book, my findings complicate this idea by demonstrating how ambiguous attitudes and practices were maintained during Ramadan despite modernity.

It is worth briefly touching on the parallels between Bauer’s ideas and those of another recent work in Islamic Studies *What is Islam?* by Shahab Ahmed (2016) to show how discussions of ambiguity and contradiction within the Islamic tradition are gaining prominence. While Ahmed’s work is a historical case study of what he calls the “Balkans-to-Bengal complex” (pp.74-75), it nonetheless has contemporary relevance with Ahmed reflecting extensively on what Islam means today. While there are some differences between the two scholars’ ideas (see Jones-Ahmed 2022b), Ahmed’s description of “perplexity” or “*hayrat*” resembles Bauer’s cultural ambiguity and is something Ahmed denotes a “normative Islamic value” (p.278). In fact, similar ideas are discussed throughout Ahmed’s book, most

extensively in Chapter 5 which includes in its title “Ambivalence and Ambiguity, Metaphor and Paradox”. Within this, Ahmed describes “the historically demonstrated capacity of Muslims to live with contradictory truths *as Islam* – that is, to live with *Islam as paradox*” (p.401, italics in original). While I have chosen to rely largely on Bauer’s (2021) theory in this thesis, I see my research as inspired by both Bauer’s and Ahmed’s work.

Finally, it is useful to note that while Bauer draws on several historical examples, his work is highly relevant for contemporary sociology. Bauer’s focus on “discourses”, “meanings” and “interpretations” in the definition above resemble Geertz’s (1973) emphasis on meaning and significance in the context of ethnography in his *The Interpretation of Cultures*. The parallels with Geertz are also apparent in Bauer’s assertion that:

Cultural ambiguity...permeates our everyday lives...Our language, gestures, and signs are not unequivocal: actions must be interpreted, norms must be explained, and values that contradict each other must be reconciled or tolerated as coexisting. (Bauer 2021, p.3)

Such an analysis could easily be applied to describe Geertz’s (1973) famous discussion of the wink. It is in this sense, focusing on the meanings and interpretations of seemingly contradictory practices of Ramadan, that I will draw on Bauer’s theory throughout my work.

3.2 AMBIGUITY AND PARADOXES IN STUDIES OF RAMADAN

While not addressing Bauer’s (2021) theory, which only emerged recently, several of the works on Ramadan I have already cited suggest that cultural ambiguity is a useful framework through which the holy month can be analysed. Themes of ambivalences, ambiguities and paradoxes have already been discussed in sociological works on the topic. Buitelaar’s (1993) book on Ramadan in Morocco highlights several examples of this mentioning the “ambivalence” in defining the beginning and end of Ramadan (p.22) as well as the way in which “fasting is paradoxically accompanied by a preoccupation with food” (p.148). She also describes how “people must cope with the paradox of continuing their daily routines and engaging in activities specific to the ritual of fasting” (Buitelaar 1993, p.164). While she doesn’t analyse the ambiguities of these cases in depth, they are nonetheless helpful in highlighting some of the paradoxes surrounding the month. Some of the examples Buitelaar describes were also ideas that came to the fore in my own fieldwork. Her section on “Dichotomies, Ambiguities and Inversions” (p.163-167), which includes mention of the contrast between “self-control” and “indulgence” (p.163), also gestures towards this kind of analysis. More prominent in Buitelaar’s work is the theme of Ramadan as “The Liminal Month” which she addresses in her penultimate chapter (Chapter 8). Drawing from Turner’s work, one can see the way in which Buitelaar’s analysis lends itself to discussions of cultural ambiguity:

Liminality is a time and space of withdrawal from ordinary classification. It refers to a kind of 'no man's land' or 'betwixt-and-between' situation (Turner 1977: 37) (Buitelaar 1993, p.159)

While liminality is not the same as the ambiguity I discuss in this thesis, it nonetheless suggests Ramadan represents a blurring of boundaries in certain ways.

Others have discussed moral ambivalences in relation to the month of Ramadan. This is most clearly demonstrated by Schielke's (2009) ethnographic work focusing on Ramadan football-playing amongst male Muslims in Egypt. Schielke argues that "Ramadan football is an ambivalent exercise" which combines "ascetic discipline with fun and entertainment" and highlights the moral inconsistencies that occur within and outside Ramadan (p.S25). He gives other examples of these moral inconsistencies as described by participants summarising that:

Morality is not a coherent system, but an incoherent and unsystematic conglomerate of different moral registers that exist in parallel and often contradict each other (p.S30)

One can see how this concept of morality resembles Bauer's definition of cultural ambiguity. Interestingly, Malara's (2017) PhD research on Ethiopian Orthodox Christians describes similar moral ambivalences surrounding their practices of fasting (Chapter 3, pp.110-134). This demonstrates how discussions of ambiguity may be relevant for understanding fasting and morality within and outside the Islamic tradition.

Even more striking than Schielke's (2009) discussion of an ambivalent form of morality is his argument that modern Islamic movements have sought to reduce such ambiguity as was demonstrated amongst his participants. The author describes this as follows:

While in earlier, more mystical traditions of Islam ambivalence was accommodated as part of a normative order that did not require a comprehensive and universalizing discipline, modernist and reformist approaches that emphasize rationality and purity often take the abolition of ambivalence as a key task (Schielke 2009, p.S26).

This is exactly the sort of argument Bauer (2021) puts forward, further adding that such movements have been influenced, in his view, by Western attitudes that are intolerant of ambiguity. While highlighting the moral ambivalences surrounding Ramadan then, Schielke (2009) also suggests that modern attitudes are becoming less tolerant of such ambiguity.

Tobin (2013) highlights a similar sort of moral ambivalence as Schielke in reference to music habits within and outside Ramadan in Jordan. Tobin describes that "avoiding music is a public ethic of Ramadan that is temporally specific" (p.292). However, she reconciles the differing practices towards

music during and outside Ramadan as resulting from a change in the prioritisation of “Islamic” moral frameworks (which forbid music) and “cultural” frameworks (which are more accepting of music) during the holy month (p.292) describing a “temporal switching between authenticities” (p.311). While her discussion does not foreground ambiguity as much as Schielke’s, she hints towards paradoxes through the way in which “Ramadan both restricts some [consumptive] behaviours and also adds opportunities for increased commercialization, heightened and altered consumption in order to create ‘an Islamically authentic Ramadan’” (p.313). She highlights this through largely quantitative findings which demonstrate the difference in patterns of consumption of participants within and outside the holy month. Tobin’s work then hints towards the contradiction between consumption and abstention, material and immaterial that link back to some of Buitelaar’s observations described above and will be expanded on in later chapters of this thesis.

Saad Aly’s (2010) PhD thesis on female experiences of Ramadan in Egypt, has echoes of both Schielke’s and Tobin’s work. In her section titled “Locality, Authenticity and Ambivalences” (p.289-297) she describes how people residing in different localities – poor areas vs. affluent areas – are perceived in contradictory ways in Egyptian society. People living in poorer areas, she explains, are perceived as more authentically aligned to traditional Egyptian culture whilst at the same time being regarded as uneducated and superstitious (p.290). She summarises this conflict as follows:

I thus argue that the moral universe in which Ramadan authenticity is embedded in is characterized by profound ambivalences, in terms of the coexistence of opposing perspectives. (p.290)

Again, Saad Aly’s statement here resembles Bauer’s discussion of cultural ambiguity. She provides further examples of the ambivalences present in Ramadan in her conclusion (pp.208-210) in which she highlights conflicting attitudes towards the West, modernity, consumerism and capitalism. On one hand such ideas are seen by Saad Aly’s participants as not authentically Islamic or opposed to Islam, but on the other they are seen as positive and able to facilitate religious practice. Thus, Saad Aly’s work highlights another important way in which cultural ambiguity is relevant to practices and attitudes surrounding Ramadan.

Sharing similarities with Saad Aly’s conclusions, Hirschman’s (2011) study of the marketing of religious celebrations including Ramadan highlights another paradox. A participant in Hirschman’s research notes the following:

There’s a new paradox [in Ramadan].... The mosques become overcrowded with people, but the hypermarkets and the downtown supermarkets are also overcrowded with people. You

see? Aren't they supposed to represent contradictory values? (Participant quote in Hirschman 2011, p.438)

While Hirschman perceives this as a "sacred/secular conflict" (p.438), there is scope to analyse such paradoxes instead through the lens of cultural ambiguity.

Other studies more specifically highlight ambiguities around food consumption during the holy month. This is something I discuss in Chapter 7 terming this the "Paradox of Food" which is hinted towards in Buitelaar's (1993) work too (p.148). Hellman's ethnographic (2008) study situated in Java is especially helpful regarding ambiguity and eating. The author compares the awkwardness surrounding eating in front of others outside Ramadan, with the relative ease and informality of eating together during the holy month. He argues this awkwardness stems from the conception of the *nafs* (lower self and desires) as ambiguous "being both God-given and potentially destructive" – the *nafs*, which includes hunger and sexual desires, can lead to sin and must be controlled but is also "necessary for survival" (p.218). Thus eating, in which the role of the *nafs* is pronounced, becomes equally ambiguous. In Ramadan however, Hellman argues this ambiguity is resolved:

The ambiguity of *nafsu*¹⁸...is resolved in the *sahur*¹⁹ and *buka puasa*²⁰ meals. These occasions are defined by eating, and it is the eating itself that constitutes the ritual activity and signifies the initiation and the breaking of the fast. (p.222)

He further argues that eating symbolises the "successful domestication of desire" (p.22) during Ramadan meals rather than representing desire itself. While Hellman suggests the ambiguity of the *nafs* is perhaps reduced in Ramadan, applying Bauer's (2021) framework, one could argue that there was an intolerance of ambiguity (of the *nafs* and eating) outside Ramadan but a tolerance and acceptance of its ambiguity within Ramadan making eating more "relaxed and informal" (Hellman 2008, p.223). Furthermore, Bauer's discussion of domestication works well with Hellman's theorisation in that fasting can be seen as a domestication of and a way to control the ambiguous nature of the *nafs*. I will develop further on these themes in Chapter 7.

It is worth returning here to Rytter's (2016) study of Danish Muslims in *itikaf* which takes an alternative perspective to Hellman, and one I critique further after presenting my own findings.

¹⁸ Alternative spelling of *nafs*.

¹⁹ Alternative spelling of *suhoor* (the pre-dawn meal in Ramadan).

²⁰ The Indonesian term for *iftar* (the meal to break the fast).

Instead of acknowledging the ambiguity of the *nafs*, Rytter argues that his respondents essentially failed in “a fight against the *nafs*” and “gave in to their lust and desires” (p.56) by consuming takeaway burgers for *iftar* instead of eating the pure food (*langar*) of the lodge they inhabited. Rytter’s article portrays the *nafs* in a much more negative and unequivocal way than Hellman describing how “the very idea of *itikaf* is to fight your *nafs*, the lower self, with its unruly desires like the craving for food or for sleep” (Rytter 2016, p.47) and describing his participants’ actions as signifying “spiritual incompleteness” (p.58). One wonders however, if Rytter is applying his own understanding of religion – he acknowledges he is not Muslim (p.51) – unhelpfully to the perceptions of his participants. Indeed, he uses the sacred-mundane framework which I critique later in this thesis (Chapters 6 and 8). Interestingly, his attitude resembles those of Oestergaard’s (2009) participants who were Danish converts to Islam. Oestergaard argues that “converts tend to adhere to a ‘puritan’ interpretation of the fast” and “assume that piety and the focus on food and other material things are antagonistic” (p.10). She contrasts this with previous work she undertook in Morocco where “piety, in the context of Muslims in Casablanca, is thus not in conflict with festivities but is a sign of the compassionate God” (p.10). Rytter’s (2016) fieldwork then seems to be an instance where an application of cultural ambiguity may have helped the analysis and facilitated understanding concepts from the perspectives of participants.

The final study to point out here is Anderson’s (2018) work on charitable giving in Syria. In this, Anderson tries to unpick a prevailing idea that “where Muslims emphasize the need to ‘maximise *thawab*²¹’, there is an entanglement between Islam and neoliberal governmentality” (p.610). Anderson argues that charitable giving in Ramadan is seen to lead to a prolonged circulation of *baraka* (blessing) and an “abundance of meaning” – i.e. money or goods given in charity have numerous meanings because their effects are wide-ranging and long-lasting. One example he discusses is that of a Quran given to a participant by his father, which was in turn given to his father by a friend, with the participant stating that “every time I read from the Quran, moral reward (*al-thawab*) accrues to my father and his friend” (p.615). While the author doesn’t refer to ambiguity in relation to this “abundance of meaning” (although he describes the attitudes of one participant towards almsgiving as “complex and ambiguous” (p.613)) one can see how this links to Bauer’s ideas, particularly the quote by John D. Caputo about ambiguity as “an excess of meaning” (Caputo, J.D. 2005 in Bauer 2021, p.15). While less resemblant of Bauer’s theory than other examples in this section, Anderson’s work nonetheless suggests there are potentials to explore the concept of *baraka* in Ramadan as culturally

²¹ A similar concept to *ajr* (religious merit).

ambiguous. In my chapter on sacredness (Chapter 7), which I argue is linked to *baraka*, I extend the discussion of the ambiguity of *baraka* and sacredness from the perspectives of my participants.

4. CONCLUSION

I have outlined in this chapter the various ways in which Ramadan has been framed in existing literature, which overwhelmingly considers the month from a medical perspective. I have argued that the Cartesian over-emphasis on physical aspects of the month overlook its important spiritual facets, something I include in my holistic approach to the occasion in coming chapters which recognise the fast as an embodied, spiritual act. I also argue that, following wider negative discourses around Islam and Muslims, Ramadan has often been framed as a month of harm. I assert that such perspectives can be remedied somewhat by understanding the paradoxes and ambiguities accepted by Muslims in relation to their observance of the month. This is particularly useful since studies of Ramadan have been framed in terms of 'extremes' – fasting is seen to be a source of both physical deprivation (Section 2.2.1) and physical excesses (Section 2.2.2) – while Bauer's theory of "cultural ambiguity" (2021) offers an alternative way to understand such apparent contradictions. Indeed, such discussions of paradoxes and ambivalences during Ramadan have already been made in existing studies of the holy month, as evidenced above. In addition to this, my analysis in coming chapters builds upon existing sociological works focusing on communal elements of Ramadan as well as its religious significance, exploring these aspects in a UK context in which sociological research on Ramadan is very limited.

I now move on to consider methodology to highlight how the research methods employed in this project helped me to gain an insight into the everyday religious experience of Ramadan. I also argue that the methods used sought to give voice and agency to participants which is important given that existing literature on Ramadan seems to concur with wider stereotyping of Muslims, as outlined in this Literature Review.

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the research methods and methodology underpinning my study of Ramadan in the UK which was based on solicited photo diaries collected during Ramadan 2020 and semi-structured interviews with a selection of diarists a few months later. The vast majority of data was collected through online methods. While my approach is substantially inspired by ethnographic writings and theorising, I argue for a flexible approach to ethnography and qualitative research which is “tolerant” of the ambiguity of the human condition as described by both Geertz (1973) and Bauer (2021). Such an approach has various advantages particularly in allowing participants to make decisions in the research process. This approach, I argue, enhances engagement, deepens ethnographic insights and empowers participants. This was especially important in my study with Muslim participants who can be seen as a marginalised group in wider British society. My flexible, participant-led approach allowed them to articulate what was important about Ramadan to them.

By way of overview, I begin (Section 2) by outlining the broad and diverse theoretical underpinnings of my approach to research which include interpretivism, social constructionism, feminist methodologies, and grounded theory. I also include a section reflecting on my own positionality as a Muslim woman in the research setting. I then go into more detail about the precise methods I used (Section 3), describing the photo diary method and post-diary interviews²² as well as outlining their rationale based on existing literature. I reflect on the predominant digital nature of these methods arguing, particularly in the case of Zoom interviewing, that they should not be seen as ‘poor substitutes’ to in-person research. While these online methods were necessary in the context of COVID-19, I had decided upon them before the emergence of the pandemic and assert that they were the most suitable way of addressing the topic of my research and understanding Ramadan from a ‘lived religion’ perspective. Sections 4 and 5 serve a similar purpose as Section 3, describing the process of writing ‘fieldnotes’, transcribing data, and analysing it, as well as explaining the rationale for my approach. Finally (Section 6), I address important themes related to research ethics including informed consent, data protection and anonymity, and risks/harm to participants. Some of these areas, particularly in terms of anonymity reflect on the implications of the digital nature of my methods, and the way in which collecting data online requires “new conceptualizations of accepted

²² Further details about participant demographics and the diverse nature of data collected is addressed in Chapter 4.

ethical norms around confidentiality, anonymity and protecting the interests of the research participants” (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2016b, p.67).

2. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

This section outlines the theory underpinning my approach to research for this thesis, much of which is inspired by writings on ethnography. While I did not use the ‘traditional’ method of ethnographic observation for this research, I nonetheless view this as an ethnographic exploration of Ramadan in the UK and have taken much inspiration from Geertz’s (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. I also critique the idea that ethnography should necessitate extended periods of participant observation, advocating for a more flexible ethnographic “way of seeing” (Section 2.2) following Wolcott (1999) and others. I also outline my transformative and feminist approach (Section 2.3) to research which seeks to empower the Muslims in my study, addressing ways in which some existing research on Ramadan follows negative narratives about Muslims (Chapter 2). My grounded theory approach (Section 2.4) aligns with my feminist methodology. While I have not sought to explore Ramadan from the perspective of one gender (though I discuss the gendered experiences of participants throughout my findings especially in Chapter 6), my positionality as Muslim, female, and a mother nonetheless had implications for the research. These implications are analysed in Section 2.5 below, as well as in Chapter 4 where I outline participant demographics in-depth. I begin by outlining my qualitative focus for this project based on interpretivism and social constructionism.

2.1 A QUALITATIVE APPROACH: INTERPRETIVISM AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

I employed qualitative research methods in my study of Ramadan because I wanted to look at aspects of everyday and lived religion and explore the meaning and significance of the month for Muslims, following Geertz’ (1973) emphasis on exploring meaning in social contexts. As highlighted in the Literature Review, much work has been done on the physical impact of Ramadan, largely using quantitative methods, and my qualitative approach seeks to provide balance to the dominance of such research. My own position as social scientist of contemporary religion also means I am interested in subjective ideas about the month of Ramadan and participants’ personal experiences, something that lends itself to a qualitative approach. I wanted to understand Ramadan as an observance of ‘everyday religion’, something that could only be explored sufficiently by speaking to those who experience the month and its rituals, and by hearing the meanings they attach to the month through their own words and images. That said, while my findings chapters (Chapters 5, 6 and 7) draw upon my qualitative findings, I have included a quantitative breakdown of participant demographics and categorisation of participant images in Chapter 4. Since I amassed so much data during my fieldwork, this gives readers

a picture of the diversity of my research participants as well as their diverse contributions through the diary stage of the research.

As is the norm for qualitative studies, I adopt a largely interpretivist epistemological stance in my research. This follows Geertz' (1973) emphasis on interpretation in his work *The Interpretation of Cultures*. In his famous discussion of the 'wink' (based on a previous work by Ryle), Geertz describes how this single practice can have different meanings in different contexts (pp.6-7). He later asserts that "cultures consist of socially established structures of meaning" (p.12). It is the job of the ethnographer then to provide a "thick description" of social events exploring the symbolic nature of activities and practices rather than a superficial "thin description" (1973). As suggested in my Literature Review, Geertz's interpretivist approach also works well with the Bauer's (2021) theory that I apply to my findings, which asserts that "cultural ambiguity is part of the human condition" (p.3). This shows the interplay between my epistemological approach to research and my analysis of the findings.

Related to this interpretivist approach, I also developed my epistemology based on social constructionism which asserts that "what we take to be objective knowledge and truth is the result of perspective. Knowledge and truth are created, not discovered by mind" (Schwandt 1998, p.223). Thus, the knowledge outputs of research are created within the research process rather than being something that exists in the world and is passively 'collected' by researchers. For this reason, Mason (2018, pp.21-22), in her book on qualitative research, prefers to talk of "generating" data rather than collecting it. I agree with Mason that gathering/generating data is an active process, but I use the terms "collecting" and "generating" interchangeably in this thesis. Regarding research diaries which were sent to me by participants, data "collection" seemed a particularly appropriate term.

Whilst this idea of knowledge and truth being 'created' could be seen as counter to a theological conviction, my own inclination resonates with Beckford's discussion of social constructionism. He comments the following on the existence of divine powers:

The best course of action is to put aside questions about the reality of their existence and to concentrate instead, on less problematic questions about the uses that human beings make of religion. This approach leaves open the possibility that divine or supernatural powers may affect human life directly. (2003, pp.28-29)

In terms of my research, social constructionism influences the way I view my findings as a distinct result of the interaction between myself – and my embodied positionality (Section 2.5 – and my participants. Had a different researcher used the same methods with different participants, their

findings would undoubtedly diverge from mine. I contend however that the ethnographic approach I adopted, and the findings they generated, provide an important perspective on the concepts and practices that shape Ramadan in Britain. Indeed, some of my findings seemed to be echoed in wider discourses about the month²³.

2.2 ETHNOGRAPHY AS A WAY OF SEEING

Influenced by Geertz' (1973) focus on meaning and thick description, I intended my research to be an ethnographic exploration of Ramadan in the UK. Atkinson et. al (2001) describe ethnographic traditions as follows:

They are grounded in a commitment to the first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting on the basis of (though not exclusively by) participant observation. (p.4)

Whilst Atkinson et al. (2001) describe how observation and participation are key traits of ethnography (p.4), they argue that ethnography comprises "a diverse repertoire of research techniques" (p.5). Thus, I adopted a flexibility with my research methods not limiting myself to participant observation. The events of the COVID-19 pandemic also meant that whilst I initially intended to conduct some in-person observation, the opportunities available were vastly reduced. My main research methods for this study were solicited photo diaries and semi-structured interviews. I saw the diaries as a way to 'ethnographically' observe Ramadan from the perspective of my participants who were given control over how and when to produce the diaries, and used interviews to focus on common themes from diaries and my own research questions.

Without participant observation, some may argue my research is not an ethnographic study of Ramadan. However, I find resonance with the approach of Bird (2003), a feminist researcher in the field of media studies and anthropology, which criticises the focus on a strict method for ethnography:

Rather than worry about relatively insignificant issues like time spent in the field, I believe we should be thinking more carefully about matching suitable methods to the subtle questions we are trying to ask. Our aim should be to achieve an "ethnographic way of seeing" (Wolcott, 1999) whose goal Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) define as "to get close to those studied as a way of understanding what their experiences and activities *mean to them*" (Bird 2003, p.8)

²³ Indeed, some of my findings seemed to be echoed in wider discourses about the month. Figure 17 in Chapter 7 provides an example of how my discussion of the ambiguous simplicity of Ramadan food was also discussed online on Instagram.

Thus, the photo diaries used in this research were a valuable tool in ‘getting close’ to my participants by giving me a snapshot of their lives and establishing a rapport with them which was built upon during the interview stage of research. The diaries are also a way of observing my topic of study while not being physically present. My specific methods will be discussed more in Section 3.

2.3 TRANSFORMATIVE AND FEMINIST THEORY

I derive influences from what Creswell and Poth (2018) term “transformative frameworks” in my research, especially feminist theories. The authors summarise these frameworks as follows:

The basic tenet of this transformative framework is that knowledge is not neutral and it reflects the power and social relationships within society; thus, the purpose of knowledge construction is to aid people to improve society (p.25).

Locating myself in the field of British Muslim studies, and recognising Muslims as facing significant discrimination, – recent evidence suggests they are Britain’s “second ‘least liked’ group” (Jones and Unsworth 2022, p.7) – I have always hoped for my research to address the disadvantages Muslims face. This is true for my research on Ramadan and reflected the ideas of my participants. Several told me they felt there was a lack of understanding of Ramadan in the wider public, and participant Maymoona commented on broader problems of Muslim representation:

And I just thought it would be a great opportunity for a research project done by yourself and by Cardiff University to get real Muslims, real people who practice the faith as best as they can... I just hope that you've got a good variety of people who do represent, you know, Islam in a good way. And it's just that sometimes you get fed up of seeing things on the media and you're like, 'that's not what we do'. Whereas I know that this is going to be portrayed in the right way. (Maymoona, Interview)

For Maymoona, and others who shared similar views, participating in the project had a transformative aim that reflected my own goals for the research. Such ideas have been reflected by participants in other research on British Muslims with Cheruvallil-Contractor’s (2021) respondents expressing “their desire to claim *their* agency...and to challenge hegemonic representations and scrutiny of Islam” (p.34, italics in original). This shows the value in applying transformative and feminist approaches to research on British Muslims.

While my research does not focus exclusively on one gender nor on gendered experiences (though I address some of these in my findings), I adopt a feminist approach to dealing with issues of power and marginalisation. Indeed, I used Fraser’s (1992) feminist social theory of “subaltern counterpublics” in a previous work (Jones 2017) to address the marginalisation of Muslims in the

British public sphere. As Cheruvallil-Contractor (2021) recognises while discussing her feminist-pragmatist approach to researching Muslims, “feminist scholars developed philosophical worldviews and methodologies that were inherently suited to challenging the marginalisation of *any* disenfranchised groups” (p.37, italics in original). The feminist methodological idea of “giving voice” (Skeggs 2001) to my participants was an important concern for me. My use of photo diaries gave participants agency in the production of research data, and my flexible guidance on diary production allowed them to decide when and how to complete them. I also used direct quotes from participants often during my thesis and used participant’s words to construct analytical themes (a practice also adopted by Grounded Theorists, see Section 2.4). The recognition of power structures which is integral to feminist theory (Skeggs 2001, p.426) shaped my work in various ways. The strategies highlighted above to give agency to participants recognised the power imbalance between researcher and researched, as well as the marginalised status of Muslims in wider society. I thus aimed for my research to be a way of empowering them.

Finally, while gender was not the main focus of my work, I nonetheless felt it necessary to describe some of the gendered experiences of Ramadan that participants articulated. Being a Muslim woman and a mother, I had experienced some of the challenges of gender in relation to Ramadan and felt that some common discourses about Ramadan - praying *taraweeh* in the mosque and even fasting for the full month – were based in male-centric experiences. These could be contrasted and enhanced by women’s and particularly mother’s accounts. Indeed, in a work on motherhood Cheruvallil-Contractor (2016a) asserts that “motherhood can be a powerful space for women’s agency” (p.26). While I did not set out to focus more on women’s experiences than men’s, I did hope my research would include some of the less conventional and less spoken-about female experiences such as not being able to fast due to pregnancy or breastfeeding and balancing acts of *ibadah* with caring for children (see Chapter 6, Section 6). My positionality as a Muslim woman and mother, I feel, allowed women to discuss their gendered experiences openly in this research (or more openly than they might in other arenas), and has allowed me to give insights into the differences between male and female experiences.

Creswell and Poth (2018) posit that an “action agenda for reform” (p.25) is a key part of the transformative frameworks described above. While I did not devise an agenda for my how research would directly improve participants’ lives, I have touched upon the ways in which my thesis challenges dominant negative perceptions of Islam and develop this further in my Discussion (Chapter 8). Additionally, my involvement in media and engagement with schools in relation to my research (see Appendix 1) has contributed to the ‘emancipatory’ goals of the project and demonstrates its

preliminary impact outside academia. Alongside this, my use of photo diaries allowed participants to be actively involved in the research design and be co-creators in the process helping address the power imbalance between researcher and researched.

2.4 GROUNDED THEORY

Another influence on my research, and one I have drawn on in previous work (Jones 2015), is grounded theory. Grounded theory was originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) aiming to address “an overemphasis in current sociology [at the time] on the verification of theory” (p.1). As such, Glaser and Strauss assert that research findings should emerge from empirical data rather than being pre-empted by researchers. They also recognise the cyclical and iterative relationship between theory and data. As such, grounded theory has been described not as a theory itself but “a technique for generating theory” (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2018, p.69). In line with my constructivist epistemological approach, I also draw on later constructivist approaches to grounded theory, especially Charmaz (2006) who argues that grounded theory became too positivist despite early constructivist influences (p.9).

While I was not initially conscious of the impact of grounded theory on this thesis, reflecting on the research process made these influences apparent. I started out with a broad aim to understand the significance and meaning of Ramadan for Muslims in Britain as well as explore common practices and activities during the month. While my emphasis on meaning was influenced by Geertz (1973), the broadness of my initial research questions was motivated by a desire not to impose my own ideas onto the experiences of participants. This follows the grounded theory approach of allowing theory to emerge from data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). However, I recognised theory did not ‘emerge’ passively and was constructed through the interaction between myself and participants and my own interpretation of data in line with constructivist iterations of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006, p.10).

Charmaz (2006) asserts that grounded theorist should construct codes for analysis using the words of participants; these are also known as “*in vivo* codes”²⁴. She argues this helps “preserve participants’ meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself” (p.55). I did not make a concerted effort to do this since many of my codes were broad topics like “food” or ‘family’. However, I did change a code which didn’t initially reflect the language of my participants – I had one code named “Sacred vs mundane” which I later changed to “*ibadah* vs worldly”. Several participants had discussed “*ibadah*” or “worship” during their interviews, but none had referred to the word “sacred” so the term “*ibadah*” better reflected their understandings. Indeed, I actively challenge the application of the

²⁴ Not to be confused with NVivo, the software I used for coding my data.

sacred-mundane (or sacred-profane) framework to studies of Muslims via my findings (Chapters 6 and 8). Other strategies I used to preserve participants' meanings include using lengthy quotes in my findings chapters and contextualising participant statements.

The iterative nature of grounded theory also encouraged my method of analysing throughout the process of data collection, transcription and afterwards (see Section 5). This follows wider ethnographic approaches to analysis. Hammersley and Atkinson (2019), for example, argue that "In ethnography the analysis of data is not a distinct stage of the research" (p.167). As such, I started writing what I called "Ideas for Analysis" during the collection of diaries in Ramadan 2020 and added to this list as I re-read diaries before interviews and later transcribed interviews. This fed into the construction of my coding frame and the more focused stage of analysis using NVivo software. This resembles Hammersley and Atkinson's (2019, p.168) argument that theorizing should be "an iterative process in which ideas are used to make sense of data, and data are used to change or develop our descriptive and explanatory idea" and reflects the grounded theory approach.

2.5 POSITIONALITY, REFLEXIVITY AND EMBODIMENT

I consider ideas of embodiment in my research particularly regarding my positionality as the researcher for this project. Atkinson (2017) argues that "embodiment and embodied knowledge are among the most significant topics for the ethnographer" (p.121) and my embodied knowledge and position as a Muslim who had experienced Ramadan herself had implications for how the research proceeded. For example, during interviews, I asked participants what were the most important things about Ramadan for them. Participants often responded with reflective, personal insights on their Ramadan experiences. They rarely told me about the 'basics' of Ramadan - such as the rules around fasting or the status of the Quran - and if they did, they added personal reflections on these topics. I suspect participants took these 'basic' aspects of knowledge as 'taken-for-granted' because of our shared position as practicing Muslims, and this perhaps led to more personal insights on the topics discussed. Nonetheless there is a need to "fight familiarity" (Delamont and Atkinson 1995) with the research topic and participant experiences hence my reflexivity about my own position here and in other areas of the thesis. I also saw the process of coding, transcribing and analysing my data as a way of "making the familiar strange" - something advocated by Delamont and Atkinson (1995, pp.7-10) - and the unusual context of the pandemic helped myself and participants reflect on the Ramadan experience in a different light.

My position as a woman, and a mother, is relevant not least because of the large proportion of women contributing to the study who made up about three quarters of participants (see Chapter 4). It was revealing that nearly all female diarists told me when they were not fasting because of their

monthly period in their diaries, something I doubt would have happened had the researcher been male. During interviews, female participants spoke in-depth the impact menstruation had on fasting and spirituality as well as the challenges motherhood brings to the experience of Ramadan. As such, I have been able to touch upon these topics in this thesis. My research thus benefitted from my positionality in that more private and distinctively female experiences were able to be addressed. Of course, there are perhaps other areas which male participants would have been more comfortable discussing with a male researcher that have not emerged during my fieldwork. This does not necessarily detract from my thesis, but I outline it to recognise how my embodied position and knowledge have impacted my findings.

There have long been arguments about the insider-outsider status of researchers when studying religion that continue to be relevant in contemporary research (Arweck and Stringer 2002; Knott 2005; McCutcheon 1999). I tend towards Collins' (2002) view that the dichotomy is unhelpful due to the complexity of personal identities and relationships but nonetheless recognise that there were aspects of my life and identity I shared with participants and others I did not. Undoubtedly, certain religious practices and ideas were common amongst myself and participants who all appeared to be 'practising' Muslims to some extent. This had advantages in enabling an in-depth exploration of ideas (as mentioned above) but also potential disadvantages. I discussed in Chapter 1 how my love of Ramadan was part of my motivation for embarking on this study. However, it is likely there were Muslims who did not value the occasion so highly who were not featured in my work. It is possible my appearance as a 'practising' Muslim²⁵ deterred them from participating. All participants in my study saw the act of fasting as virtuous and tried their best to undertake it every year (unless medical conditions prevented them). However, there are undoubtedly Muslims who do not view fasting in this way. One participant, for example, told me his immediate family, although Muslim, did not fast like him. It seemed this was an expression of their personal choice rather than resulting from ill health. These types of perspectives, and those of people who view their Muslim identity in a more 'secular' way, were not included in this thesis, something which was likely influenced by my own positionality. Nonetheless, I argue the perspectives presented here are useful in highlighting the meanings of Ramadan for British Muslims who express, or aim to express, their faith through religious observances.

²⁵ While my name is not identifiably Muslim, and I don't display my photo on my social media profiles through which I promoted the project, it would have been relatively easy for participants to find an image of me (wearing hijab) on the university website. Also, the fact I greeted participants with 'Asalamu alaikum' in initial communications would have indicated I am a 'practising' Muslim.

3. CHOICE OF RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 RESEARCH CONTEXT AND THE PANDEMIC

For various reasons, I only had a few months before Ramadan 2020 to decide my research methods and gain ethical approval. Whilst I hoped some of the communal activities of Ramadan would feature in my fieldwork (*taraweeh* prayers, *iftars*, fundraising events), I had little time to arrange observation of these. In Ramadan 2020 then, I focused on individual accounts of the month by collecting photo diaries (sent via social media or email) and conducting follow-up interviews after Ramadan in the hope of doing observational research the following year. While this was decided before COVID-19 emerged, the decision played to my advantage given the UK went into lockdown in March 2020 due to the pandemic. This meant mosques were closed for Ramadan and face-to-face gatherings were prohibited so observational research was near impossible. Additional details of the research context are unpacked in Chapter 4. Fortunately, my 2020 fieldwork gathered much interest resulting in 53 photo diaries and 22 interviews.

After this fieldwork in 2020, I had planned to do research using the more ‘traditional’ ethnographic method of participant observation in 2021. This would observe the typical activities of mosques during Ramadan – *iftar* meals and *taraweeh* prayers especially – as well as educational events, charity fundraisers or inter-faith initiatives, which could take place within or outside mosques²⁶. While mosques were allowed to reopen during Ramadan 2021 however, they were not running ‘as normal’ permitting only limited numbers of congregants and holding a drastically reduced number and range of events. One of my own local mosques, for example, only opened for the five daily prayers and *taraweeh* and had other restrictions in place (Figure 2). Such restrictions would have made it extremely difficult for me to conduct fieldwork and would not have captured the range of events normally happening in mosques nor their more ‘typical’ expression. I thus decided against conducting this phase of participant observation, especially since the photo diaries and interviews in 2020 had yielded ample data. The remainder of this section addresses my primary research methods of solicited photo diaries (Section 3.3) and semi-structured interviews (Section 3.4) in more depth, after summarising how I recruited participants (Section 3.2).

²⁶ For example, the series of ‘open *iftar*’ events I explored in my Masters’ dissertation (Jones 2017).

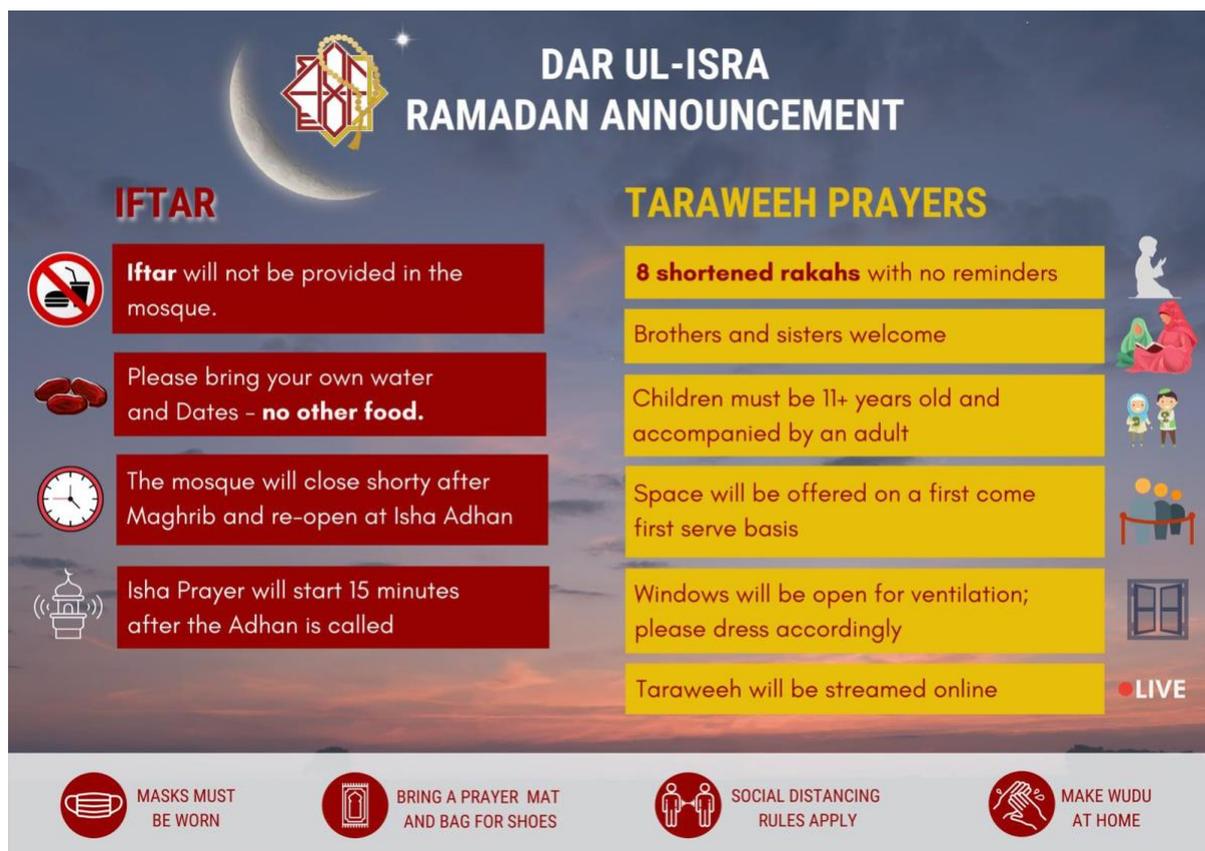


FIGURE 2 - IMAGE POSTED ON THE TWITTER ACCOUNT OF DAR UL-ISRA MOSQUE, CARDIFF (@DARULISRA) ON 08/04/2021 OUTLINING THE REGULATIONS IN PLACE DURING RAMADAN 2021 DUE TO THE ONGOING IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

3.2 RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

I relied on online methods of promoting my research aiming to recruit participants from across the UK. These online methods were also necessary once the lockdown was implemented. I started promoting the project in March 2020 just over a month before Ramadan began. I sent a recruitment poster and accompanying text to several WhatsApp groups I was in including academic networks, parenting groups and mosque groups. I posted the advert on my social media accounts on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. After this, I did more promotion on Twitter mentioning (using Twitter handles) accounts related to Ramadan, British Muslim groups or mosques, Muslim personalities and academics (individuals and networks). This solicited much interest. Additionally, I promoted the project on various Facebook groups including academic networks and mosques. Facebook proved useful for gaining participants in wider areas of the UK, for which I messaged the pages of mosques in those areas asking them to share my call for participants. Email was useful for promoting my research to UK academic networks but was less successful with community-based Muslim organisations. Social media seemed more effective for promoting my research via these groups.

I asked potential participants to fill in an online survey (created with Jisc Online Surveys) to gather biographical details. My aim was to ensure participants covered a wide demographic in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and location in the UK. I initially considered selecting applicants based on these characteristics but eventually decided to accept all applicants since I did not want to devalue their intentions to participate. The survey, however, demonstrated that a wide demographic was covered (see Chapter 4) and helped target my marketing. For example, when I realised there were no applicants from Scotland and Northern Ireland, I focused promotion on groups in these areas. The survey was invaluable in providing contextual information about participants used during data analysis.

3.3 PHOTO DIARY METHOD

The photo diaries collected during Ramadan 2020 form the largest part of the dataset for this project. I asked participants to send me one or more photos a day along with a written or audio explanation of the photo, but allowed participants to send entries less frequently if a daily entry was not feasible. Below is an excerpt from the instructions I sent them (full instructions in Appendix 2) with guidance on the type of content I was looking for. These instructions were partly constructed following advice from Ammerman and Williams (2012, p.6) who asked participants to take photographs for their study on lived religion in the USA.

***Diary Content:** Please produce a daily photo diary during Ramadan 2020 (29 or 30 days) documenting one thing each day that reflects your Ramadan (this could be an object, activity, person/people, place or anything else). Each entry should include:*

- one photograph (or more if you wish)
- some explanatory text/audio/video

For the explanations, please tell me about the image including what it is, why you chose to include it in your diary, and anything else you want to add. Don't worry about the quality of photos. If there is some repetition in your diary that is not a problem.

Ammerman and Williams (2012) assert that diary-based research is underused in sociological studies of religion (p.8) as are visual methods (p.5), concurring with Uehlinger's (2015) argument that "the study of religion/s would benefit from increased attention to images and visual culture" (p.384). While these works were written some years ago, I have not seen such methods used extensively in my own survey of sociological religious studies literature. I propose that diary and visual methods can be especially useful in capturing lived experiences of religion, something I felt important in my study of Ramadan in the UK.

3.3.1 DIARY-BASED RESEARCH

Diaries are often used in research to capture events, activities or emotions in-the-moment since one of their defining features is that they are “contemporaneous”, i.e. completed at or close to the time when events happen (Alaszewski 2006, pp.1-2). For my study of the religiously significant time of Ramadan, it was important to capture events and reflections in Ramadan, as they happened. Couldry et al.’s (2010) observation that “Diaries allow for the regular tracking of participants’ reflections over time” (p.47) emphasises the utility of diaries for researching a holy month which is a time-bound phenomenon. I felt that a month-long daily diary would be a manageable commitment for participants; indeed, Couldry et al. (2010) note that daily diaries are not usually feasible for more than two months (p.49).

Diaries also allowed me to access the private space and experience of Ramadan within homes and families which would otherwise be difficult to observe. Couldry et al. (2010, p.46) describe how diaries allow researchers to “observe...phenomena that the presence of a researcher would distort”. For this reason, diaries could be useful in documenting various aspects of everyday religious practice. Additionally, they allowed me to observe phenomena at a time when it was not possible for me to be physically present given the lockdown. Diaries also allowed participants to reflect on “taken-for-granted activities” (Alaszewski 2006, p.37), which did not arise during interviews. In this sense, certain day-to-day, not overtly ‘religious’ activities (like going for walks outdoors) were documented in diaries but not mentioned extensively during interviews. Whilst Alaszewski (2006, p.116) suggests the familiarity of diaries may elicit more “natural” data than that obtained in other ways however, I prefer the approach of Couldry and colleagues (Markham and Couldry 2007; Couldry et al. 2010) who recognise that even diaries are performative. This is part of my justification for supplementing diaries with interviews (Section 3.4).

Another reason for using diaries was that I felt participants may already be familiar with diarising their experiences of Ramadan. Whilst doing background research on Ramadan, I found media examples of Ramadan diaries (Izzidien, R. 2005a; 2005b; 2005c) as well as observing Muslim businesses selling Ramadan journals for individuals to track their ‘progress’ during the month. Anecdotally, I had spoken to individuals who kept diaries during Ramadan, and seen daily diary-like Ramadan messages posted on social media in Ramadan 2019. As such, I felt a Ramadan diary would be familiar to potential participants which would encourage uptake in my project.

Additionally, the use of WhatsApp diaries by the majority – an already familiar medium which participants used socially - facilitated participants giving me personal insights into their lives and helped build rapport. Much like Bird’s (2003) use of solicited letters which, she argues, were a

“comfortable” medium for her female participants, my solicited diaries offered “an ‘ethnographic way of seeing’ in which the participant is invited to define the terms of the encounter” (p.12). I kept the parameters of the diaries intentionally open allowing participants to decide on the length, style, regularity and medium through which to send diaries which facilitated this ethnographic “way of seeing” (Wolcott 1999). Thus while many used WhatsApp, others used different social media platforms or email, perhaps reflecting their comfort in communicating via these methods. While the familiarity of WhatsApp helped for many participants, I recognise that it may go out of fashion like any form of online communication. A lesson for future ethnographic research then is to identify a medium or media through which participants communicate socially and which they are comfortable with. This may help build rapport with participants – as was apparent through WhatsApp where myself and participants sometimes interacted outside their specific diary entries - and develop some of the more personal insights that lead to understanding the *meaning* of the research topic, in line with a Geertzian emphasis on significance.

3.3.2 DIGITAL/MOBILE DIARIES

Given the predominant use of WhatsApp, mobile phones were an important tool that most participants used to compile their diaries, whether just by taking photos, or writing up and sending entries as well. Wider social research utilising mobile diaries seems to be sparse since mobile and online methods are an emerging and changing field. However, Ulian and da Silva (2020) used innovative “time-space diaries” in their research on travel habits in Brazil getting participants to record audio diaries in real-time as they travelled and send these to each other and the researchers in a WhatsApp group. Similarly, Kaufmann and Peil (2019) developed the “mobile instant messaging interview (MIMI)” to discuss media usage in real-time with participants. The authors describe their method as a combination of established diary methods and newer techniques. The key point about these studies is that they are used to record real-time data as with the established use of diaries in research (Alaszewski 2009, p.2). Since I wanted participants to record regularly throughout Ramadan, mobile phones inevitably were a useful tool for this. As Kaufman and Peil (2019) note:

As smartphones are typically always switched on as well as permanently connected to the Internet and carried by users wherever they go (Ling & Lai, 2016), additional equipment is redundant (p.5)

Kaufmann and Peil (2019, p.4) further assert that due to the “proliferation of personal handheld devices since the 2000s, the application of technologies in diary studies has significantly increased.”

Bartlett and Milligan’s (2015) chapter on using technology for diary-based methodology highlights the advantages of mobile phones in that the cost of equipment is reduced and they are

user-friendly since participants use devices they are already familiar with. They discuss related studies to highlight the potential of social media platforms for diary-based research though noting there are few examples (p.61). With the pace of change in technology, it is likely Bartlett and Milligan's work is slightly outdated and more recent research has solicited diaries via social media (Ulman and da Silva 2020). Bartlett and Milligan (2015) further highlight issues of performance when researching online blogs in that participants write for an audience that is not just the researcher (p.61), an argument that holds weight when analysing outward-facing social media. I reflect on this performativity further in Chapter 4 (Section 4).

The benefits highlighted above support my use of mobile methods, a methodology that was chosen to enhance the quality and frequency of diary entries and make the process easier and more enjoyable to participants. This was something I valued as an important part of my ethical responsibility as a researcher, particularly given the time-consuming nature of diary-based research. It was also valued by participants who told me in interviews that, on the whole, they found the diary easy to complete and that WhatsApp was a particularly convenient platform. Whilst the benefits outlined here drew me to using the mobile diary method, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown meant that my methodological options were limited. Mobile diaries were a fieldwork option that could be undertaken in this context and in fact, were one of the only ways I could get an insight into Ramadan 2020 when people were largely confined to their homes. While some have argued about the exclusivity of certain online research methods (Deakin and Wakefield 2014), the growing access to the internet, mobile phones and online platforms (especially post-pandemic) means such methods are increasingly useful and accessible. Indeed, Cheruvallil-Contractor and Shakkour (2016) encourage wider use of digital methods in the sociology of religion arguing that "the 'familiar' methods are simply no longer sufficient" (p.xix).

3.3.3 VISUAL METHODS

Visual methods were a key component of this research since I asked participants to include a photo (or photos) on each day of their diary. Ammerman and Williams (2012) note "religion is itself visual and material, and our methods should reflect that fact" (p.5) citing places of worship, religious dress and statues as examples of religious visual culture. They suggest visual methods have been neglected in the sociology of religion. When designing my study, I came across various ways of celebrating Ramadan (e.g. decorations, advent-style calendars, communal meals) for which a visual record would be useful. Ammerman and Williams (2012) also emphasise the importance of visual methods for studying lived religion particularly in that the use of images can go beyond "taken-for-granted categories" and pre-existing ideas of researchers (p.7). Given my own positionality, I felt images may help explore ideas beyond my personal experience of Ramadan. Ramadan was also an

apt opportunity to study lived religion being a month in which acts of worship and day-to-day life are intertwined, whilst individuals proceed with their daily lives of going to work, school or looking after family. This lived aspect of Ramadan is evident throughout my findings chapters. Through visual methods then, I captured not only formal aspects of worship but also individual and communal traditions which may be overlooked in wider discussions of Ramadan.

Ammerman and Williams (2012, p.7) highlight another advantage of visual methods being that “images may act as bridges between culturally distinct worlds, allowing researchers and subjects to come to a shared understanding”. While I shared some aspects of culture with my participants, there were many aspects and traditions that were not familiar to me which became apparent through my fieldwork. Aspects of our demography were also unfamiliar, for example, the fact that I had not grown up in a Muslim household whereas other participants had. These differences in upbringing and other factors undoubtedly affected our experiences of Ramadan and the ‘bridging’ aspect of images was useful in conveying these varying experiences. One example of this is Noor’s description of *penya*, a traditional *suhoor* food in her household. While she described this to me in interviews and her diary, I was still unclear as to what it was until she sent me an image (Figure 28, Chapter 7) emphasising the way in which participant images aided understanding. This ‘bridging’ function of images is also useful in conveying my research findings to the wider public, as well as communicating my findings in academic environments, as I have already begun to do in academic presentations and publications and community-focused engagements (Appendix 1).

3.3.4 DIARY FLEXIBILITY

Returning to the diary medium, I was intentionally flexible with the format in which diaries could be submitted allowing participants to use email, WhatsApp or other social media. I hoped this would increase uptake and facilitate engagement with my project which seemed to be the case. This decision was supported by Couldry et al.’s (2010) project that gave participants a choice of media through which to complete diaries, a decision that the authors suggest helped reduce the drop-out rate. Participants in my own study noted that they found diaries easy to complete due to their flexibility and convenient method especially via WhatsApp. Rayyan discusses this as follows, responding to a question about the process of completing the diary:

I mean I don't have any strong feelings either way. It was, like I said, as if I was to send the same pictures on my sisters group chat or to my mum, you know? If she said, ‘what you up to?’, I might send her a picture of my daughter doing something, or, you know, ‘Mum, I'm cooking this today,’ so it was very much just normal. You know, you send things over WhatsApp - well, I do - all the time (Rayyan, Interview)

Similarly, whilst I encouraged participants to send daily entries, I was not strict about this and allowed them to submit entries as often as feasible for them (see Chapter 4, Section 4). I wanted participants to understand that I appreciated any contributions they could give rather than feeling guilty or that they had failed in their commitment linking to the ethical basis for my research discussed in the next section. Once again, Rayyan commented on how this was helpful in her completing the diary and others expressed similar sentiments:

You were very super flexible because we didn't even send half of the pictures [laughing] and yeah. It was good because it didn't feel burdensome. I didn't feel like 'Oh, God, I've got to do that diary entry'. It was just natural; it was part of my day. (Rayyan, Interview)

My flexibility in the diary method also avoids critiques of diaries as an old-fashioned medium for contemporary research. Scourfield et al.'s (2013) study of Muslim childhood which used oral diaries, noted that the use of diaries could be seen as "a white middle-class habit, which may perhaps be rather outdated" and suggest Twitter as an innovative idea for future diary-based research (p.70). While things have moved on since the authors' observations, my encouragement for participants to use diverse and novel methods such as social media seemed to help encourage completion of the diaries by a wide demographic including various age groups and ethnicities. Thus, flexibility with the diary format, I argue, helped increase the accessibility for diverse research participants and reduced exclusion from the process.

3.4 POST-DIARY INTERVIEWS

After collecting the photo diaries in Ramadan (April-May 2020), I conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 of the diarists²⁷ between August and October 2020. The combination of photo diaries with interviews was initially influenced by Ammerman and Williams' (2012) study on lived religion which used the photo elicitation method. I eventually decided to limit photo elicitation to one question within my interview schedule and drew advice from Couldry et al.'s (2010) study on media consumption and public engagement which combined diaries and interviews. Whilst Couldry et al. (2010) also conducted pre-diary interviews to introduce the project and find out about participants' backgrounds (p.49), I replaced this with an online survey and online communication (often via WhatsApp) with participants due to time constraints. In the following sections, I outline my reasons for adopting the interview method specifically focusing on how I constructed the interview schedule, preparations for interviews and the choice of interview medium.

²⁷ I outline my reasons for selecting a sample of participants to interview in Chapter 4, Section 4.3.

3.4.1 CONSTRUCTING THE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Couldry et al.'s (2010) research on media consumption which utilised a combination of diaries and interviews was a key influence for my methods, particularly in the construction of my interview schedule (Appendix 3). The authors' post-diary interview had several aims (Couldry et al. 2010, p.50). Firstly, the researchers sought to find out "how typical the diary period had been". This is less relevant to my study due my focus on a rather atypical period, it being both Ramadan and lockdown. Nonetheless, I used interviews to ask participants how Ramadan in lockdown compared to previous experiences of the month, and to ask questions about Ramadan more broadly. This was helpful in elucidating ideas about the significance of Ramadan outside lockdown conditions, as elaborated on in my findings chapters. Secondly, Couldry et al. (2010) allowed participants to give feedback on the project, a practice I adopted at the end of my interviews. As my diary approach - particularly the multimedia and online elements - was quite novel in religious and sociological studies, I wanted to evaluate the process to inform future studies by myself and others (some of this feedback is discussed throughout this chapter). Thirdly, Couldry et al. (2010) discussed "the logistics of diary production" in their interviews (p.50) which I followed and formed the first section of the interview schedule (Appendix 3). This further helped evaluate the diary method but also contextualised particular diarists' entries. Diarists told me, for example, about their motivations for taking part in the project, who they envisioned as their target audience, and whether they had taken pictures specifically for the project or chosen from existing photos. One insight expressed by several participants was that they felt academic research on Muslims often does not focus on the most important issues, such as fasting and Ramadan, as discussed in my Introduction (Chapter 1). This reassured me of the value of my research but also encouraged me to make sure my findings were recognisable to my participants and reflected their experiences.

Couldry et al.'s (2010) post-diary interviews also tried to analyse "what elements in a particular diary were artificial" (p.50). I was sceptical of this reasoning initially since it seems to assume interview data is less artificial than diary data. However, asking questions about the diary process in interviews did highlight differences in how participants discussed Ramadan in these two stages of research. Participants who posted diaries on social media accounts (not including WhatsApp), as may be expected, were less likely to highlight some of the more personal difficulties of the month in the diaries. These participants did discuss some of these challenges (relating to motherhood, or living with family who did not fast) during interviews however. This performative element was not exclusive to outward-facing diaries, with one WhatsApp participant noting the following:

It [the diary] was a reflection of what my life was like very *much*, but it wasn't the whole story; because you don't put down if you've had a bad day or you know, if you've had an argument

with one of your kids or something like that - I didn't include any of that. But that's not to say that- it was still very much a good and accurate reflection of what I was doing as part of my days. So, yeah. I just thought, right, this is this is the highlight of my day, or this is what I was doing mostly today and then put it in. (Participant, Interview)

Participants also told me how they tried (and sometimes struggled) to keep diaries varied rather than repetitive, whilst some made other choices such as not including too many food photos. For some, this was because this was not the most important part of Ramadan, or as one participant put it:

I thought a lot of people might do lots of food ones, so I tried to avoid food - food, food, more bloody food, you know? (James, Interview)

Another common choice was not to include images of people or at least their faces to protect anonymity which further demonstrates how diaries may not have conveyed 'the whole story' of Ramadan.

I wanted to allow diarists time to talk about their diaries further in interviews and, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, Ammerman and Williams' (2012) photo elicitation method seemed well-placed to facilitate this. In their study, they asked participants to take some photographs and used these as starting points for discussion in a follow-up interview. Whilst this was an appealing method, participants had given me some explanatory information about the photos in their entries and I felt interviews would be better used to focus on my own research questions. As such, I only included one photo elicitation question where I asked participants beforehand to choose one photo that they would like to discuss further. Rose (2016) in her text on visual methods says that "discussing a photograph or a drawing with an interviewee can prompt talk about different things, things that researchers hadn't thought about and places that researchers can't go" (p. 315). She also argues that photo elicitation allows the exploration of "everyday, taken-for-granted things" and can "empower research participants" (p.316). Thus, I felt photo elicitation would glean useful insights on the lived aspects of Ramadan. Indeed, several participants used this question as an opportunity to discuss aspects of Ramadan they wanted to emphasise (e.g. Mariya's assertion that Ramadan is *not* about food – Chapter 7), and what was unique about their Ramadan in lockdown (e.g. Hasina's appreciation of being able to pray together as a family – Chapter 5).

Another helpful piece of advice from Rose's (2016), and something adopted in Ammerman and Williams' (2012) study, was to ask participants "about what photos they wanted to take...but could not" (Rose 2016, p.324). For Rose, reasons for not taking photos would be practicalities like

getting a camera to work, or not seeing a particular thing (that was usually seen) during the photo-elicitation process. I felt such practicalities would be less of an issue for my participants who largely used their own smartphones, so changed the wording of the question slightly to ask about what photos they wanted to take but did not. I felt this change would allow participants to discuss images they had not taken for privacy reasons (e.g. photos of people, family or friends) something that had already been mentioned in some diaries (and some used emojis to conceal people's identity). Interviews ended with an open question allowing participants to add anything further that they wanted to say on the topic. Ethically, I felt this a small but important action in addressing the power relationship between researcher and participant to further foreground their voice and agency in the research process.

Reflecting on my broad aims behind the interview stage, Markham and Couldry's (2007) discussion of their post-diary interviews was helpful:

Our reflexive aim was not to strip away the artificiality of the diaries to reveal the "true" or "natural" voice underneath the performance but rather to interpret and contextualize the performance that accompanies both reflection on the project's themes and the writing or recording process itself. (Markham and Couldry 2007, p.685)

This was what I aimed to do by asking broader questions about Ramadan in my interviews rather than only focusing on diary entries. I aimed to generate more data on my topic and research questions, but also deepen my understanding of diary entries. Because I had not been able to do pre-Ramadan interviews, I had no context about individuals' general understanding of, and thoughts and feelings towards Ramadan so interviews were helpful for providing this. A semi-structured approach meant I could structure the interview in the way I felt most beneficial for my research whilst allowing opportunities to explore areas of particular significance with participants.

3.4.2 INTERVIEW PREPARATION

When preparing for the interviews, I found Roulston and Choi's (2018) advice helpful. They discuss formulating questions which "speak to the research questions" and moving from broader to specific questions through the duration of an interview. I tried to incorporate this in my interview schedule. Their work also reminded me of the importance of using "open, rather than closed questions". Their encouragement of self-reflection before interview was useful since they suggest researchers consider their own assumptions and "preconceptions" about the topic beforehand as well as learning more about participants. As such I considered my own assumptions about the topic beforehand, thinking about whether these had a basis in my existing diary data. I also looked through each interviewee's diary before interview so that I could ask questions relevant to their diary and

attempt to phrase questions in a way they would relate to. Roulston and Choi's advice below, also helped me remember the aims of my research rather than being overly focused on the interview schedule and encouraged me to put aside my own preconceptions.

Our recommendation is that interviewers come to interviews well-prepared with respect to the topic of the interview, with a good sense of what they hope to learn from the questions they anticipate asking, and with a willingness to listen carefully and learn from participants (Roulston and Choi 2018)

3.4.3 INTERVIEW MEDIUM

Again influenced by the events of the pandemic, most of my interviews were conducted via Zoom (though I left the medium open for participants to choose). Similarly to Bird (2003) who used phone interviews in her research, I saw this as one of the few alternatives to the 'ideal' of face-to-face interviews which were largely unavailable to me. Bird (2003, pp.13-14) criticises "the idea that phone interviews are by definition a poor substitute for face-to-face contact" arguing that her participants were more comfortable with phone interviews as a familiar means by which they communicated and a method that reduced the problems of "impression management", citing Goffman (1990 [1959]). While face-to-face interviews are either conducted in the researcher's space (e.g. an office), the participant's space (e.g. a home or office), or a so-called "neutral" space (which is arguably never really neutral), Zoom interviews did not fit these categories. Piela (2016) describes this in her reflection on Skype interviewing stating how the researcher does not have to enter a participant's home nor "find a neutral, formal location" (p.121). During Zoom interviews, both myself and my participants were on 'home ground'. I think this allowed both parties to feel comfortable in their own spaces and participants may have been more willing to disclose or share personal insights.

Whilst Bird's concerns around "impression management" (Bird 2003, p.14) were arguably still present, Zoom limited what I, as researcher, could see of the participant's space which was perhaps easier to 'make presentable'. Additionally, because we were in the pandemic and people had got used to working from home, these presentable spaces had already been set up for the myriad of Zoom meetings people were undertaking. I know this was the case in my own home-office. The ability of participants to select a presentable space for the interview, and the ability to choose a digital background (which one participant did) or turn off their camera (which was done by another participant) again redresses the imbalance between researcher and participant. Indeed, this concurs with Piela's (2016) reflection on Skype interviewing with *niqab*-wearing²⁸ Muslim women where she

²⁸ *Niqab* is the term for the face-veil worn by some Muslim women.

argues that “the informality of the home setting can contribute to diminishing inequalities in power relations” (p.121) particularly drawing on Bertrand and Bourdeau’s (2010) work to assert that the ease of withdrawing from an online interview “equalizes power relations” (Piela 2016, p.121). This supports my feminist methodological approach discussed above.

4. FIELDNOTES AND TRANSCRIPTION

When and how to write fieldnotes, a common element of ethnographic research, was a challenge I had to grapple with due to the remote methods used. Key texts discussing fieldnotes often discuss them in the context of conventional ethnographic methods of participant observation (Emerson et al. 2011; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019, pp.154-160). Hammersley and Atkinson (2019, pp.154-160) also discuss writing fieldnotes for interviews but suggest they are more helpful when audio or especially video recording is not available. Whilst I considered my research ethnographic, it did not use traditional ethnographic methods. Additionally, there was no physical ‘field’ in which I could locate my fieldnotes, since my fieldwork was largely done from home.

Whilst I attempted to write notes during the diary collection stage, I was unsure what to write about. Instead of writing fieldnotes related to the diaries, I opted to keep a record of wider contextual events happening during and around Ramadan 2020. This included notes on the progression of coronavirus, lists of media articles related to Ramadan, a list of Muslim-led events during Ramadan and screenshots of relevant social media posts. I also kept a diary-like record of several online Ramadan events I attended. These documents have proved useful in situating my research in its unique context in Chapter 4. For interviews, I had audio and video recordings of Zoom conversations which reduced the need for fieldnotes, as Hammersley and Atkinson describe (2019, pp.154-160). Thus, I produced brief hand-written notes after each interview commenting on my own feelings about the interview and contextual information that may not have been captured in the recordings (e.g. if myself or a participant had been running late, or an interview had been rescheduled). These notes were a useful reference for checking contextual information related to particular interviews.

I needed to transcribe the full audio diaries of two participants plus a single audio entry from another, as well as all but one of my semi-structured interviews which was conducted via email. I used the online/app-based Otter software which automatically transcribes audio files and allows the researcher to edit transcripts afterwards. This software proved useful in speeding up the process of transcribing and provided a very basic analysis of the “Key Words” in a particular transcript. I decided to transcribe verbatim to “preserve participants’ meanings” (Charmaz 2006, p.55) in the transcripts in line with my grounded theory approach (Section 2.4). I edited quotes for clarity when adding them into my thesis but tried to retain the original wording as much as possible.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

I saw data analysis not as a separate stage within my research but something that took place throughout the fieldwork process and afterwards. This was influenced by the iterative approach of grounded theory and Hammersley and Atkinson's (2019, p.168) encouragement for ethnographers to analyse throughout the course of research (see Section 2.4). Thus, whilst collecting diaries, I kept a Word document of what I considered emerging themes from the research and things that were commonly mentioned by participants. I added to this document and created similar documents at other stages of the research including when I reviewed participant diaries before interviews, and during transcription. As such, I had various ideas about the themes of my thesis before my more focused analysis.

I decided to use NVivo to analyse my data given the large amount of data I had collected and its various formats (images, video, audio, text). I felt NVivo would help to organise my analysis and allow me to refer to all instances of a particular theme. It proved particularly useful later for searching the full set of data for particular words or phrases (e.g. "sacred" for Chapter 6). While I used a single coding frame, I undertook two stages of NVivo analysis, one which included diary images, diary entries and interviews, and another which was a very basic coding of the categories of images, only including photos from the diaries.

For the former stage, I constructed my coding frame by adding categories about themes that had emerged from the data and that I knew I wanted to discuss in my thesis (e.g. food), as well as important categories I had not yet considered in-depth (e.g. the Quran). I also made slight changes to the coding frame during the coding process if I realised there were important categories I had missed (e.g. 'Illness and medication') or that codes could be grouped in a different way. A code named "Methodological Notes" proved helpful in highlighting where participants discussed or evaluated the research methods – excerpts of which have been included in this chapter – and also for paralinguistic analysis such as when participants expressed emotion during interviews.

For the second stage of analysis, I drew on Rose's (2016) extensive chapters on visual analysis in her book *Visual Methodologies*, the chapter on content analysis being particularly relevant (Chapter 5). In this stage, I coded photos only according to limited range of categories in terms of what was visibly in the photos (e.g. food, Qurans, prayer mats etc.). While this visual content analysis aided qualitative findings, I also produced quantitative outcomes in terms of the numbers of photos in different categories (Rose 2016, p.96), something facilitated by the use of a separate code to categorise photos. These quantitative findings provide a useful introduction to some of the themes addressed in this thesis and are discussed and depicted in Chapter 4 (Section 4.2).

Rose (2016, p.85) explains content analysis as an analytical method which focuses on “the selecting, coding and quantitative analysis of large numbers of images”. She describes that this quantitative focus led to the claim that the method was a “rigorous, reliable and objective” way to analyse images. While I disagree that a visual analysis of images can or should be ‘objective’, the process of coding images was appealing to me as it works well with NVivo and is useful for analysing a large number of images. I also dispute the so-called replicability of content analysis. Rose describes this as follows:

The coding categories must be completely unambiguous. They must be so clearly defined that different researchers at different times using the same categories would code the images in exactly the same way (2016, p.96)

The human aspect of interpreting qualitative data (images, interview transcripts and anything else) seems, to me, important in providing creative insights and I am not keen on the more ‘robotic’ approach prescribed in the above quote. I favour Lutz and Collins’ (1993 in Rose 2016) more flexible approach which allows their research questions to guide their coding frame (see Rose 2016, p.93 for the frame they used). The categories they devise are not completely objective categories although both Collins and Lutz code the images separately and eventually come to a mutual agreement on their coding (Rose 2016, p.96). I do not think the use of subjective categories is a problem, and think there is a level of subjectivity involved in interpreting visual data especially to contextualise images and discuss their social and cultural implications. Rose (2016) herself asserts that this contextualisation is important throughout her book. The idea that coding categories can be “completely unambiguous” (Rose 2016, p.96) is a misnomer that fails to recognise the complex nature of human researchers at the heart of the process. This idea concurs with Bauer’s (2021) assertion that “cultural ambiguity is part of the human condition” (p.3), and thus I would encourage researchers to be “tolerant” of ambiguity in every stage of their research.

6. RESEARCH ETHICS

This chapter has already outlined the transformative, feminist approach to my research topic which sought to ‘give voice’ to participants and challenge dominant negative narratives around Muslims. This is an approach which considers participant needs and thus contributes to my research ethics. However, there are more explicit ethical issues researchers must address during fieldwork which I outline below. Based on these considerations, this PhD project received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of my school (SHARE) at Cardiff University in March 2020.

6.1 INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent was integral to ensuring participants were fully aware of how their data would be used in my research. As such, I decided only to include adult participants in my study to ensure they could understand the implications of my research and fully consent. I recognised that it was unlikely all participants would have English as a first language (a question on the Ethical Approval Form) but ensured that they were fluent enough to understand the project documentation and contribute to my research. Their participation helped ensure this was the case since diaries were submitted and interviews conducted in English. I also gave ample opportunity for participants to ask questions before consenting and I let them know they could withdraw consent at any time.

I decided initially to obtain consent via WhatsApp for participants who chose to do WhatsApp diaries, which was the majority. I felt that the more traditional email-based (or handwritten) consent process may be prohibitive for some participants or create unnecessary barriers. Instead, I wanted to use a platform that was perhaps used more regularly by participants. Barbosa and Milan's (2019) discussion on WhatsApp-based consent is helpful in this regard:

The codified way of obtaining informed consent does not work either, with research subjects expected to sign a consent form as the sine-qua-non condition for participating in the research. This approach is entirely outdated in the age of chat apps (p.57)

Whilst the authors make this point in the context of research using WhatsApp group chats (whereas I used one-to-one conversations), I felt that since much of my research data would be obtained on this platform, obtaining consent via WhatsApp would be appropriate. Indeed, Cheruvallil-Contractor and Shakkour (2016) argue that, in the context of digital methods, "current ethical guidelines are no longer sufficient" (p.xxi).

Thus, I sent project documents (consent form and information sheet) to participants in a WhatsApp conversation, asked them explicitly if they consented, and to respond with 'Yes' or 'No' followed by their name. Although this is an unconventional and innovative method, social media research methodologies are an emerging field and as such there are no set rules on what is considered best ethical practice. Others using WhatsApp-based research have also obtained consent using the platform (Kaufman and Peil 2019). Thus, I came up with strategy whereby participants received full project documentation but could consent via WhatsApp message. I intended to screenshot and save these messages as records of consent.

In practice however, only four participants consented via WhatsApp, two of whom did not respond in the way I intended but downloaded and filled in the form then sent me a photo of it. One

reason for this was that I had sent most participants the details via WhatsApp broadcast message, not realising that they would only receive the message if my number was saved to their phone. For various reasons, including the fact I had switched to a different number for diary collection, most participants did not receive my initial messages about consent so I resent the forms via email. I also texted any remaining participants from whom I had received no contact to ensure they had got the message, asking them to save my number. For the interviews, I sent a separate “Interview Consent Form” to ensure informed consent was obtained at all stages. Whilst filling in the forms suited most participants, Rayyan told me this was difficult for her since she had no device (e.g. laptop) on which she could do this easily, and she would have preferred to consent over WhatsApp. While it did not work very well in my case, Rayyan’s comments suggest WhatsApp consent is worthy of consideration in future studies, perhaps by offering the option of more ‘traditional’ forms of consent alongside innovative methods.

6.2 DATA PROTECTION AND ANONYMITY

In line with Cardiff University’s ethical guidance, all information collected from or about participants during the study was kept confidential and managed in accordance with data protection legislation. The data was stored securely and only I had access to it. It was anonymised as soon as possible after collection – for example, identifying information like the town/city where a participant lived or names of participants and their relatives were not included in interview transcripts, or were removed if they had been automatically transcribed by Otter. While most participants were happy to submit diaries digitally, one wanted to print entries and send them in the post due to his concerns over digital security. Unfortunately, with the university campus being closed due to the pandemic, there was no way for me to access items posted there (and I did not want to share my personal address) so we came to a suitable solution whereby the participant sent his diaries using a secure file-sharing platform online. Again, flexibility was key in enhancing engagement with the project and ensuring ethical practice.

In terms of anonymisation more broadly, all participant names (or names of family members) were replaced with pseudonyms as soon as possible after data collection. I decided not to reproduce photographs where participants or their family members were identifiable and asked participants’ their explicit permission to use other photographs in my thesis or other research outputs (e.g. conference presentations, journal articles). I also removed or changed identifying information from participants’ data to ensure they could not be recognised. Anonymisation was also quite challenging in that some participants conducted their diaries using a public (or semi-public) social media platform but engaged in one-to-one interviews which were private. This signifies “public-private blurring” inherent in online spaces that Cheruvallil-Contractor (2016b) describes, which requires “new

conceptualizations of accepted ethical norms” (pp.67-68). Thus, I had to think carefully and innovatively about my anonymisation strategy in these cases. As such, I have sometimes removed a participant pseudonym completely (referring simply to ‘a participant’) or changed the text of diary entries (while preserving the meaning) so they can’t be traced back to a social media account. A similar consideration was made for the image in Figure 15 (Chapter 6) where Sarah sent me screenshots of a Facebook post and her own comments on the post in her diary. I did not include the image containing her Facebook comments in this thesis because although she removed her name, it may still have been possible to identify her from the text.

There were also cases in which participants shared information that was very private and had not been shared with many other people. In cases where participants asked me explicitly not to mention particular information, I respected their wishes and clarified how they would like this information to be communicated, if at all. I used my judgement in other cases (for example, when participants told me personal details about their family) deeming whether it was relevant to my findings and how participants might feel about me sharing that information. I largely erred on the side of caution in these instances avoiding discussing such experiences in detail.

6.3 RISKS TO PARTICIPANTS

I did not anticipate any risks to participants as a result of this study since it was not likely we would be discussing particularly sensitive topics. That said, I sent participants regular messages during the diary phase to ‘check in’ on them and their wellbeing, as well as encouraging those from whom I had not received many entries.

There were instances where I had to be aware of potential risks. For example, when a participant got emotional during an interview, I ensured he had time and space to pause and that he was happy to continue afterwards. Additionally, one participant told me she was feeling down and struggling to submit diary entries, so I assured her that she did not have to continue. She decided to stop the diary at this point. I did, however, interview her later. Another participant suffered an anxiety attack before the interview we had scheduled on Zoom and again, I gave her the option to cancel the interview but also asked if there was another suitable way she would like to complete the interview. In the end, she was happy to be interviewed via email. In the latter two cases, while I recognised the participants were struggling to fulfil the requirements of the research, I wanted to offer them alternative ways to continue contributing. I feel my flexibility with my methods then, is not just useful for empowering participants and benefitting the researcher, but also helps preserve ethics in the research process.

6.4 VALUING PARTICIPANT CONTRIBUTIONS

As part of my practice as an ethical researcher, it was important for me to show participants that I valued and appreciated their contributions to my research. Whilst some researchers promote the use of cash incentives (Boulianne 2008), such incentives can bring up a host of ethical issues (Ripley 2006). Personally, I felt that ‘putting a price’ on participant diaries might diminish the value of participants sharing their personal lives with me. Thus, I opted to give all diary participants a gift voucher for a UK-based website selling Islamic gifts and books, something I felt was in-keeping with the spirit of Ramadan too.

I was wary of lessons learned by Cappucci (2015) in his study with Iraqi Shi’a Muslims in the USA. He notes that participants were “perplexed” by his offer of vouchers and felt “the acceptance of a modest ten-dollar gift card would negate the spiritual grace one would have obtained from God. This divine reward is much more valuable than any financial payment one could acquire from another” (pp.93-94). My participants, I think, had similar altruistic motivations (see Seymour 2012) for taking part with several telling me they wanted to ‘help out’ with my research, and so, following Cappucci (2015), I emphasised that the vouchers were a gift of thanks (rather than a payment). I also offered the vouchers after participants had completed the diary stage so as not to affect their contributions to my research. I offered gift vouchers to all participants regardless of the completeness of their diaries to recognise the value of all participants’ contributions.

7. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have addressed a range of areas in relation to the methodology and methods applied in this research. These include the theoretical underpinnings of my methodology (Section 2), the details and rationale behind my methods of data generation (solicited photo diaries and interviews), fieldnotes, transcription and analysis (Sections 3-5), and an exploration of the ethics of the project (Section 6). All these areas are underpinned by my feminist, ethnographic approach to research though I did not employ traditional ethnographic methods. Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated my efforts to be flexible and innovative with my research methods, something which, I argue, enhances participant agency in the process. This addresses power imbalances between researcher and researched, and is important given prejudice faced by Muslims in a British context (Jones and Unsworth 2022). I return to this further in Chapter 8. Such methodological flexibility recognises the complexity and subjectivity of human experience – both for researchers and participants - and aligns with understanding the “cultural ambiguity” of human societies asserted by Bauer’s (2021) work which I draw upon throughout my findings. Before moving on to my main findings,

the next chapter seeks to situate my fieldwork in its unique context and introduce readers to the broad spectrum of contributions received as part of the research.

CHAPTER 4 – SETTING THE SCENE

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces readers to the unique social context of the pandemic in 2020 as well as giving more details about the data collected, its various formats, and the demographics of my participants. This contextualising information is important for understanding the distinct context of my findings. To begin, I discuss the COVID-19 pandemic and the situation of the early lockdown in the UK in 2020, as well as exploring the ways in which Ramadan was being discussed at the time amongst Muslims and more broadly (Section 2). I then go on to outline the specifics of my own research. In the previous chapter, I outlined the research methods used for this study in conversation with other methodological literature that informed my approach. Whilst I included some participant quotes reflecting on their experience of participating in the research, this chapter goes one step further. I first provide an overview of the demographics of my participants (Section 3) and then address the diversity of the data received (Section 4). This includes a breakdown of the formats through which diaries were sent and interviews conducted as well as a broad overview of the content of the diaries – which were diverse in their styles – to highlight some of the important themes that emerged through the process of coding the data. Themes and topics covered in participant diaries and interviews were wide-ranging and I was only able to explore a portion of this in the remaining chapters of this thesis. While this section contextualises later findings chapters then, it also points towards other aspects of Ramadan that were significant to participants that I suggest are useful as future directions for research in my Conclusion (Chapter 9).

2. COVID-19, THE LOCKDOWN, AND RAMADAN

2.1 THE EMERGENCE OF THE PANDEMIC

The period of my fieldwork and the months leading up to them were unprecedented due to the global COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting social restrictions imposed in Britain. Similar rules were implemented in other countries, but I will focus largely on the UK situation. The information presented in this section is drawn from my own “fieldnotes” written at the time as well as online sources regarding the situation of the pandemic and the changing nature of and limits on social interaction. I start by introducing the global context briefly before moving onto its manifestations in the UK.

Late 2019 and early 2020 saw the spread of a new virus – known as coronavirus or COVID-19 – from China to countries all over the world leading to a worldwide pandemic. The situation was declared a “public health emergency of international concern” on 30th January 2020 (World Health

Organisation 2020). While the virus was considered to have mild symptoms for most healthy people, it was potentially fatal for a significant portion of the population including the elderly or those with underlying health conditions. This combined with the virus' high contagiousness and lack of a vaccine at the time meant the worldwide death toll was increasing rapidly in the early stages of the pandemic.

While the UK saw its first cases of COVID-19 at the end of January (Aspinall 2022) and implemented some guidance for those experiencing symptoms from February, the country seemed largely unaffected until March. At this point, the government introduced increasingly strict measures to try and stem the spread although it was later criticised for its slow response (Triggle 2021). Over this time, Prime Minister Boris Johnson, or one of his colleagues, gave daily televised updates introducing stricter measures each day. Within the space of about a week, the advice for the public had changed from simply washing your hands for longer and more often, to a full 'lockdown'. This meant that everyone was instructed stay at home unless for permitted reasons including essential shopping (food, toiletries etc.), medical needs, exercise once a day, and essential work that could not be done from home. Schools closed - except to look after vulnerable children and children of essential workers – along with most universities, and many workplaces shut and asked employees to work from home where possible.

Regarding Muslim institutions, even before the Prime Minister ordered places of worship to close on Monday 23rd March, many UK mosques had shut their doors. There was much debate about this amongst Muslims online. Two prominent Deobandi scholars issued guidance saying mosques should remain open “until and unless the government places a total restriction on religious places” (Shabbir 2020, see Figure 3) whilst other Muslims criticised this as being the wrong stance to take. Within days however, an emergency meeting was called and a statement issued by Deobandi scholars across the country permitting and encouraging congregants to pray at home while mosques remain open (Islamic Portal 2020, see Figure 3). This indirectly led to the closure of many Deobandi mosques – along with other mosques which had not already closed – even before the government instructions a few days later.

Amidst all this, Ramadan (which was due to start around the 25th April) inevitably entered into discussions amongst Muslims. What would Ramadan be like without the mosque? What would happen to the collective *taraweeh* prayers, communal *iftars* and charity events? Could the communal spirit of Ramadan which is so fundamental to the month (as participants describe in Chapter 5) be maintained in this unprecedented context? Muslims realised this was going to be a Ramadan like they had never seen before and were anxious as to how they would experience this important occasion given the pandemic restrictions.

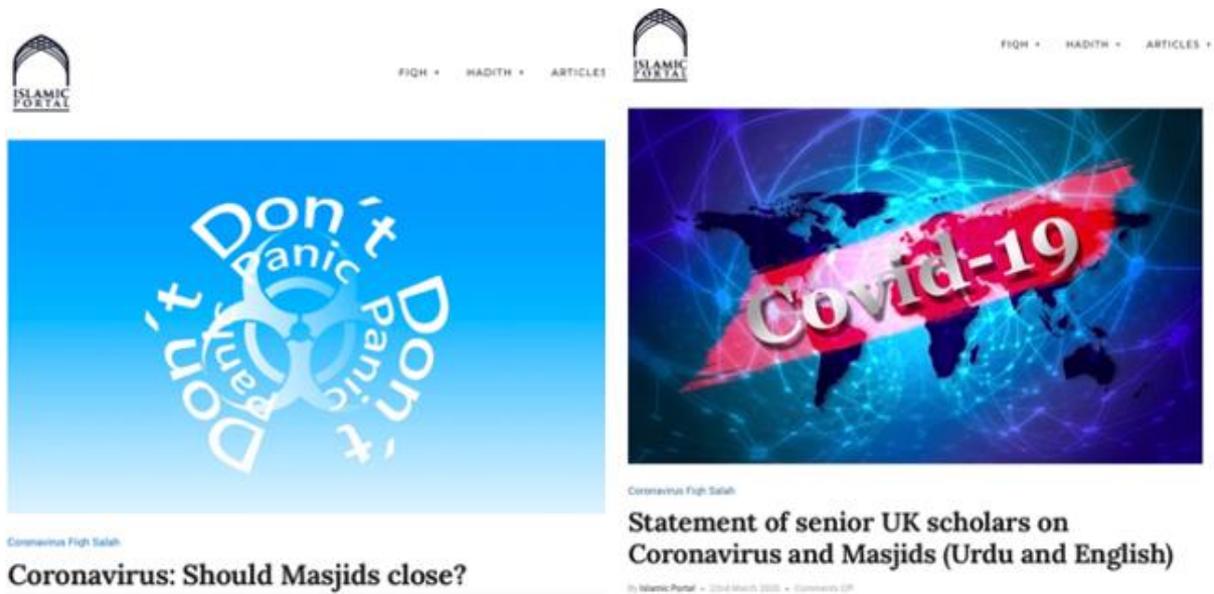


FIGURE 3- SCREENSHOTS OF WEBPAGES ILLUSTRATING THE CHANGING DEOBANDI GUIDANCE ISSUED REGARDING CORONAVIRUS. LEFT IMAGE DEPICTS A POST ON 17TH MARCH 2020 (SHABBIR 2020) AND RIGHT IMAGE DEPICTS A POST ON 22ND MARCH (ISLAMIC PORTAL 2020).

2.2 “RAMADAN ISN’T CANCELLED”

When discussing my research with a non-Muslim friend, and telling them I was hoping to continue despite the pandemic, I was asked “will Ramadan be cancelled?”. I perceived this as a strange question - akin to asking if Christmas would be cancelled - to which I quickly responded “no” and shrugged off. However, as Ramadan drew closer, I came across several posts and videos online where Muslims seemed to be discussing similar ideas themselves. Such posts reminded viewers that Ramadan would go ahead despite the pandemic (Figure 4). They encouraged Muslims to put as much energy into their worship during the month as usual, and to remember that its blessings prevailed even while other aspects of life – school, work, etc. - slowed down. While they perhaps stated the obvious (Ramadan was *not* going to be cancelled), such statements also seemed to be rhetorical techniques for gaining attention online²⁹. While those running such accounts were not necessarily UK-based, these posts were observed by me as a British Muslim, and ‘shared’ or ‘liked’ by others I knew in the UK, demonstrating how geographical boundaries became blurred when so much activity shifted online during the height of the pandemic. Thus, British Muslims were influenced by and contributed to these digital discourses. Indeed, the UK-Based Ramadan Tent project, also founders of the Open Iftar initiative, published a video within which was stated, “Open Iftar 2020...is cancelled...but Ramadan continues” (Ramadan Tent Project 2020).

²⁹ A similar example in journalism is “Betteridge’s Law” which argues that headlines which ask a question are almost always answered with the response ‘no’ in a clickbait style (Morris 2019; Ince 2020).

Several online initiatives emerged in time for Ramadan 2020 to replace some of what was lost by the lack of in-person activities. The aforementioned video (Ramadan Tent Project 2020) was a promotional video to launch #MyOpenIftar, a virtual project which the organisers described as their “solution to keeping the Ramadan spirit alive this year”. The online events, one of which I attended, happened every night of Ramadan 2020 and included introductions by participants, a series of presentations, and a question-and-answer session. While they took place in accordance with *iftar* time in the UK, eating together was not a substantial element of the events – it was more of a social and educational space and a way to encourage Muslims to be ‘together’ virtually before breaking their fast, broadcast via Zoom and Facebook Live. Additionally, the “Ramadhan Stories” Snapchat account (pictured in Figure 4) set up by a Dutch Muslim provided a novel way of sharing one’s experience of Ramadan with others around the world. Through this platform, individual Muslims from countries across the world (including the UK) would ‘take over’ the account each day of Ramadan to share photos and videos their experience of the holy month. These are just two examples, but there were numerous similar initiatives emerging online in 2020. It seemed that Muslims were putting a special effort in to such activities in order to preserve a ‘sense’ of Ramadan that had been lost in other ways³⁰.

Interestingly, some female Muslims seemed to challenge the way in which online discourses seemed excessively concerned about the impact of the pandemic, noting that they had already had to manage Ramadan without the mosque, particularly in the context of motherhood. Malik (2022) reflects in her article (originally published online in 2020) on her first experience of Ramadan as a mother, noting:

My first Ramadan without a mosque, tarawih³¹, jummah³² prayers, communal iftars or family gatherings is not this one...as we happily heralded the new moon of our first Ramadan with a newborn, I had no idea that a mother’s Ramadan is amongst the loneliest there is (Malik 2022)

Similarly, Elshayyal (2021), an academic writing in a more personal capacity in this instance, notes her curiosity at the way in which “some [online] commentators expressed despair at the prospect of their first-ever Ramadhan as adults without attending nightly taraweeh at the mosque” while she had

³⁰ It is interesting also to note that this ‘buzz’ in activity was particularly pronounced in 2020 compared to the following Ramadan (even though many UK restrictions were still in place during Ramadan 2021). It seemed Muslims were more concerned about how they would experience Ramadan during the early pandemic than the following year when they had perhaps got used to the situation more.

³¹ Alternative spelling of “*taraweeh*”

³² Special Friday prayers that happen at a mosque in congregation

already been experiencing this as a mother for several years (p.76). At the same time, I came across Muslim mothers online (on WhatsApp groups I belonged to as well as wider social media platforms) sharing ideas about home-made Ramadan decorations and children’s activities to do during the month. While this is not exceptional for Ramadan (I observed similar discussions in 2022, for example), it seemed more pronounced in 2020 since parents would be spending a lot more time at home with children during the lockdown. I highlight further debates about motherhood and domestic life amongst my participants later in this thesis (Chapter 6).

Aside from this, Muslim businesses seemed to be taking the pandemic as an opportunity to market their products in new ways. These included businesses selling Ramadan decorations, but also companies selling Ramadan journals and Islamic books. The image in Figure 4 stating that “Ramadan isn’t postponed or cancelled” is from the creator of a Ramadan journal. Accompanying the post, she describes a list of other things that aren’t postponed including “kindness” “duas” and “reflection”. She includes images of her journal and links to the product’s Instagram page. Elsewhere, UK-based Kube Publishing announced their ‘Stay at Home, Read at Home’ promotion in the run up to Ramadan allowing customers to purchase various e-books for 99p each (Kube Publishing 2020). At this time, there were concerns about coronavirus spreading on surfaces via delivered products which seems to be partly behind Kube’s encouragement to purchase e-books. Although I don’t delve much into commercial aspects of Ramadan in this thesis, these examples serve to further highlight the increased online activity around Ramadan 2020.

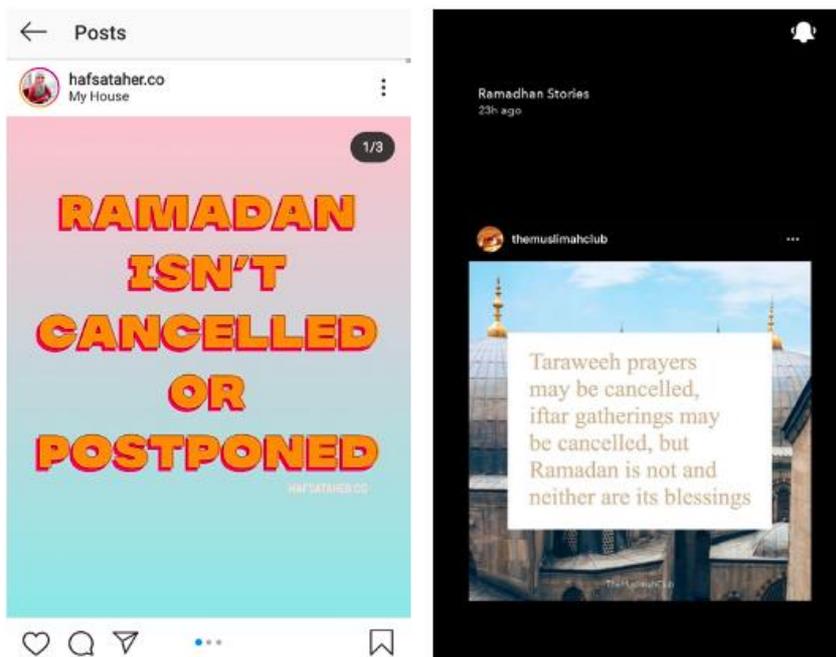


FIGURE 4- LEFT IMAGE: INSTAGRAM POST BY @HAFSATAHER.CO. RIGHT IMAGE: SNAPCHAT POST BY ‘RAMADHAN STORIES’ ACCOUNT.

2.3 MEDIA INTEREST IN RAMADAN 2020

There was an understandable emphasis on the COVID-19 pandemic in the mainstream media at the time of my fieldwork. Thus, I expected there to be less interest in Ramadan in the UK. However, I was proven wrong several times. Firstly, BBC local stations in England broadcast an 'Islamic reflections' series every Friday from 3rd April after mosques closed. This seemed to be in recognition of the issues around Ramadan and social distancing. As the head of local BBC Radio, Chris Burns, noted:

Many Muslims will feel a void in their lives where prayers used to be – a feeling the [sic] will be magnified as we approach Ramadan... Local radio is all about connecting communities and we hope these weekly reflections will go some way to helping Muslims feel a sense of community while they are isolating (Layton 2020)

Other media articles explained the ways in which Muslims would or did experience the month given the unusual circumstances (Diseko 2020; Sivathanan 2020). For the latter of these, which consisted largely of a video, the Muslim journalist who narrates her account describes how "it almost doesn't feel like Ramadan" a message echoed on her Twitter account (@SodabaH, 01/05/2020). Some outlets additionally described how Muslim institutions responded to the pandemic, such as the advice delivered by the Muslim Council of Britain on how to observe Ramadan during the lockdown (Gardner 2020). Interestingly, Gardner argues that "individual isolation is completely counter-intuitive to most Muslims during the month of Ramadan" contrasting my own participants' perceptions as well as the practice of *itikaf* described in Chapter 5. While the above articles are relatively benign in their presentation of the topic, others seemed to reinforce the wider stereotyping of Muslims in the UK media, with Hellen et al. (2020) suggesting that Muslims would continue to gather during the month thereby facilitating the spread of coronavirus. Suffice to say that coverage of Ramadan 2020 was widespread and diverse, and it was possible that the pandemic enhanced media interest in the month since it was one of the few occasions or events that had not been 'cancelled'. This section has hopefully provided the reader with an insight into the context within which my fieldwork and my participants were situated in the early stages of the pandemic.

3. PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

It is important to introduce the composition of participants in this study to contextualise the following chapters. I used an online survey to recruit participants which captured most of the information presented in this section, with other aspects being filled in during diary or interview stages. While I recruited 53 participants in total, 51 were based in the UK (and thus formed the primary

basis for my findings³³) and I focus on these 51 participants in this section. The participants covered a range of demographics in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and location within the UK. This data is represented in tables in Figure 5 which I refer to throughout this section. In terms of age, almost half of my participants were 25-39, but with a good proportion of older and younger participants (Figure 5A). Only one participant was over 60, and while there is a relatively young Muslim population in the UK (based on 2011 Census data discussed by Sedghi 2013), this figure was likely affected by the online research methods used as well as largely online promotion of the study.

Nearly a quarter of my participants said they converted to Islam (Figure 5B) and most of these seemed to be white apart from one who defined herself as 'mixed Asian' (Figure 5C, shaded cells)³⁴. Although there are no conclusive figures for the number of Muslim converts in the UK, a 2010 report estimated that converts made up around 4% of Muslims at the time, with around half of these being White British (Brice 2010). It was likely the high proportion of white converts was influenced by my own shared identity – although I did not introduce myself as a 'convert' (and rarely define myself as such), I consciously tried to make it clear to potential participants that I was Muslim and my name is indicative of the fact I was not born into a Muslim family. Interestingly, one participant answered 'Other' in relation to whether she considered herself to have converted (Figure 5B), explaining during interview that although she was brought up in a Muslim family, she left the faith as a teenager and later returned to being a Muslim. Thus, she considers herself a convert in some ways. The overrepresentation of white converts was something I considered during analysis and writing up my thesis, and I have tried to ensure the issues discussed in this thesis are relevant to a broad spectrum of my participants unless otherwise stated. I have also made efforts to include the voices of, and quotes from, participants of diverse ethnicities within this work. Aside from those described above, the ethnicities of participants were quite varied including Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Arab, North African and mixed ethnicities. It is worth noting that I allowed participants to define ethnicities themselves rather than providing fixed categories aiming not to exclude particular groups and recognising the complex ways people define themselves. Thus, instead of trying to group these ethnicities, I have provided a full list of self-defined participant ethnicities (in no particular order) in Figure 5C.

Notably, a large proportion of my participants were women with 41 female and 10 male participants (Figure 5D). This was not something I deemed a problem. I felt it was important to portray

³³ See Section 4.1 in this chapter for more about the international data collected.

³⁴ It is difficult to define precisely the ethnicity of converts in this study since the category was self-defined and only 8 out of 13 converts stated explicitly that they were 'White' or 'Caucasian'.

the gendered experiences of Ramadan in my work since what is perhaps seen as the 'typical' experience of Ramadan (e.g. attending the mosque for *taraweeh* prayers) is often derived from a male perspective (as mentioned in Chapter 3). Nonetheless, I don't seek to provide a primarily female account of Ramadan in this thesis as others have done successfully in work on Ramadan in Morocco (Buitelaar 1993) and Egypt (Saad Aly 2010). Rather, I ensured male participants were included in the interview stage roughly proportionate to their numbers in the diary stage, and I highlight gendered experiences in my findings. I expect the large proportion of female participants was partly down to my own gender. However, it may also be linked to the diary method I used since it has been suggested that women are more likely to engage in diary research (Bird 2003, p.12). Additionally, understandings of Islamic gender norms may have influenced the lower uptake of male participants. This was suggested by James' comments who, during interview, explained one reason he chose an outward-facing social media platform to submit diaries rather than a one-to-one format was because, "you know, you're a woman, I'm a man. Yada, yada, you know, we probably shouldn't be- you know what I mean?" (James, Interview). While this might seem vague, it was clear to me that James was referring to Muslim norms that unrelated men and women should not freely mix and interact together, and he deemed it less appropriate to communicate with me one-to-one³⁵. His answer points to further ways in which males may have been less willing to take part in my project. It is likely the combination of these factors influenced the high number of female participants since a diary is often quite a personal, reflective endeavour that one may be more comfortable sharing with someone of the same gender, especially in the context of Islamic gender norms.

Other demographic factors I recorded included the city or town in which participants lived within the UK and while around 75% lived in England, I had representation from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, something I had intended through targeted promotion of my project towards these areas (Figure 5E). Participants had varying living situations (Figure 5F). While the majority (84%) lived with family - either with parents and/or siblings, or with a spouse and/or children - a small number lived with fellow students and a few lived alone. A small number had extended family living in the household too. I made sure to include both those living alone and with others during interviews to see how these situations differed. In terms of their occupations, participants included those who were working full or part-time, self-employed, students, stay-at-home parents, the unemployed and one participant who was retired (Figure 5G). Specific occupations (discussed in interviews and diaries)

³⁵ It is interesting, however, that James contacted me occasionally via WhatsApp outside his diary submissions. I suspect it was the regularity with which he would be sending diary messages directly to me, as a woman, that put him off submitting his diary via that format. He also was happy to be interviewed one-to-one on Zoom.

included teachers, medical and health workers, journalists, those working for mosques or Islamic organisations and many more. It is worth noting that although I did not actively seek to determine social class, it seemed most participants were well-educated (to university level) and few were in typically working-class occupations. Thus, the accounts provided may be less relevant to Muslims from working-class backgrounds. The variation in terms of demography provided a range of experiences to underpin my study which I hope means that my findings have resonance with many members of the wider Muslim population in the UK.

A)

AGE	18-24	25-39	40-59	60+	TOTAL
Number of Participants	10	25	15	1	51
%	19.6%	49.0%	29.4%	2.0%	

B)

CONVERT STATUS	"I was born into a Muslim family"	"I converted to Islam"	Other	TOTAL
Number of Participants	37	13	1	51
%	72.5%	25.5%	2.0%	

C)

LIST OF ETHNICITIES (SELF-DEFINED BY PARTICIPANTS, ANSWERS AS WRITTEN IN ONLINE SURVEY)	
Pakistani	Chinese-Malay
Welsh	Pakistani
British Asian	English
British Gujrati Indian	Welsh Pakistani
Pakistani	Bengali
White European	Pakistani
white British	British Indian
Mixed asian	Mixed Black, White and Asian
White British	Pakistani
White British (English)	North African
Mixed	British bangladeshi
White U.K.	British Bangladeshi
Bangladeshi	Bangladeshi
English/ British	Bangladeshi
White welsh	Pakistani
Bangladeshi	mixed malay iraqi
Pakistani	Arab/Turkish
Caucasian	Middle Eastern
Cornish	Belfast
Mixed, Irish Kurdish	Arab
Middle East	Pakistani
Welsh Pakistani	Brit Pak
Indonesian	Arab Egyptian
Birmingham	Asian
White other	British Bangladeshi
Arab	

D)

GENDER	Female	Male	TOTAL
Number of Participants	41	10	51
%	80.4%	19.6%	

E)

LOCATION IN UK	England*	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland	TOTAL
Number of Participants	38	2	7	4	51
%	74.5%	3.9%	13.7%	7.8%	
	*includes North East, North West, Midlands and South East England				

F)

LIVING SITUATION IN RAMADAN 2020	Alone	With parents and/or sibling(s)	With spouse only	With spouse and child/children	
Number of Participants	6	8	5	15	
%	11.8%	15.7%	9.8%	29.4%	
LIVING SITUATION IN RAMADAN 2020	With children only (not spouse)	With friends (students)	With family - unspecified	Other (included extended family)	TOTAL
Number of Participants	3	2	9	3	51
%	5.9%	3.9%	17.6%	5.9%	

G)

OCCUPATION	Full-time	Part-time	Student	Stay-at-home parent	Unemployed	Self-employed	Retired	TOTAL
Number of Participants	19	13	13	3	2	5	1	56*
	*Respondents were allowed to provide more than one answer to this question hence the total is greater than the total number of participants. Percentages have not been provided for this reason.							

FIGURE 5- TABLES OF PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS BASED ON VARIOUS FACTORS. DATA COLLECTED FROM INITIAL ONLINE SURVEY FOR PARTICIPANTS (MARCH-APRIL 2020).

4. DIVERSITY IN DATA THEMES AND FORMAT

In this section, I provide a broad overview of the data collected and reflections on the data post-fieldwork. I describe the diverse formats, themes and styles encountered during the diary phase as well as touching upon the variety in the semi-structured interview data, which was more consistent than diaries but nonetheless allowed participants freedom to explore areas of importance to them. This section aims to give readers a picture of the type of data collected as well as introducing some of the important themes emerging in relation to Ramadan especially in Section 4.2. This hopefully provides some context for the findings to be discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

4.1 DIARY STYLES

While interviews were more structured (see Interview Schedule in Appendix 3), the content and format of the diaries was largely left to the decision of participants. I described my open-ended instructions regarding the diaries in Chapter 3 (Section 3.3). In total, I collected 53 Ramadan photo diaries, 51 from UK-based participants, and 2 from participants outside the UK. Although my research was interested in Ramadan in the UK, 4 people from outside Britain showed interest in the project and I agreed to let them participate on the basis that their input may provide interesting comparative data. In the end however, only 2 of these submitted their diaries and I have not used their input extensively in this thesis but it may prove more useful in future work. Whilst 65 participants filled in my initial survey to take part, 12 of these dropped out before submitting any entries – the majority of them said they were busy with other things and did not have time to complete the diary. Nonetheless, I was pleasantly surprised by the uptake to my project especially given the unique and difficult circumstances people faced in relation to the pandemic at the time. I also allowed participants to choose the platform through which to submit their diary. WhatsApp proved to be the most popular diary format (35 diaries), followed by email (7 diaries) which were sent either in the email text or attached in a Word document. Four participants submitted via Instagram post, two via personal blogs, two via a combination of WhatsApp and email, and single participants submitted on Instagram story, Twitter and online file sharing of a Word document.

While I received over 50 diaries, they were not all filled out to the same extent, as might be expected. Indeed, I explained to participants that I was flexible with the frequency of the diaries from the outset encouraging them to send daily entries but being open to accepting however many were feasible for them. Out of the 53 diaries - which spanned 29 or 30 days of Ramadan (depending on when participants started the month) plus 1 day of Eid - I received what I classed as 23 'full' diaries (25 entries or more), 18 'partial' diaries (10-25 entries) and 12 'infrequent' diaries (less than 10 entries). Only 1 participant sent a single diary entry while 17 sent entries every day of the month.

While most participants wrote each entry in one day, one participant who sent entries via email told me she had been writing them every few days or sometimes constructed an entry over a couple of days. Other participants occasionally sent entries that covered two days. Across these diaries, I collected 1228 photos with most entries containing one photo and some including multiple. Some participants consistently delivered one photo and description every day (bar one or two days they missed) while others sent several photos each day reflecting different things they had done.

These diaries gave me ample data to analyse especially in combination with the follow-up interviews. While I know that many researchers struggled completing fieldwork during the pandemic, I suspect that being in lockdown enhanced diary completion in my study since participants had more time to complete them (working, studying and leisure activities stopped or slowed down for many). Additionally, participants described during interview how they were motivated to take part in the project to record an unusual Ramadan, as Rayyan notes regarding the diaries:

I just thought, 'Oh, that'd be a nice way for me to keep track as well,' because obviously, it's a very unusual year and you forget actually what you've done and so I just thought it'd be nice for me as well to have a record. (Rayyan, Interview)

Similar sentiments about the lockdown were echoed by others, as well as the idea that completing the diaries would help them “reflect” more, reflection being an important practice of Ramadan. Sulaiman explained that he had always wanted to write a Ramadan diary but the research gave him the impetus to do it for the first time (Sulaiman, Interview). That said, a small number of participants said they struggled to complete the diary during lockdown because there wasn't much happening and they weren't sure what to include (Mariya, Interview; James, Interview). However, this did not have a negative impact on James' completion of the diary for which he sent daily entries and photos.

While most participants were fairly consistent in sending entries, several only seemed to send me things when prompted by my reminders. Additionally, a surprising number were very consistent until the last week of Ramadan. In this group, despite sending several reminders after Ramadan, I didn't receive the entries covering the final period of the month even though some told me they had taken the photos but were yet to write up the entries. It seemed that once Ramadan had finished, the motivation for writing entries had gone, as the time of Ramadan had passed making the diary entries less meaningful. One participant, who completed the diary on social media with her sisters, alluded to this in her interview when discussing why diary entries had dropped off at the end of the month:

Zahra: And then after it [Ramadan] was over- the plan was to, even before, the plan was to continue the account, even after Ramadan ended. But [pause] I don't know everything kind of became different [pause] and it never happened.

Laura: Yeah, like once Ramadan finished. It was all- it kind of changed?

Zahra: Yeah. (Zahra, Interview)

Participants also told me in interviews that the end of Ramadan became busy for them in terms of increased acts of worship (due to the enhanced sacredness and religious merits of the last 10 days of Ramadan- see Chapter 6) and preparations for Eid. There was a sense of making even more of the special time during this period or “trying to grab the *baraka* before it goes” (Lucy, Interview – see Chapter 7) something that would perhaps be interrupted by completing their research diaries.

While the regularity and frequency of diaries were diverse, so too were the types of photos taken. Broadly speaking, some photos depicted events or activities participants had been involved in that day – e.g. Leena’s photo of her family praying together outside during the lockdown (Figure 6a) - and some were more ‘symbolic’ such as Asiya’s photo of a pot of coins (Figure 6b) used to reflect on charity and expressing “wanting to give time and effort rather than only money” (Asiya, Diary, Entry 9). Some images were a combination of these such as Rubina’s photo (Figure 6c) from a rose garden she visited that day. In the accompany entry she also reflected on the value of enjoying the outdoors in lockdown and the “beauty of Allah’s creation” (Rubina, Diary, Entry 20). While the vast majority of participants sent images they themselves had taken on the day, some sent me ‘stock photos’ – images taken from the internet – which again either represented a participant’s daily activities (e.g. Mehmooda’s picture of a lasagne, the dish she had cooked for iftar that day, Figure 6e), or were more symbolic, such as Sabrina’s image of a phone (Figure 6d) used to highlight the importance of maintaining contact with relatives in Ramadan (Sabrina, Diary, Entry 15). Photos also included screenshots of online communications or events (e.g. Syeda’s screenshot of a YouTube series she listened to with her children, Figure 6f) and one participant occasionally sent images and text compiled together which she posted on a Facebook page she ran (not depicted to maintain confidentiality). Examples of these types of images are displayed together in Figure 6 to illustrate the variety of photos received, but it is important to note these are broad and overlapping categories.

In terms of the entries that accompanied images, they were equally diverse. While the majority sent accompanying text entries, two participants chose to do this audially via WhatsApp voice-notes. Other participants sent the occasional audio message instead of text. I observed that, like the images, entries could be grouped into three broad styles; 1) entries which simply described images

and daily events, 2) entries that were more reflective (on spirituality, Ramadan, the pandemic, or general life), and 3) entries that were didactic (and often reflective) in tone seeming to encourage others to take lessons from them. Again, there was much overlap between these diffuse categories – an entry could both describe daily events *and* be reflective, for example – but it seemed the didactic style was more common (but not exclusive) to outward-facing social media posts such as Instagram. This is understandable since these platforms have a wider audience and was apparent in Maymoona’s comments about benefitting others through her Instagram diary during interview. While she emphasised the diary was primarily for herself, she mentioned the following, seeming to hint towards the *ajr* (religious merit) available during Ramadan:

I started [the diary process] with ‘what message do I want for myself and whoever's reading this to be here today?’... So, in my head, I thought, well, if that benefits whoever wants to read it, I would be more than happy, because obviously I'd reap the benefits of benefitting someone else just reading it. (Maymoona, Interview)

The flexibility and broadness of the initial instructions about the diaries meant some participants were quite unique in their photo and entry styles. Maymoona was the only participant to use Instagram ‘stories’ meaning text and images were compiled. While most individuals commented in some sense on their daily activities in Ramadan, Maymoona’s diary was different in that she wrote a short reflection each day accompanied by a verse of the Quran with little or no mention of her daily activities. Her approach was also different in that most of her photos did not have any apparent relation to the text – they were landscapes or food images – and photos had been taken prior to Ramadan 2020 (most participants took photos contemporaneously). Another diary that stood out in its distinctiveness was Shaheeda’s which included no photos and was emailed in full at the end of Ramadan. Shaheeda completed this fairly regularly throughout the month but used it primarily as a way to track her progress including an introductory and concluding section listing her Ramadan “goals” and to what extent she met them. She also however, like other participants, documented personal struggles with work and mental health.

I am certain that the flexibility of the method and giving the participants choice in diary platform increased the diversity of the diaries. This is something I feel enriches the data rather being a problem. Mason (2006) similarly makes the case for mixing methods in sociological research, arguing that:

Explanations [arising from different methods] do not have to be internally consensual and neatly consistent to have meaning and to have the capacity to explain. Indeed, if the social world is multi-dimensional, then surely our explanations need to be likewise? (p.20)

Her observations also tie in with Bauer's understanding of the cultural ambiguity inherent in human nature (2021, p.3). While the variety in style and regularity of the diaries I collected could bring into question the usefulness of the data, I would argue that the various ways diaries were constructed reveals things about individual participants and what was important about Ramadan to them, as well as bringing methodological insights about the distinctiveness of different media. Such insights were gathered partly through asking participants about the process of completing diaries during interviews which helps contextualise different performative styles of diary data (Markham and Couldry 2007). The adoption of a more didactic style by Maymoona along with her comments during interview above, for example, highlights how bringing benefit to others was an important facet of her Ramadan experience, something I suspect would have been less apparent had she sent diaries via one-to-one communication. The diverse platforms used for diaries allowed me to identify aspects of performance through comparing different media. This demonstrated to me, as mentioned, how the didactic style was more common on platforms which had an audience beyond myself as researcher.

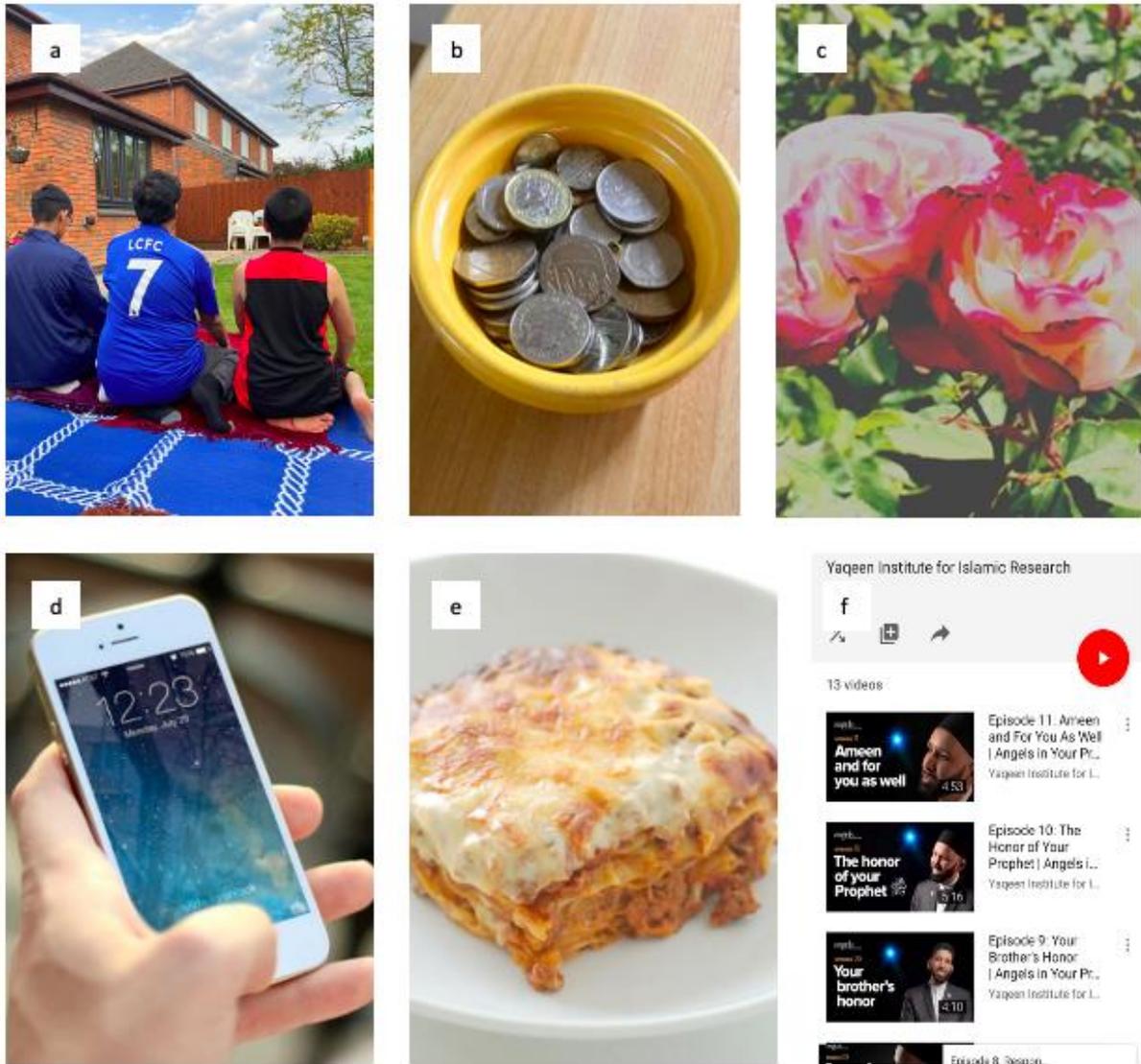


FIGURE 6- A SELECTION OF IMAGES DEPICTING THE VARIETY IN TYPES OF IMAGES SENT IN PARTICIPANT DIARIES; A) A PARTICIPANT-TAKEN PHOTO DEPICTING A DAILY ACTIVITY (LEENA, DIARY, ENTRY 17); B) A 'SYMBOLIC' PARTICIPANT-TAKEN PHOTO (ASIYA, DIARY, ENTRY 9); C) A PARTICIPANT-TAKEN PHOTO THAT BOTH DEPICTS A DAILY ACTIVITY AND IS 'SYMBOLIC' (RUBINA, DIARY, ENTRY 20); D) A 'SYMBOLIC' STOCK PHOTO (SABRINA, DIARY, ENTRY 15); E) A STOCK PHOTO DEPICTING A DAILY ACTIVITY (MEHMOODA, DIARY, ENTRY 4); F) A SCREENSHOT (SYEDA, DIARY, ENTRY 9)

4.2 DIARY CONTENT

While the section above describes the broad styles of diaries received in terms of ‘how’ diaries were put together, this section looks more specifically at the variety in diary content; essentially ‘what’ participants chose to depict. I have chosen to examine this through focusing on different categories of images, since I included a simplified section of my coding frame to categorise photos only which focused on content. The categories of images described here are also a fairly close reflection of accompanying entries. However, more abstract themes which appeared in my wider coding frame (e.g. ‘reflection’, ‘spirituality’ or ‘time’) are not included in this analysis of images. These more abstract themes are picked up in my later findings chapters. The purpose of this section then is to give readers an idea of what Ramadan ‘looked like’ from the perspective of participants and introduce readers to the vast range of activities depicted in diaries.

While my overall coding frame was used to code all diary and interview content – including text, audio and images – a separate ‘IMAGES’ category was made solely to categorise diary photos. Under this I created sub-categories based on my initial reviewing of diaries before interviews, but I also added to these sub-categories as I coded data further, including themes I may have overlooked previously. I often coded images under multiple categories so it is difficult to speak about precise percentages of images depicted under each theme. However, NVivo provided a useful visual representation of the categories (Figure 7) in which the size of each box is proportional to the number of images coded under each theme. From the NVivo data, the ten most common themes in images were:

1. Food
2. Outdoors or nature
3. Miscellaneous
4. Online activities
5. Gifts or charity
6. Children or family
7. Self-portrait
8. Other books (i.e. not Quran)
9. Screenshots (a sub-category of ‘Online activities’)
10. Quran

Other prominent categories included decoration, prayer mats and exercise. From this overview, it is clear that diaries covered a range of topics, from what might be seen as ‘mundane’ activities like going for a walk to more explicitly religious rituals like reading the Quran and prayer. However, even

seemingly mundane activities were often discussed in terms of their religious or spiritual significance. As described above, Asiya reflected on the “beauty of Allah’s creation” as she went for a walk in a rose garden (Asiya, Diary, Entry 9). Images of gifts and charity were often used to explain the Islamic emphasis on generosity during Ramadan especially. Additionally, while food might seem like a generic topic, in Ramadan it was intertwined with the act of fasting highlighting its religious significance. The ‘mundane’ overlapped with the religious and diaries were a useful tool to highlight these everyday expressions of religion. I return to these blurred boundaries between sacred and mundane further in Chapter 6.

The above list also highlights how food was particularly important in Ramadan, and I have dedicated a chapter to the role of food (Chapter 7). The prominence of online activities is also apparent, something I suspect was particularly pronounced because of the lockdown. Images of the outdoors were also popular, again something that seems to be influenced by the pandemic since many indoor locations (shops, workplaces, schools, places of worship) were closed. The prominence of outdoor photos is also however, undoubtedly a result of Ramadan falling in the Spring (or Summer) in 2020 – had this been a winter Ramadan, I suspect the make-up of images would have been different. Family was something participants seemed to value and focus on in Ramadan - generally, particularly in terms of religious education and upbringing towards children – but again, because of the pandemic, participants were much more home-based and spent more time with their families. Several participants mentioned this was something they viewed as a really positive aspect of Ramadan in lockdown (Chapter 5; see also Jones-Ahmed 2022a). This overview of the content of diary images highlights the way in which my data was particular to the context of Ramadan in 2020, but diaries inevitably also shed light on the significance of Ramadan and debates about the holy month more broadly. This included Noor’s discussion of the problems of access to mosques for women in her audio diary (Noor, Diary, Entry 5), as well as William’s complaints (directed largely towards himself) about the excesses of Ramadan eating (William, Diary, Entry 9). Additionally, interviews were especially useful in contextualising the impact of the pandemic and discussing Ramadan’s significance more broadly.

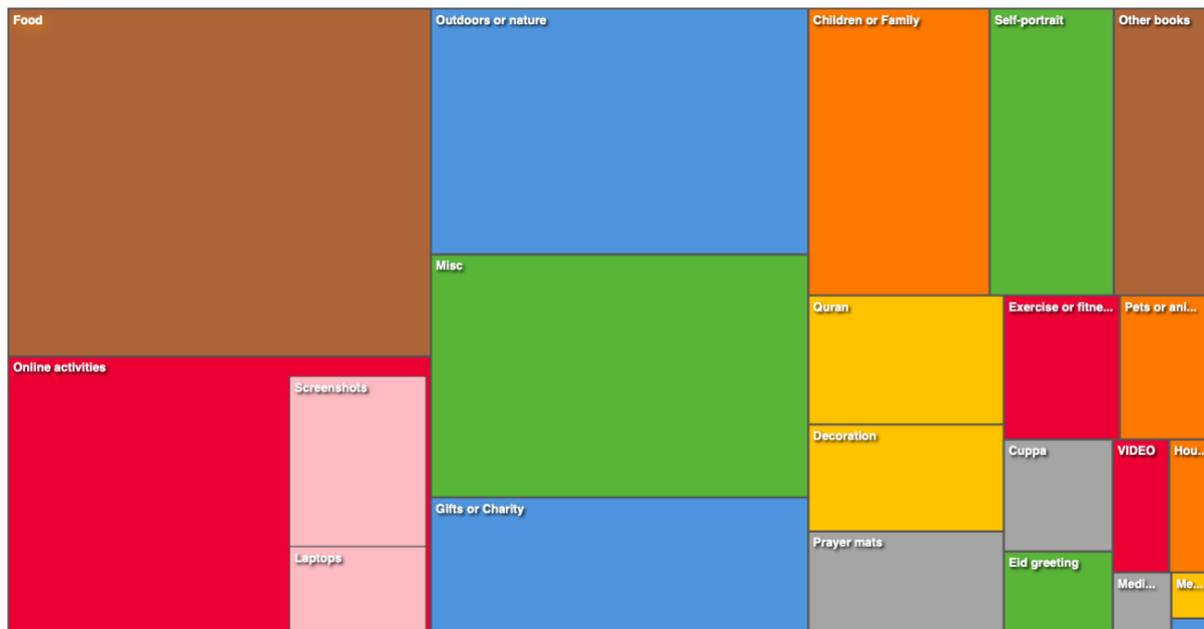


FIGURE 7- ‘TREEMAP’ PRODUCED IN NVIVO DEPICTING DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF DIARY IMAGES RECEIVED. THE SIZE (AREA) OF THE BOX INDICATES THE PROPORTION OF IMAGES CODED UNDER EACH CATEGORY I.E. ‘FOOD’ CONTAINED THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF IMAGES, THEN ‘OUTDOORS OR NATURE’, THEN ‘MISC’ (MISCELLANEOUS I.E. UNABLE TO BE CATEGORISED UNDER OTHER CODES), THEN ‘ONLINE ACTIVITIES’ ETC. THE ‘ONLINE ACTIVITIES’ CATEGORY ALSO CONTAINED THE SUB-CATEGORIES ‘SCREENSHOTS’ AND ‘LAPTOPS’.

4.3 INTERVIEWS

I conducted interviews with a selection of diarists rather than new participants aiming to contextualise diary data (as mentioned in Chapter 3) and explore themes from the diaries in more depth. 22 interviews were conducted in total, 18 via Zoom, 2 via phone, 1 via email and 1 face-to-face (socially distanced). Zoom was offered as the ‘default’ interview format but I gave participants flexibility resulting in two interviewees choosing to speak to me via phone. As explained in the previous chapter, I interviewed one participant via email as she was experiencing anxiety about interviewing on Zoom. I adapted and summarised the interview schedule for this purpose. While this interview yielded less detailed answers than other methods it was nonetheless a useful and valued contribution. A final participant was interviewed face-to-face (socially distanced) as she lived feasibly close to me for this to be possible, and I thought it would provide a useful comparison to online interview methods. It is difficult to draw general comparisons because it was only a single case, but our conversation seemed more relaxed and informal than some others and the discussion often strayed from interview questions more, exploring issues of interest to the participant. Since we were in a public space however (a coffee shop – one of the few meeting spaces available at that point in the pandemic), there was the inevitable problem of background noise when transcribing, something

that was largely eliminated when recording and interviewing on Zoom. Apart from the email interview then, it was difficult to identify any substantial differences between the interview formats.

I did not interview all participants due to time constraints and the fact I had ample data from diaries. Instead, I chose a selection of diarists based on the following loose criteria:

- a. **Level of engagement** – I prioritised for interview participants who had engaged well with the diary process as this suggested, to me, that they would provide rich data in interviews. I typically ruled out those who had given me five or less entries but made exceptions as in the case of Layla discussed below.
- b. **Diversity of participants** - Interviewing a diverse range of participants was important to me. I sought to interview different genders, ages, ethnicities, living situations, and include converts and non-converts to Islam. My spectrum of interviewees broadly reflected the demographics of the full sample of diarists (described above).
- c. **Diversity in diary style** - I interviewed participants who used various diary platforms (including email, WhatsApp and Instagram) as the platform used had an affect the content/style of diaries. In particular, I wanted to know about the more distinctive styles participants had chosen for diaries to gain further methodological and empirical insights.
- d. **Rapport developed**- I felt that a strong rapport between myself and participant would facilitate in-depth discussions during interviews. I based the rapport on the level of disclosure during diaries – did participants talk personally about their life or feelings, for example? – and to what extent myself and participants had conversed in between diary entries (more common for WhatsApp diaries).

As mentioned, these criteria were loose and somewhat subjective and I often included exceptions to these guidelines. I sometimes selected a participant for interview because they raised a particular point or topic I wanted to discuss further (e.g. Sarah's discussion of educating children about Islam during Ramadan). I selected other participants who might be called 'anomalies' since they were in a particularly interesting situation or context (e.g. Mariya, an international student spending Ramadan in the UK away from her son and husband because of lockdown). Another exception was Layla who only sent me two entries and could not continue because of personal struggles during the month. These entries, however, were some of the most reflective and insightful that had been sent to me. I was pleased to have included Layla in the interview process because she highlighted the difficulties of observing Ramadan in lockdown that were not always present among others, difficulties that ultimately meant she was not able to contribute consistently during the diary stage. Without these

'outliers', I may have made assumptions about the data or participants that would have gone unquestioned. This fits in with the idea of "fighting familiarity" where you are familiar with the context (Delamont and Atkinson 1995).

While interview data spanned a range of topics, it was inevitably less diverse than diaries through which participants were given more agency in the research process. In contrast, interviews had an interview schedule that I determined beforehand although the photo elicitation question gave participants more freedom and the semi-structured format meant there was flexibility to explore topics of interest to particular participants. Some of the participants in the previous paragraph prove useful examples of this flexibility and diversity in interview themes. Mariya, for example, took her interview as an opportunity to emphasise that Ramadan is "not about the food" (Mariya, Interview) an idea she repeated and is discussed further in Chapter 7. Sarah described extensively her own struggles with combining motherhood with fulfilling the requirements of Ramadan, and the upbringing of her son more broadly (Sarah, Interview). Layla used her interview to talk through the ways she had come to terms with the changed experience of Ramadan as a result of the lockdown (Layla, Interview). While interviews were more consistent in format than diaries, the content was varied and the method gave participants the opportunity to focus on issues important to them.

5. CONCLUSION

This chapter has sought to provide a contextual overview to support my findings chapters. Section 2 introduced the UK situation amidst the pandemic, how Muslims were responding to this online with reference to Ramadan, as well as media interest in Ramadan 2020. Section 3 gave an overview of participant demographics reflecting on my own positionality. Finally, in Section 4, I introduced readers to the diversity in my data in terms of format and content, especially regarding participant diaries through which participants were given a lot of agency to compile entries to their own specifications. Some emergent themes in my data were highlighted in Section 4.2 which hints towards important themes discussed in the following chapters. Now, I turn to my first findings chapter which discusses individual and communal facets of worship and spirituality, discussions which were somewhat derived from the unusual social context at the time, but nonetheless have broader relevance to understandings and practices related to Ramadan in the UK.

CHAPTER 5 – INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNAL WORSHIP: GETTING TO THE HEART OF RAMADAN

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter will focus on embodied acts of *ibadah* (worship) such as formal prayer (*salah*) and fasting during Ramadan, and will highlight the individual and communal manifestations of these acts. I will further discuss how worship was seen as a way to achieve spirituality during the holy month and how ideas of social and individual spirituality were contested amongst participants. Worship or *ibadah* was a concept emphasised by participants across the board as essential to the experience of Ramadan, something which was intertwined with spirituality. Yet some felt that wider discourses about Muslims “neglected” spiritual aspects, only having a simplistic understanding of the regulations around fasting (Noor, Interview). This is part of my rationale for beginning with this chapter on worship and spirituality, which includes fasting but extends to other important rituals too.

The findings here highlight two important contributions to understanding the concept of spirituality in a contemporary context. Firstly, the acts of worship discussed demonstrate that spirituality is an embodied process, contrasting ideas that it is solely related to less tangible human facets like the mind or the soul (see McGuire 2003). Furthermore, I highlight how individual and communal spirituality fit within a wider framework of ‘organised’ religion, complicating studies asserting the individualisation of spirituality in the modern world (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). As Ammerman (2020, p.31) argues, in response to such studies, “while spirituality is clearly not confined to any given religious organization, neither is it independent of religion”. I suggest that future studies in the sociology of religion should pay closer attention to embodied and communal manifestations of spirituality rather than relying on the idea of spirituality as a personal, individualised phenomenon that is immaterial and cognitive. Researchers should also listen closely to participants’ distinct interpretations of spirituality since, as Ammerman (2020, p.31) argues, “the spiritual qualities of religious practice are both seemingly obvious and difficult to define”.

I begin by outlining some existing research in relation to embodiment and spirituality – two key themes in this chapter. Next, I use three examples of ritual worship in Ramadan – fasting, *salah* and *itikaf* – to demonstrate the individual and communal facets of the embodiment of *ibadah*. I will show the interactions, tensions and contradictions between these two competing dimensions. Finally, I move onto a discussion of spirituality. I explain the link between *ibadah* and spirituality for participants and demonstrate how individual and communal manifestations of spirituality, though sometimes debated, were important in participants’ religious conceptualisations.

2. EXISTING RESEARCH: EMBODIMENT AND SPIRITUALITY

2.1 EMBODIMENT IN STUDIES OF RELIGION

The physical and embodied aspects of religion are perhaps more evident during Ramadan than any other period of the year. As participant Abdullah commented (Chapter 1), Ramadan is associated, in some way, with nearly all the five pillars of Islam which are active expressions of religion. The act of fasting has clear impacts on the body (demonstrated by the dominance of medical literature about the holy month discussed in the Literature Review), and the worship rituals associated with Ramadan – including formal prayer (*salah*) and recitation of the Quran – are embodied in other ways. Thus, understanding the body is integral to understanding Ramadan. In this chapter, I understand embodiment in relation to the bodily aspects of the rituals I outline – fasting, *salah* and *itikaf* - which are all very physical in their manifestation. However, I also describe how this embodiment exists at a communal level, within families, mosque congregations and globally. This links to the idea, drawn from Bourdieu, “that *all* our senses – not just our physical senses, but also our social senses – are all involved in remembering and embodying practices” (McGuire 2003, p.3). Embodiment, as discussed here, and by McGuire (2003), is a physical, social and spiritual process.

Academics have previously called for sociologists of religion to consider embodiment more seriously (McGuire 1990; Mellor and Shilling 1997) arguing that “sociological discussions of culture, belief and ideology [have been] dominated by the Enlightenment belief that the mind has become more important than the flesh. Humans are not disembodied rationalist beings” (Mellor and Shilling 1997, p.5). Since then, however, embodiment has become a popular theme. This is demonstrated by recent books which centre the body in discussions of contemporary and historical religions (Frank et al. 2020; Jones 2019; Malik 2016). As Wuthnow (2020) argues regarding the consideration of bodies in research on religion, “I suggest that treatments of these topics have matured beyond the discussions of a quarter century ago... The lament that could be expressed in those years about the lack of concrete empirical examples...no longer applies” (p.150).

In terms of Islam, embodiment has been applied to various sociological studies. Hoffman (1995) and Khuri (2001) have broadly outlined the role of the body in the Islamic tradition, though with little reference to everyday, empirical perspectives. In one of the earliest empirical studies discussing these ideas, Starrett (1995) examines the embodiment of ritual practices – including *wudu*³⁶ and *salah* – in Egyptian schools arguing away from “a vague discourse of mute embodiment” in studies of Muslims, towards understanding embodiment as a more active, decisive process. More recent

³⁶ Ritual washing/ablution undertaken in preparation for formal prayers (*salah*).

studies have addressed embodiment using empirical examples further. Boyle (2004) draws on examples of Quranic schools from the Middle East and North Africa to explain how the Quran is embodied through memorisation and how one such school embodies social change in its community. In a similar vein, Ware's (2014) ethnographic study of Quran schools in West Africa draws on key themes of embodiment in terms of Quran memorisation, the sharing of food, and other rituals. Additionally, Hardaker and Sabki's work (2015; 2016) discusses the embodiment of the Quran and knowledge in British madrasas, and Sidat's research (2018; 2019) looks at embodying knowledge in contemporary British *Dar ul Uloom*s (Islamic seminaries). From a geographical perspective, Mohammad (2005) discusses the body in terms of the regulation of British Pakistani Muslim women's dress and their movement through different arenas – “transparent” and “opaque” spaces, as Mahmood denotes them. While the aforementioned research foregrounds the bodies of participants, Gilliat-Ray (2010) further argues the need for researchers in Muslim studies, and religious studies more broadly, to address the role of their own bodies in the research process.

While Ramadan is not explored thoroughly in social sciences literature especially in the UK (see Chapter 2), there has been some examination of embodiment with regards to fasting. Winchester (2008) and Oestergaard (2009) both explore the role of embodiment and ritual amongst Muslim converts, referring to fasting during Ramadan in their papers. Winchester (2008) discusses fasting's role as a “spiritual training” for converts in the USA highlighting the link between bodily and moral restraint (pp.1767-1770). Alongside fasting, he also foregrounds the contribution of ritual prayer and hijab-wearing to the construction of a Muslim habitus. While many of Winchester's conclusions could be applied to a broad spectrum of Muslims, Oestergaard (2009) looks more specifically at the role of ritual and embodiment amongst Danish converts. She argues there is a “tendency amongst converts to be attracted to explicit rules and ritualization” – the more explicitly bodily aspects of Islam - and these rituals “function as the means to embody and develop as a Muslim” (p.10). Like Winchester, Oestergaard discusses prayer and dress in her paper, but also highlights the emphasis converts put on avoiding foods deemed unhealthy in Ramadan or breaking the fast with “food that is normally served at Danish feasts” (p.10).

Of those sociological studies more overtly focused on Ramadan, some have highlighted its embodied character. Buitelaar (1993), although not referring explicitly to ‘embodiment’, recognises the bodily aspects of Ramadan in various ways. In her section on “purifying the body” (pp.38-39) she highlights various acts – such as bathing, giving up alcohol and cupping (*hijama*³⁷) – that are done in

³⁷ *Hijama*, a form of cupping, is a process of removing blood from the body in order to bring health benefits. Some Muslims adopt the practice regarding it as recommended by the prophet Muhammad.

preparation for the holy month. Additionally, her book is permeated with discussions of the embodied nature of fasting in terms of its perceived positive impact on health, and foods associated with Ramadan like *hrira* soup which, she argues, “has come to symbolise the ‘Moroccan way’ of fasting” (p.179). While Rytter’s (2016) research on *itikaf* acknowledges embodiment through the author’s focus on food, he takes a different perspective, positioning the body in opposition to religious ideals:

The very idea of *itikaf* is to fight your *nafs*, the lower self, with its unruly desires like the craving for food or for sleep. When the body instinctually demands something, a Saifi³⁸ should ideally do the opposite. This ongoing struggle with the *nafs* is in Sufism referred to as “the Great Jihad” (p.47)

While he discusses food and bodily “desires” in-depth, Rytter seems to argue that his participants sought a more disembodied experience of religion. Evidently, there are elements of Islamic practice and teachings that discourage succumbing to bodily wants, exemplified by the abstinent practice of fasting. However, Rytter’s statement that a group of Muslims should constantly fight the body’s desire for food or sleep comes across as too simplistic and out-of-step with emic understandings of the religion. Rytter’s comment contrasts Buitelaar’s (1993) findings around the emphasis on food in Ramadan, and my own discussion in Chapter 7 which emphasises paradoxical attitudes towards food.

Since Ramadan presents one of the most overt cases of religious embodiment – through alimentary consumption (or lack of it), religious rituals and communal activities – there is further need to investigate the bodily aspects of the occasion. Amongst those who have explored its embodied nature, there is a lack of discussion of embodiment *beyond* fasting. This chapter will address this and shed light on existing discussions of embodiment during the month, as well as demonstrating the wider role of the body in Islamic religious practice. I also contribute to discussions of religion and embodiment more broadly. In particular, I explore the interaction between individual and communal forms of embodied worship and their interaction with spirituality.

2.2 UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUALITY

Alongside embodiment, this chapter focuses on spirituality, a significant concept in participants’ experiences of the holy month, and an idea that was related clearly to bodily practices. McGuire (2003) argues Western understandings of spirituality have failed to acknowledge the importance of the body:

³⁸ Saifis are the particular Sufi group with whom Rytter did his fieldwork.

Western societies, in recent centuries, have tended to view spirituality and materiality as dichotomous, in tidy binary opposition...I argue, to the contrary, that spirituality fully involves people's material bodies, not just their minds or spirits. (p.1)

To provide historical context, McGuire outlines the change in attitudes towards Carnival and Lent following the Reformation (p.6). She asserts that, before this period, the two occasions were "complementary aspects of the ritual year" (p.6) and equally important forms of religious expression. After the Reformation however, the ideas of consumption and aesthetic pleasure linked to Carnival were relegated and deemed sinful or inappropriate in contrast to the abstinence and sombreness of Lent which was perceived as more sacred. This development sat alongside the creation of "the dramatic binary oppositions between spirit and body, as well as between sacred and profane" (p.6). Consequently, McGuire asserts that "there are compelling reasons why today we should not uncritically accept them [binaries between sacred and profane, material and spiritual] in our own definitions of religion and religiosity" (p.7)³⁹. While McGuire writes in the context of Christian spirituality, her arguments certainly have relevance for understanding other religious traditions, particularly Ramadan which has parallels with Lent. Following McGuire's arguments, this chapter foregrounds the role of embodied practices in the spirituality of my participants. This is in-keeping with participants' emic conceptions of spirituality which, according to them, was facilitated by ritual *ibadah* during Ramadan.

Secondly, this chapter explores spirituality as a collective and individual phenomenon. McGuire (2003) again comments on the role of embodiment in "both individual and communal spiritual experience" (p.9) in her paper, but such ideas have been present in earlier sociological understandings of religion too. Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (2001[1912]), discusses how social groups "hold periodic meetings in which their members may renew their common faith by some collective demonstration." (p.157). He argues that more intense and frequent manifestations of such gatherings result in "a general effervescence characteristic of revolutionary or creative epochs" (p.158). These periods of collective "effervescence" - which the translator's introduction likens to "a sort of social electricity" (p.xix) - are integral to the formation of religion according to Durkheim: "It is in these effervescent social settings, and from this very effervescence, that the religious idea seems to be born" (p.164). While I am sceptical of Durkheim's contention that religion is created through such gatherings, his concept of effervescence can be seen as a communal

³⁹ I return to discussions of sacredness in Ramadan in Chapter 6.

spiritual experience. His mention of “passion”, “feelings” and “actions” (p.157) related to religion all tie in with wider understandings of spirituality.

Additionally, Durkheim’s effervescence recognises individual and collective facets of spiritual experience. He gives the example of someone charismatically speaking to a crowd (pp.157-158), describing the “passionate energies” circulating from speaker to group and back again. Durkheim concludes that the speaker “is no longer a simple individual speaking, he is group incarnaté and personified” (p.158). Despite this focus on the power of sociality, Durkheim acknowledges the role of the individual in religious experience also:

For collective force is not wholly external to us; it does not move us entirely from the outside. Indeed, since society can exist only in individual minds and through them, it must penetrate and become organized inside us (p.157)

Thus, Durkheim’s work sheds light on the role of the individual and the collective in terms of spirituality.

Despite this, it has been argued that more recent academic work on spirituality has failed to fully consider its collective manifestations. Ammerman (2020) calls for a more “multidimensional approach” to studying religion which foregrounds practice and considers “actions that are embodied, material, emotional, aesthetic, moral, and narrative, as well as spiritual” (p.33). Amongst her discussion, she highlights that some studies of spirituality have deemed it to be an individual, areligious phenomenon, and that conceptualising it in this way is unhelpful. As the author notes:

As with all other dimensions of practice, patterned cognitive expectations *and* social structures are in play. Spirituality, in some places, is perceived to be a substitute for religion (Heelas and Woodhead 2004), but that either/or framework is not analytically helpful. While spirituality is clearly not confined to any given religious organization, neither is it independent of religion...We are as interested in the spiritual practices inside religious institutions as we are in spiritual practices that claim to be independent and individual. (Ammerman 2020, p. 31, emphasis added)

Ammerman further argues that this focus on individualism is largely found in research on religion in the West which “has been relatively blind to its own cultural particularity” (p.37). She asserts that ideas of individualised religion may be relevant in these specific contexts “where institutional religion is comparatively weak, but it leaves unexplained the religion that takes organized form, as well as the religion that is located in other cultures, nations, and social settings” (pp.10-11). Her arguments can also be extended to literature that discusses the trend towards “believing without belonging” in an

individualised fashion (Davie 1994; 2016). It follows then, that my study of Muslim religious practices will be enhanced by considering both individual and communal dimensions of spirituality and practice, as outlined in this chapter.

Furthermore, I consider the interactions and tensions between these two dimensions throughout this chapter, as advocated by Ammerman's (2020) encouragement for researchers to consider both individual practice *and* wider contexts, to find "a framework for thinking about those structural contexts, a way to link micro and macro analysis" (p.34). I also analyse such tensions as a demonstration of Bauer's theory of "cultural ambiguity" (2021) that I have already introduced in Chapter 2. Now, I move on to discuss my empirical findings more closely, starting with the concept of embodied worship in Ramadan and its individual and communal manifestations.

3. EMBODYING *IBADAH* – COMMUNAL AND INDIVIDUAL

Ibadah – or worship – was one of the most important parts of Ramadan for my participants. It comprised tangible, physical acts including ritual prayers (*salah*), recitation of the Quran, charitable acts – including, but not limited to, donating money – and of course, the fast itself⁴⁰. Ramadan was a time for increasing *ibadah* to seek rewards from God, but worship was also seen to enhance participants' spirituality, another key goal of the occasion. The intensity of worship during Ramadan was unmatched by any other period of the year, particularly during the last ten days of the month, one of which was perceived to be *Laylatul Qadr*⁴¹ (The Night of Power), the most spiritual night of the year.

In this section, I demonstrate how different forms of *ibadah* prominent in Ramadan were embodied at both individual and collective levels. By doing so, I follow Ammerman's (2020, p.34) argument that studies of lived religion should consider individual observance *and* wider contexts. I also build on Durkheim's (2001 [1912]) elaborations on individual and collective facets of spirituality, as outlined in the previous section. I use the examples of fasting, *salah* (formal prayer) and *itikaf* (ritual seclusion) to highlight the importance of individuality and collectivity during the holy month. I further demonstrate how both individual and collective worship were maintained in Ramadan 2020 despite the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown. This signifies the importance of these acts, particularly the

⁴⁰ While such rituals were considered the primary forms of worship in Ramadan, *ibadah* was also seen to include more 'mundane' tasks too. This is explored in Chapter 6 (Section 6.2) in reference to motherhood and domestic duties.

⁴¹ The significance and understanding of *Laylatul Qadr* will be discussed further in the section on *Itikaf*, and in Chapter 6 in relation to sacredness.

communal rituals which were especially impacted by the limits on in-person gatherings. In the case of *itikaf*, I suggest the ritual is paradoxical in being both a reclusive and communal act linking to Bauer's (2021) theory of cultural ambiguity.

It is important to note that many practices associated with Ramadan in my study, including social and family activities which were less overtly seen as *ibadah*, were individually and collectively embodied⁴². While I still consider these religious practices, I have chosen to explore three worship rituals here because of the significance placed on Ramadan *ibadah* by my participants. While Salamandra (2004), who looks at media consumption in Ramadan, argues anthropological studies of Ramadan have over-emphasised the role of "religious precepts, as if the month held only deep religious significance for all its participants" (p.94), my focus on *ibadah* follows the emic understandings of my respondents. As Maymoona's comment suggested (Chapter 3), she appreciated the 'religious' focus of my research, seeing it as an opportunity "to get real Muslims, real people who practice the faith as best as they can" as opposed to people she saw featured in media articles who did not always represent the religion appropriately (Maymoona, Interview). A similar sentiment was expressed by other participants, as highlighted throughout Chapter 1. Before discussing these worship rituals in depth, I will contextualise their relevance by outlining the position of *ibadah* during the holy month.

3.1 THE PLACE OF *IBADAH* IN RAMADAN

Ramadan, according to my participants, was a month of *ibadah*. It was a time when blessings and rewards from God were increased and thus participants sought to 'make the most' of this period by worshipping God more. As Hamida explained, "It's like you've got a lottery ticket and you need to take the most amount you can from it" (Hamida, Interview). Many respondents set targets to fulfil during the month, such as reading a certain amount of Quran or completing their daily prayers on time. Children were encouraged to join the Ramadan goal-setting too (Figure 8). *Ibadah* took many forms including observance of key Islamic rituals such as fasting, reciting the Quran, *salah* (formal prayer), *dhikr* (remembrance of God) and *sadaqah* (charitable acts or donating money). Alongside these, Islamic learning – educating oneself about Islamic topics through reading, watching Islamic lectures or attending classes – and cognitive reflection were also considered part of worship.

As will be demonstrated, *ibadah* encompassed individual, private practices and collective acts, and sometimes displayed both of these facets. It is important to note that the fieldwork focused on

⁴² McGuire (2003) argues that domestic acts, for example, have been unjustly relegated from the sphere of 'religion' in contemporary understandings.

Ramadan 2020 during which the UK was under lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant places of worship were closed, meeting with people outside one's household was prohibited and consequently many of the communal gatherings associated with Ramadan did not happen. While the practices of Ramadan 2020 differed from a more typical Ramadan however, many communal acts were maintained in different ways. I argue that this highlights the importance of communality during Ramadan which is also linked to a Durkheimian sense of "effervescence" (2001 [1912]). Below, I discuss the performance of fasting, *salah* and *itikaf* during Ramadan 2020, and in the context of more 'typical' Ramadans, as explored by participants. I have chosen these rituals as they are some of the most important rituals associated with the month and are embodied in clear ways. The fast has clear impacts on the body through the modification of diet, the actions associated with *salah* have a distinct physicality individually and collectively, and *itikaf* represents a physical and spiritual retreat from worldly concerns.

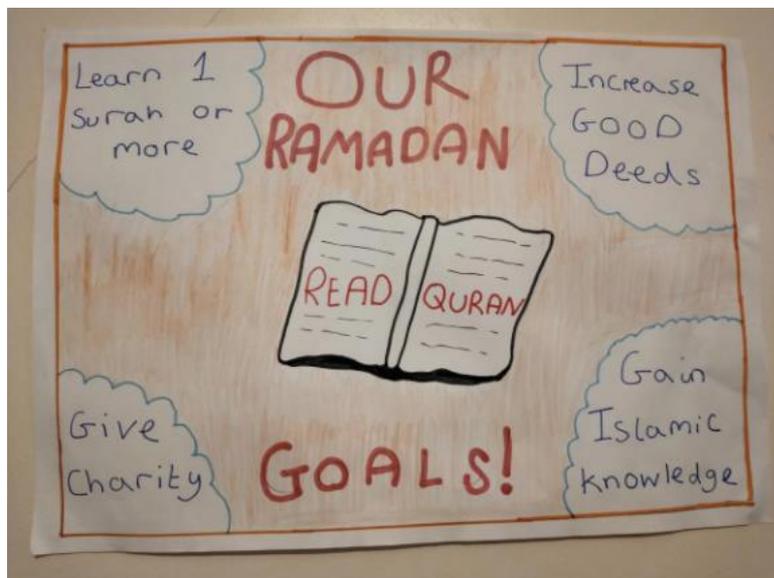


FIGURE 8- POSTER MADE BY PARTICIPANT SYEDA'S CHILDREN DEPICTING THEIR RAMADAN GOALS (SYEDA, DIARY, ENTRY 24)

3.2 FASTING

Fasting is the act of worship that distinguishes Ramadan from the rest of the Islamic year, and although fasting is possible at other times, the ritual becomes obligatory in Ramadan. Fasting is an individual act which requires self-discipline and encourages self-development, as noted by several participants. It is also classed as an individual obligation (*fard 'ayn*) as opposed to a communal responsibility (*fard kifayah*) in Islamic jurisprudence. Participant Sarah noted her own struggles with fasting in the face of illness and looking after a young child (Sarah, Interview) further highlighting the personalised nature and implications of the act. Many participants commented in their diaries on the physical effects of fasting – thirst, hunger, headaches, exhaustion – which were personally

experienced and embodied during the month. While participants expressed that these sensations were difficult – and Jennifer even commented that “I fall into a common Muslim pattern of pretending it *isn't* hardship” (Jennifer, Interview, emphasis in speech) - they were regarded as spiritually beneficial. Sabrina’s reflections in her diary highlight this:

When the body and its demands are locked up. The body will be silenced and we will not run after its desires, and our day is not spent on what we want to feed and drink. When the body becomes silent, it becomes trapped, so the soul begins to look for food. (Sabrina, Diary, Entry 5)

The temporal specificity of Ramadan however, transforms this solitary act of abstinence into a communal one by bringing Muslims together in fasting simultaneously. As Buitelaar (1993) highlighted in her ethnography of Ramadan in Morocco, fasting is a way of “linking Muslims everywhere in the world in a joint action of alternately fasting and feasting” (p.178).

Participants in the current study reflected on these communal elements of the fast. As Jennifer stated, “I have always envied people in Muslim countries where everyone together is joining that experience” continuing to explain that there was something “powerful” about the fact that Muslims in those contexts were not allowed to eat in public (Jennifer, Interview). Even in the UK, the communality of fasting was highlighted. George, for example, emphasised the loss of this collectivity in 2020:

I did find it very, very lonely because my wife wasn't doing Ramadan because she was breastfeeding, so that just meant that it was just me in the house doing it. She would be very encouraging which was nice. But, you know, I felt sad not being able to go out for iftar with people (George, Interview)

George’s statement highlights how fasting is embodied at different levels; as an individual, in his immediate household, and amongst the wider community, although he missed out on the latter two in Ramadan 2020. This loss had a negative emotional impact on George suggesting the communality of fasting leads to heightened emotions reflective of Durkheim’s concept of “effervescence” (2001 [1912]). Jennifer’s comment about how “powerful” collective fasting is in Muslim countries also points to the symbolic role of the ritual, which links to Cohen’s (1985) idea that symbols are vital in the construction of communities. These comments suggest then that the embodied, communal nature of fasting is important in community solidarity.

3.2.1 THE “COMMUNITY OF FOOD”

While fasting is defined by abstention from food, alimentary practices cannot be divorced from the ritual, as highlighted by the emphasis on food that will be described in Chapter 7. Many of these food-related activities further demonstrate the communal nature of embodiment during the holy month. *Iftar*, as described by participants, was typically a time for families, friends or mosque congregations to eat together, something that would not always happen during the rest of the year. While this did not always happen in the same way during lockdown, *iftar* was still often a family affair, unless participants lived by themselves. Participants valued these opportunities to eat in communion. Commenting on eating with her family in Ramadan, Deena said she “wouldn’t change it for the world” (Deena, Diary, Day 4), and Layla, who was still working during Ramadan 2020, adjusted her work schedule around *iftar* time because “life is better than having *iftar* on a train by yourself. It's bigger than that” (Layla, Interview). Thus, eating in communion was a key form of bodily collectiveness during the month.

Alongside eating together, sharing food is another ritual that signifies the communal embodiment of fasting. As will be discussed in Chapter 7, nearly all participants recounted instances of sharing food with others in their diaries. They highlighted the act’s poignance in Ramadan when one should “make sure that your neighbour is not starving before you feed yourself” (George, Diary, Day 14). It also seemed that, in Ramadan 2020, the act of sharing food helped to take the place of the communal *iftars* that were not possible due to restrictions on physical gatherings. Zahra hinted at this as follows:

This year specifically, that [sharing food] was the only way that we connected with the neighbours. Because in Ramadan like everyone comes together but obviously we couldn't do that with lockdown. But by sharing food, it was really nice. (Zahra, Interview)

Zahra made the above comment while describing her diary entry which included an image of food packs her family had prepared for neighbours (Figure 9). In her entry, she also reflected on maintaining a sense of community during the lockdown. Zahra’s statements highlight the key role of food in maintaining communal solidarity during the month, reflecting George’s reference to “the community of food” which he saw as an important part of Ramadan (George, Interview). The way in which the practice of sharing food was maintained despite the lockdown – and not (largely) substituted for virtual alternatives - further emphasises the importance of such embodied communal acts during the month.



FIGURE 9- FOOD PLATTER GIVEN OUT TO NEIGHBOURS BY ZAHRA AND HER FAMILY (ZAHRA, DIARY IMAGE 1)

3.2.2 REMEMBERING THE POOR

Finally, the contested nature of the purpose of fasting amongst participants further sheds light on individual and communal aspects of the practice. Many mentioned the role of fasting in helping them understand the experience of poor people, with George describing the development of “empathy” (George, Interview), and Sabrina expressing that in Ramadan, “you must learn how poor people live” (Sabrina, Interview). The actions of participants also reflected this idea, with several participating in charitable, often food-related, campaigns (see Chapter 7). Yusuf’s diary, for example, focused almost entirely on his involvement in local foodbanks and other charitable services. The idea that fasting helps Muslims relate to the plight of others around the world demonstrates another aspect of the communal embodiment of the fast, linking to Buitelaar’s (1993) argument that fasting in Ramadan “unifies the Islamic community” or *umma*⁴³ across the world (p.178).

Some respondents, however, questioned whether fasting really helped them resonate with people in need. Many of these critiques revolved around the idea that participants did not feel the same hunger experienced by those in poverty, because of the abundance of food available at *iftar*. Rayyan noted on this topic that “Ramadan has always felt like feast. Ramadan has never felt like famine. Never” (Rayyan, Interview). Others argued there were superior purposes to fasting in

⁴³ Meaning “community” and usually referring to ideas of a global Muslim community.

Ramadan that involved improving one's own spirituality, relationship with God, and "*taqwa*"⁴⁴ (Hamida, Interview). Sarah strongly disagreed that Ramadan was about "solidarity" with poor people, stating the following:

I really, really disagree with that. I think you fast out of gratefulness and, um, to get to a higher spiritual plane. Like, when you stop feeding your body, you're feeding the soul, and it has more space. (Sarah, Interview)

Sarah's comments suggest that, for her, the impact of fasting on her personal, spiritual development is more important than notions of communal solidarity. Additionally, her statement highlights how a physical, embodied practice of abstention can have spiritual implications, an idea that will be discussed further in Section 4.

The contested role of fasting amongst participants then, highlights further how the practice is embodied both as an individual and as a community, and raises some tensions between these two facets. As I describe in upcoming chapters, such tensions also point towards Bauer's discussion of cultural ambiguity (2021). Muslims in my study variably and contentiously felt that fasting was about solidarity with others and *not* about solidarity with others, it was about the self *and* it was about others, highlighting the practice's ambiguous purpose.

3.3 SALAH

Alongside fasting, *salah* is one of the most prominent forms of *ibadah* during Ramadan. The performance of *taraweeh* prayer, for example, is unique to the month, with mosques across the world holding this extended prayer every night. The imam⁴⁵ (or imams) of a particular mosque will often aim to complete a recitation of the whole Quran during the month-long performance of *taraweeh*. On a more personal level, Muslims in my study told me they put more effort into performing *salah* regularly and on time during the holy month, and tried to increase the amount of non-obligatory prayers they did, highlighting the emphasis placed on this ritual by participants. This was the case both within and outside lockdown. *Salah* is a clearly individually embodied practice, through the physical movements and often audible recitation involved, but is also embodied at a congregational and even global level, as will be discussed in this section. The fact that *salah* can be conducted individually or in congregation

⁴⁴ Islamic term meaning God-consciousness or awareness of God. Achieving *taqwa* is described in the Quran as one of the goals of fasting (2:183, Saheeh International).

⁴⁵ The imam is the person appointed to lead the *salah*. While it is a term often applied to a religious leader or scholar associated with a mosque, others who do not have an extensive Islamic education can be appointed the imam for a particular prayer (in the mosque, at home, or elsewhere).

is also demonstrative of its individual and communal embodiment following the other rituals in this chapter.

3.3.1 PRAYING IN CONGREGATION

While *salah* can be conducted by oneself, congregational prayers are particularly emphasised in Ramadan. Muslims often make efforts to attend the mosque more frequently during the occasion – a habit conveyed by several participants – and the nightly *taraweeh* prayer is one of the most significant communal acts that is distinct to the month. While prayer in the mosque was not possible during my fieldwork because of the pandemic, the phenomenon of praying congregationally with family was very common, as displayed in several diaries (Figure 10) and discussed further in my journal article (Jones-Ahmed 2022a). Some families prayed *taraweeh* in congregation and others prayed the five daily prayers together also. This family *salah* seemed to be something participants had implemented with the commencement of Ramadan, resulting from their unusual circumstances in lockdown. This highlights the important place of communal prayer in the embodied experience of the holy month.

The practice of praying together as a family was valued highly by participants. Hasina, during interview, stated it was one of “the most positive things” of Ramadan 2020 (Hasina, Interview), and Leena similarly described it as one of the best parts of her Ramadan:

My eldest one, we said to him, right, you're going to be the, the imam, you're going to be leading us throughout Ramadan. And we started sort of enjoying that *jama'ah*⁴⁶ that we had as a family together and taking that time to pray together for that extent of time *hugely* - I mean, we loved it. After a while it was like, right, let's do this even normally sometimes, you know, even outside of Ramadan, when we go back to normal Ramadans, let's take some nights out that we just say right, forget everything, we're just going to pray together as a family. (Leena, Interview)

Leena's comments also hint that the lockdown may have inspired a new religious practice in her household – though one that was entirely feasible outside lockdown – that could continue when things returned to “normal”⁴⁷. While congregational family prayers are nothing radical in terms of Islamic practice, they seemed to be a formerly uncommon act which was encouraged by the unusual circumstances. The way prayers were adapted in 2020, and the value placed on this novel practice by

⁴⁶ Congregation or congregational prayer.

⁴⁷ It is not clear whether this practice did continue after lockdown, but further research could examine such long-term effects of the pandemic.

participants, highlights the importance of communal worship to the experience of Ramadan. This is echoed by Sulaiman's comments that the performance of communal prayers transformed the space of his home so that "our house actually felt like a masjid...There was a presence. Like you came into our house, you'd actually feel that this is a Muslim household where you'd feel Ramadan. You'd actually feel it" (Sulaiman, Interview). Sulaiman's explanation suggests the embodiment of collective prayers was not limited to the bodies performing the act but spread to the surrounding space and enabled it to also embody a sense of Ramadan. This again resembles Durkheim's (2001 [1912]) discussion of the "passionate energies" (p.158) that reverberate around effervescent religious gatherings.

While male and female participants enjoyed the enactment of prayers as a family, it seemed particularly appreciated by women. On this point, Hasina noted "if it's not lockdown, my husband and my son would sometimes go to the mosque, right? For *taraweeh*, for *maghrib*⁴⁸, but in this Ramadan, we have to do it together" (Hasina, Interview). Hasina suggests there is a gendered appreciation of the ability to pray in congregation since, as a mother of young children, she was sometimes left to pray individually whilst other family members attended the mosque. Jennifer also highlights this disparity, noting that before she had children, she "was able to have Ramadan like men do. In terms of just being really quite selfish and doing my own spiritual- this is *my* Ramadan". She mentions that she could "go to the mosque every night" because she didn't have caring responsibilities (Jennifer, Interview). These comments highlight how the lockdown enabled Muslim mothers to experience a communal practice of Ramadan that normally would not be accessible to them.

⁴⁸ Prayer at sunset, before *iftar* (breaking the fast).



FIGURE 10- COMPILATION OF IMAGES SENT BY DIFFERENT PARTICIPANTS SHOWING OR SYMBOLISING CONGREGATIONAL FAMILY PRAYERS

3.3.2 PERSONAL DIMENSIONS OF PRAYER

While communal prayers were pronounced in Ramadan, there were individual dimensions to the practice also. For many participants, Ramadan was a time to improve their performance of *salah* and set defined goals on how to achieve this. Shaheeda, for example, used her diary as a way to monitor and evaluate her Ramadan goals which included trying to pray her *salah* on time. Other participants highlighted how *salah* helped develop their personal connection with God. While several participants missed praying in the mosque, and for some, this had a drastic impact on their experience of Ramadan 2020, Noor emphasises below the relationship between prayer and her individual spirituality:

I think *taraweeh* at home carries its own beauty, its own wondrous seclusion, because it's just you and God; no one else. When you have an imam, who's leading you, leading you onwards, upwards, he's building a foundation on which you can climb. But there's something special about just having your own connection with Allah (Noor, Diary [Audio], Day 5)

While her comments should be interpreted in a context where Muslims were prevented from praying together in mosques (i.e. lockdown), Noor nonetheless highlights the personal dimensions and embodiment of *salah*. Noor's opinions also echo findings of survey-based research of Muslim women (Piela and Krotofil 2021) where the authors highlight how the lockdown encouraged participants to recognise the value of solitude in terms of religious practice, including prayer (pp.7-9).

Furthermore, several participants in my study documented their creation of “Ramadan corners” in their diaries (Figure 11). These were decorated spaces in homes set aside for worship, predominantly individual acts of *ibadah*. They included various worship items such as Qurans, other Islamic books, *tasbeeh* (prayer beads), and prayer mats. These spaces again highlight the importance of individual embodiment in the context of *salah* since they were often used for the daily prayers, and particularly prayers at night. Sarah notes how the sensory elements of her corner were intended to enhance her personal performance of prayer:

I don’t really like praying but maybe the scent will engrave a feeling of spiritual contentment in my brain somehow. Scents are strong memory makers (Sarah, Diary, Entry 2)

These comments also link with McGuire’s (2003) discussion of the embodied nature of memory and spirituality, and her statement that “some sociologists have described religion as a community of memory” (p.4).

It was interesting also to see that these corners were largely created by female participants. It seems they represent another gendered aspect of the experience of Ramadan, since these women would not always have access to the communal worship in mosques enjoyed by their male counterparts (see Jennifer and Hasina’s comments in Section 3.3.1). Thus, these corners can be seen as a way to recreate a sacred space reminiscent of the mosque in private homes, and were particularly important in 2020 due to the closure of places of worship across the country.

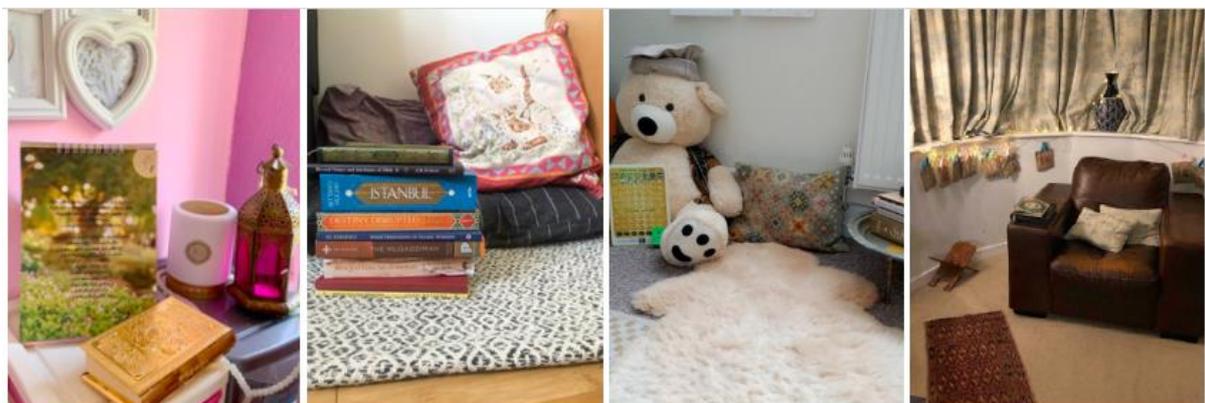


FIGURE 11- COMPILATION OF IMAGES DEPICTING THE ‘RAMADAN CORNERS’ CREATED BY VARIOUS PARTICIPANTS

3.3.3 GLOBAL EMBODIMENT

I have highlighted the ways in which *salah* is embodied at a personal and congregational level in the month of Ramadan. However, there is a wider form of embodiment which applies whether the prayer is performed individually or in *jama’ah* (congregation). Abdul-Azim Ahmed (2016) elaborates

on this in his ethnography of a British mosque. He focuses particularly on the act of turning towards the *qibla* (the direction of Makkah, which Muslims face for *salah*) demonstrating this as a ritual which “forms a global connection” with other Muslims around the world (p.113). He highlights how, through this spatial and bodily orientation, “the mosques and worshippers within them form concentric circles across the globe all centred on the Kaaba in Makkah” (p.113; see Figure 12). This can be seen as a form of global, communal embodiment of the *salah* that applies both during individual and communal enactment of the ritual. Buitelaar (1993) echoes Ahmed’s argument and also asserts that domestic spaces be included in this global embodiment of *salah* which links to the Islamic notion of the *umma*. She writes, “like the men who pray in the mosques, women who perform the *salât*⁴⁹ at home do so facing Mecca, the geographical centre of the *umma*” (p.95). Adding to this idea of communal embodiment, Ahmed highlights how the “universal nature” of the *salah* means Muslims can travel to other contexts and still understand and participate in the ritual there (p.114) resembling Ammerman’s (2020) discussion of the universal and localised facets Muslim prayers, and her encouragement for researchers to think about the “structural contexts” of religion (pp.33-34). Thus, the shared nature of the embodied aspects of *salah* – actions, speech and orientation – are another way in which the practice is embodied at a communal and global level.

While participants in my study largely discussed the sense of community associated with *salah* in terms of mosque contexts or immediate family, there was an acknowledgement of a wider level of embodiment too. Mehmooda, who lived in an area with a high Muslim population, reflected on how the ebb and flow of congregants to the five daily prayers were, in normal Ramadans, a way for the wider community of the city to recognise the holy month had begun (Mehmooda, Interview). Speaking at a more global level, Lucy remarked the following:

Now it is the first of the last ten nights of Ramadan...There is a sense of urgency now as we hope to find ourselves awake and praying on the night of *Laylatul Qadr*. I use the plural pronoun because whilst I am alone, at the same time there is a sense of community and connected hearts and intentions as all Muslims seek this special night (Lucy, Diary, Entry 14)

Lucy acknowledges here the idea of the global embodiment of *salah* that was particularly poignant during the last ten nights of Ramadan. Once again, these ideas feed into Durkheim’s (2001 [1912]) theory of collective “effervescence”, though rather than simply functioning at a local level, as Lucy suggests, this effervescence works at a global level too. Lucy points towards the complex nature of this embodiment highlighting how she was simultaneously “alone” and together with a wider

⁴⁹ Alternative spelling of *salah*.

“community”. This paradoxical aspect of the individual and communal embodiment of *salah* is aptly summarised by Sulaiman, who described himself, while praying alone at home, as “isolated, connected and engaged in prayer” (Diary, Day 24). These discussions once again highlight the individual and communal dimensions of *salah* which work at personal, local and global levels.

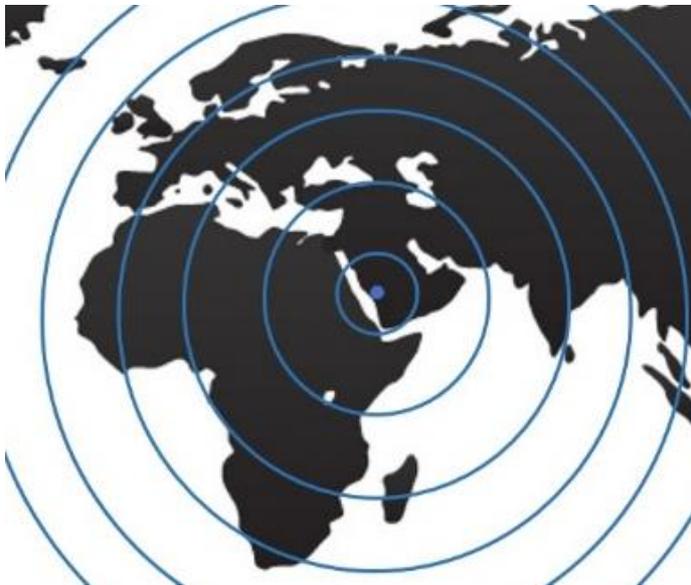


FIGURE 12- A DEPICTION OF THE “CONCENTRIC CIRCLES” CREATED BY MUSLIMS GLOBALLY AS THEY ALIGN THEMSELVES TOWARDS THE QIBLA FOR SALAH; REPRODUCED FROM A. AHMED (2016, P.113)

3.4 *ITIKAF*

The final ritual discussed in this section is *itikaf*, or ritual seclusion. *Itikaf* is a practice associated predominantly with Ramadan and is undertaken mostly during the last ten days of the month. It is an important practice for understanding Ramadan and Islam more broadly since the final ten days of the month are seen as the climax of Ramadan and the highpoint of the Islamic year (see Chapter 6). According to Iffat these days were “the most magical and spiritual times of the year” (Iffat, Diary, Entry 22). While none of my participants undertook *itikaf* in 2020, likely because it usually happens within mosques which were closed, participants who had undertaken the practice previously remarked on the strong emotional and spiritual impact of the ritual. James described how he “felt absolutely heartbroken” that his planned *itikaf* was cancelled after he was called into work, adding that the practice “would have been such a spiritual peak” (James, Interview). Hamida and Rayyan felt that the Ramadans where they had done *itikaf* were some of their best experiences of the month. This highlights the poignance of *itikaf* for my participants and links to the way it has been described as a “transformative ritual” (pp.44-45) in a Masters dissertation on the topic (Zahid 2021).

Itikaf is a period of seclusion or retreat, both spiritually and physically, during which Muslims try to detach themselves from worldly concerns by spending time in a mosque, other religious institute

such as a *khanqah*⁵⁰ (Rytter 2016), or, for women, a room in their home. Time in *itikaf* is dedicated to the main forms of *ibadah*; participants particularly highlighted the importance of *salah*, Islamic learning and reciting the Quran during this period. As Lucy mentions in the quote above (Section 3.3.3), this increased *ibadah* is a way to “seek” *Laylatul Qadr* (The Night of Power), the night in which the Quran was first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. This night, according to the Quran, is “better than a thousand months” (97:3, Saheeh International), or as Abdullah denoted it “the night of a thousand nights” (Abdullah, Diary, Entry 1) owing to the increased spiritual rewards available from God, although its precise date is debated. For those in *itikaf* then, *ibadah* is prioritised, and other, more ‘worldly’ pursuits are avoided as much as possible. For example, food is generally provided for *mutakifs* (people in *itikaf*) by others who are not secluding. This focus on *ibadah* and the spatial relocation of worshippers during *itikaf* highlight the embodied nature of the practice.

It is clear, from the reclusive nature of the ritual, to see how *itikaf* functions as an individually embodied worship practice. However, this idea is complicated by the fact that the seclusion often takes place in a communal setting (a mosque). Participants also highlighted the communal aspects of the period as some of their most memorable moments of previous Ramadans. Hamida recounts the significant impact left by an *itikaf* halaqa she attended (Hamida, Interview), and Sulaiman describes how the structured *itikaf* programme – consisting of *halaqas* (Islamic study circles), prayers and other group activities – in his local mosque was a “transformative experience” for himself and his friends (Interview) linking to Zahid’s (2021) ideas. Zahid also describes *itikaf* as “nested in concentric layers of social activity” – including the *mutakifs*, congregants and imams in his accompanying depiction - despite the fact that “the very particular times and place in which ‘Itikaf takes place may suggest a constricted, isolated ritual” (pp. 47-48).

Itikaf then, like the other rituals described here, becomes an example of the paradoxical nature of embodied worship, perhaps more so than fasting or *salah*. *Itikaf* is aimed towards seclusion and retreat from worldly matters, but it is also a communal, social experience. Even if *mutakifs* seclude individually in their homes, as is often the case when women undertake the practice, the temporal bounds of the practice mean that they are united with other *mutakifs* all seeking the rewards of the last ten days of Ramadan, particularly *Laylatul Qadr*, the most blessed night of the year. This echoes Lucy’s comment made during the last ten days that, “whilst I am alone, at the same time there is a sense of community and connected hearts and intentions as all Muslims seek this special night” (Lucy, Diary, Entry 14). It also links to Buitelaar’s (1993) argument that *umma* – the global Muslim community

⁵⁰ Sufi lodge.

– is a key aspect of Ramadan. Like prayer, and even fasting then, *itikaf* is an embodied practice that has both individual and communal dimensions. I would argue that it is a ritual that encapsulates Bauer’s concept of cultural ambiguity (2021) in that competing ideas of social isolation and social communion exist together simultaneously.

4. SPIRITUALITY IN RAMADAN

4.1 LINKING SPIRITUALITY AND *IBADAH*

I have described above how *ibadah* is essential to the experience of Ramadan, and how such rituals are enacted, sometimes paradoxically, in individual and communal ways. But how do these physical acts link to spirituality during the holy month? And how does this contribute to McGuire’s (2003) argument that “spirituality fully involves people’s material bodies, not just their minds or spirits” (p.1)? When I asked participants about the most important things about Ramadan for them, answers commonly related to “spirituality” and connection with God. As George responded, “I think for me it’s about, first of all, spirituality. So it’s a time when I feel I’m a lot more spiritual and I try and kind of, connect to Allah much more” (George, Interview).

These discussions of spirituality and metaphysical ideas, however, were almost always linked to tangible actions and *ibadah* like those discussed above. Hamida, for example, after mentioning the spiritual development inherent in Ramadan, described her efforts to increase her “*nawafil*⁵¹ prayers”, recite more Quran and read other Islamic books like the *seerah*⁵² (Hamida, Interview). James also narrates the following while discussing fasting and other acts of *ibadah*:

I just think it’s [fasting/Ramadan] a good exercise, really, in terms of- there's enough stuff dragging you away from spirituality, this is definitely something to bring you to spirituality, you know? Annoyingly, I don't read the Quran every day, you know, I should do that. I don't do *tahajjud*⁵³ every day, you know, I try to. The intention is there. But certainly, in Ramazan I make a real effort, and I go all out (James, Interview)

James, like other participants, highlights here how *ibadah* – such as fasting, reciting Quran and praying - was seen as a vehicle to achieve spirituality. For him and others, increasing *ibadah* in Ramadan and going “all out” was linked to an increased sense of spirituality. In the excerpt above, James moves quite naturally, and without explanation, between talking about spirituality to discussing embodied

⁵¹ Referring to optional prayers, outside the five daily obligatory prayers.

⁵² Biography of the Prophet Muhammad.

⁵³ Optional prayers done before dawn, a time of particular religious merit and blessings.

ritual practice. His lack of distinction between these concepts troubles the contemporary binaries that separate spirituality and materiality, as discussed by McGuire (2003).

The embodied *ibadah* undertaken by participants in Ramadan then, had spiritual consequences. The spirituality central to Ramadan does, in McGuire's words, "fully involve people's material bodies" (2003, p.1). Spirituality was a bodily process as much as a metaphysical one, and, as demonstrated above, it was embodied in both individual and collective ways. Particularly in terms of the collective elements of *ibadah*, it is clear how the month of Ramadan can be seen as an example of Durkheim's (2001[1912]) "effervescence". Participants also, however, discussed and debated the individual and communal aspects of spirituality more explicitly, discussions which were almost certainly stimulated by their situation in the lockdown. These discussions will be elaborated below.

4.2 SPIRITUALITY AS COLLECTIVE OR INDIVIDUAL

While I have suggested spirituality was both an individual and communal phenomenon, participants discussed and debated whether spirituality was best cultivated in isolation or with other people. These debates were almost certainly stimulated by their unusual situation of experiencing Ramadan - a normally very social period – in the context of severe limitations on sociality. I argue here that both communal *and* personal facets of spirituality are important from the perspective of my Muslim participants despite debates surrounding them. While it was important to develop one's own sense of spirituality and connection with God, participants, on the whole, recognised the importance of community and congregation in cultivating that spirituality too. This spirituality, even from an individual perspective, was situated in a clearly religious framework, echoing Ammerman's emphasis that researchers should be "as interested in spiritual practices inside religious institutions as we are in spiritual practices that claim to be independent and individual" (Ammerman 2020, p. 31).

4.2.1 SPIRITUALITY IN COMMUNITY

The loss of a physical religious gatherings during Ramadan in lockdown emphasised the importance of community for the spirituality of participants. Several expressed how this situation had a negative impact on them, particularly their spirituality. Amin, for instance, who moved from his hometown a few years ago, described how he would normally return there for the last ten days of Ramadan to attend the mosque and sometimes do *itikaf*. He said the mosque was "where I find that real, deep level of spirituality" adding that, in 2020 "I found it difficult to attain that at times because I didn't have that community aspect" (Amin, Interview). His additional mention of the seclusive yet social practice of *itikaf* (Amin, Interview; see Section 3.4) suggests that both isolation and sociality – sometimes simultaneously – were important aspects of participants' spirituality.

Rayyan further elaborates on the social aspect of spirituality below. On asking her what the most important part of Ramadan is, she responded:

For me, it's the spirituality definitely. And I really did feel a lack of it this year. So in the past, we would go *taraweeh* prayers. Sometimes we go as a family, so I really missed that... I didn't necessarily miss the socialisation side of it. But I really missed the spiritual side of it. (Rayyan, Interview)

She went on to describe other activities like “*zikr* circles⁵⁴” and Quran recitation groups that she attended in a typical Ramadan too. Rayyan delineates different facets of this communal activity – there was a social side and a spiritual side – and the spiritual side was more valued by her, at least in Ramadan. For Rayyan, ‘socialising’ with others was of little importance, but the spirituality of being in communion and worshipping together with fellow Muslims was prized and appreciated. This emphasises the embodied communal nature of such religious practices, and links to Durkheim’s (2001[1912]) idea of the importance of effervescent religious gatherings.

While Rayyan herself does not prioritise the so-called ‘social’ element of these religious activities, such rituals would be understood as social practices from a broader academic perspective. The way in which bodies and practices are central to participants’ spirituality blurs the boundaries of existing dichotomies between materiality and spirituality. These are binaries which have been constructed, according to McGuire (2003), as a result of Christian post-Reformation thinking. The material, embodied aspects of spirituality displayed here supports McGuire’s argument that researchers “should not uncritically accept” such binaries and instead examine practices which link “people’s spiritual lives with their mundane material lives” (2003, p.7). They further suggest that social research on contemporary Muslims should not rely on existing binaries which have emerged in the context of modernity, a theme through other areas of this thesis which I return to in my Discussion (Chapter 8).

4.2.2 SPIRITUALITY IN ISOLATION

Alongside the emphasis on community for maintaining one’s spirituality, participants valued the isolation arising from the lockdown expressing that it facilitated their connection with God. Sulaiman, for example, described it as “a very, very personal Ramadan... And I think that is what made this Ramadan one of my best Ramadans. I found it was one-to-one with the Creator” (Sulaiman, Interview). Several respondents noted how the lack of routine and reduced interactions with others

⁵⁴ A *zikr* or *dhikr* circle is a communal gathering where attendees recite words in praise of Allah or the Prophet Muhammad.

gave them more opportunities for personal reflection which added to the spirituality of the month. Sarah described a mechanism by which the absence of social interactions facilitated a connection with God, saying “it forces you to think more about your relationship with Allah instead of the horizontal relationships with people” (Sarah, Interview). For many, these ideas of spirituality in isolation were not incompatible with communal spirituality. Sulaiman, as mentioned above, found great value in praying together with his family at home, an act which brought “a presence” to the house “where you’d feel Ramadan” (Sulaiman, Interview).

Some participants, however, questioned the idea that one’s religious fervour should rely on others. This is summarised by Noor below:

Obviously we couldn't really go to the mosque for *taraweeh* or anything [in 2020] but I feel like- again, if your sense of religious identity is shaped by like, social things or like your Ramadan traditions and stuff, when those things are taken away, then you're going to feel an impact. But if your sense of Ramadan is shaped by getting closer to God, for example, then even if those things are taken away, you still have that. (Noor, Interview)

Noor’s comment suggests that “getting closer to God” should be a primary goal of Ramadan and this should not be dependent on social/communal practices, although elsewhere she did discuss her appreciation of social Ramadan traditions.

Sarah was firmer on the idea that “solitude is better” in Ramadan. She commented on a tradition in some countries where people go out for *suhoor*⁵⁵ together, noting that, “I can imagine that is good for the community feeling or family feeling but I can't imagine that that's good for your spirituality”. She further expressed that observing the holy month in a non-Muslim country is “a more Islamic experience because you really do it out of your own motivation, and there’s no social pressure” (Sarah, Interview). In these comments, Sarah draws a distinction between a “community feeling” and one’s own “spirituality”, a distinction that was not common amongst other participants. At other points in the interview, however, Sarah seemed to value communal worship and activity during Ramadan. She recalled her best Ramadan as one where she attended a retreat with other Muslims for the whole month, and described the experience as follows:

You feel like you're nearly doing it as the Prophets would have done it - that's how you imagine it. You know, as a community, and constantly praying in the *masjid*, like the *masjid* is available

⁵⁵ Meal before Fajr, immediately before the day’s fast begins.

to you all the time. And you're preparing food together, doing dishes together, everything's together. (Sarah, Interview)

While Sarah, and other participants, argued that isolation was important to cultivate spirituality, a spirituality nurtured in communion with others was also, paradoxically, appreciated. Again, participants' simultaneous rejection and acceptance of communal aspects of spirituality is resemblant of the concept of cultural ambiguity (Bauer 2021).

While Sarah and Noor did not necessarily 'resolve' these conflicting ideas during our conversations, Maymoona brought the two ideas together by concluding that both isolation and congregation were important concepts in an Islamic framework:

I think community is *so* important and it's an integral part of Islam. And it's amazing. *But* at the same time, I think part of Islam *is* the idea of, of isolating yourself and reflecting, and sitting down on your own, and [sigh] you know, not having that influence from other people. And so I think Islam caters for lockdown [laughs]. So, in a way, yes, community is lovely; you could argue it can be distracting. You could argue maybe I'm going to the mosque because of the community, because of my friends. But when you're having this Ramadan lockdown, you know, you have no choice. You *can't* go to the mosque. And you can still enjoy it because it's you and Allah. There's no one watching you. There's no peer pressure. There's no, you know, you can't say I'm doing it for other people. Literally, this is you, on your own, in the house, just you and Allah - okay, this is it now. You know, this is your time to work on that relationship with you and God. I think as much as community is really important and amazing, but I think there is- Islam caters for you to also reflect by yourself. (Maymoona, Interview)

Maymoona aptly highlights some of the tensions between a communal and individual sense of spirituality and connection with God, but argues *both* are important from an Islamic perspective. It is clear her reflections are influenced by the circumstances of the lockdown, as was apparent during my interactions with other participants. It also seemed she had reflected on these ideas previously, likely related to her experience of being someone who used to attend the mosque in Ramadan but had to change her practice after marrying and having a child (as mentioned during interview). Nonetheless, Maymoona adequately summarises a key argument of this chapter that both communal and individual notions of spirituality and practice are important in an Islamic framework, and that these ideas include tensions which must be navigated by Muslims. This navigating of categorisations is sometimes contradictory but very rarely excludes one or the other category completely demonstrating, I would argue, a "tolerance" of ambiguity.

5. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have demonstrated the way in which acts of worship (*ibadah*) are embodied at both an individual and communal level during the month of Ramadan. I demonstrate the interaction and tensions between these two facets of *ibadah* arguing that rituals are embodied at individual, familial, local and global levels. These categorisations are not mutually exclusive and may overlap and contradict. In the case of *itikaf*, for example, it is as an act of isolation which is enacted in the context of a local mosque community. Whether such acts are done on one's own, with family, or in a mosque, the time-limited nature of Ramadan unites such rituals in a global embodiment of worship. This is particularly clear in the examples of fasting, prayer and *itikaf* that have been highlighted in Section 3.

I have also reflected on the relationship between spirituality and *ibadah*. Firstly, I have shown how embodied *ibadah* was intimately linked with the spirituality of my participants, contrasting ideas that spirituality is exclusively related to the mind or soul (see McGuire 2003). Secondly, like *ibadah*, I have demonstrated how both individual and communal aspects of spirituality were valued by my participants. Although participants debated whether spirituality was best cultivated in isolation or with others, neither category was fully excluded from their conceptualisations. As with *ibadah*, tensions between the two categories were present, but participants' actions and discussions conveyed that both individuality and communality were enacted and appreciated during Ramadan and more broadly. The maintenance of a communal spirituality by my participants, as well as an individual sense of spirituality which sat within in a religious framework, complicates research that asserts modern ideas of spirituality are becoming individualised and detached from religion (Heelas and Woodhead 2005) concurring with Ammerman's (2020, p.31) similar critiques of such studies.

Overall, this chapter contributes towards the argument that research on lived religion should consider individual practice *and* wider contexts (Repstad 2019; Ammerman 2020), and that researchers need to find "a framework for thinking about those structural contexts, a way to link micro and macro analysis" (Ammerman 2020, p.34). I have thus outlined the interaction between individual and communal forms of embodiment in Ramadan at various levels, and propose that exploring the relationships between individual, familial, congregational (based in a mosque or place of worship) and global dimensions of religion as a way to link the levels of analysis Ammerman describes. I also suggest that future studies in the sociology of religion should pay closer attention to embodied and communal aspects of spirituality rather than relying on some conceptions of spirituality which portray it as individualised or disembodied. The discussions of spirituality in this chapter also portray it as a complex, complicated, and often contradictory idea, emphasising the importance of researchers listening closely to their participants' distinct interpretations of the concept. This echoes Ammerman's

(2020) argument that “the spiritual qualities of religious practice are both seemingly obvious and difficult to define” (p.31).

Furthermore, this chapter begins to portray the way in which Bauer’s idea of “cultural ambiguity” (2021) manifested amongst my participants’ experiences of Ramadan. This was apparent through the way in which individual and communal aspects of *ibadah* and spirituality often conflicted and were debated by participants but nonetheless coexisted in their perceptions and experiences of the month. The way in which such tensions were held together simultaneously, I argue, demonstrates what Bauer calls a “tolerance” of ambiguity (2021). My next chapter develops the idea of cultural ambiguity further in reference to the sacredness of Ramadan as well as critiquing other existing binaries that have been applied to the study of religion, namely the sacred-profane.

CHAPTER 6 - DOMESTICATING THE SACRED: AN ABUNDANCE OF *BARAKA*

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of the “sacred” has been integral to the work of some of the early theorists of religion such as Otto (1958 [1917]), Durkheim (2001 [1912]) and Eliade (1987 [1957]) and continues to be conceptualised in sociological works today (Lynch 2012; Mellor and Shilling 2014; Evans 2003). Concurring with Durkheim’s definition of sacredness, Ramadan was deemed “set apart” (Durkheim 2001 [1912], p.46), different and special in comparison to the rest of the year and my participants marked this sacredness by increasing their *ibadah* (worship) during the period. In this chapter, I expand upon understandings of sacredness amongst Muslims based on participant experiences of Ramadan. I argue that Ramadan signified an abundance and diffuseness of sacredness that had to be managed or “domesticated” by participants through the structuring of time and the prioritising of actions.

To support this claim, I first provide an overview of existing theories of sacredness as well as holding them up against Bauer’s (2021) theory of “cultural ambiguity” (Section 2) which is important to my conceptualisation of the diffuse sacredness of Ramadan. Section 3 highlights how the month of Ramadan signifies a profusion of sacredness based on participant perceptions of the increased *ajr* (religious merit) and *baraka* (blessing) associated with the month as well as the commemoration of significant events in Islamic history. I also highlight how the temporal nature of Ramadan was understood to be integral to its sacredness. In Section 4, I argue that despite the delineated nature of the month, its sacredness was “ambiguous” (Bauer 2021) and diffuse, drawing on examples of the variation in determining the start and end of Ramadan and the unknowability of *Laylatul Qadr*, the most sacred night of the year according to participants. The remainder of the section demonstrates how this abundance and diffuseness of sacredness was domesticated or managed by participants. Section 5 focuses in-depth on the structuring of time in Ramadan, particularly in reference to a hierarchy of sacredness culminating in *Laylatul Qadr*. This hierarchy, I argue, aided participants in managing the abundant blessings available during the month. Section 6 focuses on the prioritisation of actions particularly in terms of the avoidance of acts deemed less worthy of *ajr* during the month, and the negotiation of ‘everyday’ tasks such as childcare and domestic duties alongside *ibadah*. I further highlight the ambiguity of sacredness here through the ways in which participants perceived their daily tasks as meritorious and how such activities could be transformed into acts of worship.

While the works of the early scholars of religion are important to my discussion of the sacredness of Ramadan, it has been observed that their ideas, particularly the sacred-profane dichotomy, are based in a specific Western post-Reformation context and thus should be interrogated

and critiqued before utilising them in contemporary studies of religion (McGuire 2003). This is seen to be especially true for explorations of Islamic sacredness where frameworks rooted in Christian ideas and history may have less power for explanation and understanding (Ahmed, S. 2016; Akkach 2005). It is only relatively recently that Muslim conceptualisations of sacredness have emerged sociologically (Ahmed, A. 2016; Ahmed, S. 2016; Akkach 2005) so my findings provide an important contribution to this field. My work provides a critique of the sacred-profane binary by demonstrating the different levels of sacredness present throughout the month (and arguably the whole year) as well as demonstrating how various everyday activities can be deemed sacred. This concurs with Akkach's (2005) argument that it is better to conceptualise Islamic sacredness as "a sacred without a profane" (p.164). Finally, my findings build upon Bauer's theory of "cultural ambiguity" (2021), providing examples of how participants experienced time as ambiguous and diffuse in Ramadan, and how this was "domesticated" (Bauer 2021) through the structuring of time and the prioritisation of actions.

2. EXISTING LITERATURE: SACREDNESS AND AMBIGUITY

2.1 THEORISING THE SACRED

Some of the earliest theorists of religion perceived the sacred to be a fundamental part of religion. Durkheim's (2001 [1912]) definition of religion, for example, includes an attempt to define sacredness:

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions - beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church. (2001 [1912], p.46, italics in original)

Durkheim's idea of the sacred as "set apart" is well-known and continues to influence contemporary sociological works (Winchester and Pagis 2022, p.21; Ahmed, A. 2016, p.167). The separateness of sacredness constructed by Durkheim also relates to Eliade's argument that the sacred is "a reality wholly different from 'natural' realities" (Eliade 1987 [1957], p.10). Conceptualising Ramadan in Durkheimian terms as both "set apart" – a time distinct from the rest of the year - and "surrounded by prohibitions" – in relation to the prohibitions associated with fasting - is useful and something I will draw on in this chapter. Similarly, Durkheim's emphasis on the social and communal elements of religion and sacredness are apparent in this chapter through the way in which specific acts and times are socially constructed.

Another way of understanding the sacred is the sacred-profane dichotomy discussed in Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (1950 [1917]) and Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* (1987 [1957]). Eliade (1987 [1957]) famously defines the sacred as "*the opposite of the profane*" (p.10, italics in original) and, as

alluded to above, describes sacredness as “the manifestation of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural ‘profane’ world” (p.11). In later chapters, he describes how there are sacred spaces and times which are distinct from profane ones, referring to time as follows:

On the one hand, there are the intervals of a sacred time, the time of festivals...on the other there is profane time, ordinary temporal duration, in which acts without religious meaning have their setting. (p.68)

Thus, there is a difference, for Eliade, between the “religious” and the “profane” or “ordinary”.

Contemporary academics have, however, critiqued the firm binary set up by Eliade. Meredith McGuire (2003) argues that the sacred-profane duality was a product of the Reformation that may no longer be relevant. Writing in the context of Christian spirituality, she states:

These dichotomous binaries were between sacred and profane, material and spiritual, were historically constructed. There are compelling reasons why today we should not uncritically accept them in our own definitions of religion and religiosity. (p.7)

McGuire highlights how “everyday ritual practices” such as preparing food, eating and singing “were defined out – as not pertaining to religion” (p.7) during the Reformation but uses case studies to demonstrate how these are aspects of Christian spirituality today.

There have also been calls to reimagine the sacred-profane distinction when researching Islam. Akkach (2005) questions whether the concept of the profane is relevant to the Islamic tradition, highlighting the problems of translating Eliade’s work into Arabic (particularly the word ‘profane’) as well as arguing that medieval Islamic texts did not refer to sacred places distinct from profane ones (pp.164-165). He argues that while sacredness is a recognised concept in the Islamic tradition, profaneness is not. He concludes:

This does not mean, of course, that in premodern Islam there were no conceptions of the sacred or sacred sites but that the understanding and construction of the “sacred” itself was different. Conceptually, a “sacred” without a profane must necessarily be different from a “sacred” with a profane. (p.165)

Shahab Ahmed (2016) concurs with this, arguing that Eliade’s binary “does not help us in – indeed, actively obstructs us from – recognizing and grasping central ways in which Muslims have conceptualized *being Muslim*” (p.209, italics in original) taking issue with the idea of the profane, like Akkach. It is interesting that Eliade (1987 [1957]) himself seems to complicate the boundary, or “abyss

that divides”, the sacred and profane suggesting that mundane acts like eating, sex or work can be “charged” with sacredness (p.14). He further argues that “sacred and profane are two modes of being in the world” rather than being concrete and objective (p.14). Nonetheless, his application of the terms elsewhere in the book, as highlighted above, suggests they are more static concepts.

2.2 MUSLIM SACREDNESS

The works of several researchers of Islam can be consulted to begin theorising a Muslim perspective on sacredness. Linked to his comments above, Akkach (2005) argues Islamic sacredness is better conceptualised as “a sacred without a profane” (p.164), highlighting the diffuse and expansive nature of sacredness for Muslims. Elaborating on this, Abdul-Azim Ahmed, in his ethnography of a mosque, concludes that *baraka* (blessings) – a possible alternative term for sacredness amongst Muslims – is “not diametrically opposed to the profane as is the case with the sacred. Rather, *baraka* is something that can seep into all aspects of life” (2016, p.109). Ahmed also refers to Gottschalk (2013) who similarly describes how “Muslims often speak of *baraka*, a divine blessing” (p.4) associated with sacred sites in his introduction to a volume on Muslims and sacred space. Understanding *baraka* amongst Muslims then, provides another way to explore what sacredness means to them, and is something I touch upon in this chapter.

Some authors have also outlined the importance of hierarchy in Muslim conceptions of sacredness. Akkach (2005, pp.165-166), a specialist in architecture, discusses this in relation to the variable virtues attached to geographical locations. He argues there is a “hierarchy of holiness” in relation to Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem (p.167). Katz (2007, p.147), in her historical study of the *mawlid*⁵⁶, contends that “an elaborate (if contested) hierarchy of sacred nights emerged” amongst Muslim scholars who attempted to weigh up the virtues of important times in the Islamic calendar. These authors demonstrate how hierarchy may be an important way of conceptualising sacred time and space for Muslims. Linked to Akkach’s and Katz’s statements, the idea of virtue or reward from God (*ajr*) is prominent, with Katz (2007) asserting that, according to some scholars, “the main distinguishing feature of special times... is the vastly multiplied degree of religious merit reaped from acts of worship performed at these times.” (p.143). The theme of *ajr* was also prominent in Buitelaar’s (1993) study of Ramadan in Morocco and discussed by my participants. The ideas of hierarchy and reward will thus be explored throughout this chapter.

⁵⁶ The *mawlid* is the anniversary of the Prophet’s birthday which is celebrated especially in Sufi traditions of Islam but frowned upon by some other groups. Katz (2007) interrogates opinions on the *mawlid* in depth.

Finally, Katz (2007) describes the “transhistorical quality” of sacred times in that they mark the anniversary of significant events in Islamic history, describing how, on such days, “special blessings are manifested in different ways throughout the sweep of Islamic salvation history” (p.165). Complementing this, Oestergaard (1996) describes the “myths” associated with *Laylatul Qadr* (The Night of Power) in that it is thought to commemorate the first revelation of the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad (pp.118-121). It is interesting that these discussions link back to Eliade’s description of sacred time as “*a primordial mythical time made present...the reactualization of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past, ‘in the beginning’*” (1987 [1957], pp.68-69, italics in original). Katz (2007) further argues, sacred time for Muslims, in contrast to pre-Abrahamic religions, can be viewed as “an ascending spiral rather than a circle: while proceeding inexorably into the future, it also had a circular component which cyclically brought close the blessings of great events at corresponding times of the week, month or year” (p.168). The way in which Ramadan acts to mark and recreate significant times in history is explored later in this chapter.

2.3 AMBIGUITY, SACREDNESS AND TIME

While not addressing sacredness extensively, cultural ambiguity and its domestication (Bauer 2021) – as introduced in Chapter 2 in this thesis – provide a framework for discussing the plurality of discourses, meanings and practices associated with Ramadan and the way in which this is managed by participants. Existing works on Ramadan point to the relevance of Bauer’s theory (Chapter 2, Section 3.2). The idea of ambiguity also links to interpretations of sacredness as diffuse amongst Muslims (see Section 2.2 above) and scholarly disagreements about the most sacred time of the year (Katz 2007, pp.146-147). Abdul-Azim Ahmed uses *baraka* in a similar sense as sacredness describing it as “an open, ambiguous term” (2016, p.109). This also links to Anderson’s (2018) assertion that *baraka* “brings an abundance of meaning” (p.616) in Ramadan, reflecting Caputo’s definition of ambiguity as “an excess of meaning” (2005, p.23). Bauer himself briefly references works which suggest the ambiguous nature of sacred space including Stauth’s (2008 in Bauer 2021, p.25) discussion of the inclusion of Pharaonic architectural elements in mosques. Shahab Ahmed’s *What is Islam?* (2016) also bears key similarities with Bauer’s work, as Ahmed describes how Muslims “conceptualize Islam in terms of contradictory meaning-making and... live as Muslims in those contradictory terms of Islam” (p.404). These themes of contradiction, complexity and paradoxes run throughout Ahmed’s book in which the author also has an extended discussion of sacredness.

Bauer’s (2021) “cultural ambiguity” is a useful tool for discussing fluid and arguably contradictory aspects of sacredness related to Ramadan. I touch upon these below (Section 4) where I argue that the variable practices in determining the parameters of Islamic months – including Ramadan – and the unknowability of the precise date of *Laylatul Qadr* – potentially the most sacred

night of the year – are prime examples of the ambiguity of sacred time during Ramadan. They highlight the abundance of sacredness during the month as well as demonstrating a high tolerance of ambiguity amongst my participants. I further draw upon Bauer’s (2021) concept of the “domestication” of ambiguity within Islamic societies which he sees as a way to manage the tolerance and abundance of ambiguity that exists. I build on the idea of domestication of ambiguity in reference to the hierarchy of sacred times in Ramadan (Section 5) and attempts to prioritise certain actions during the month (Section 6). I argue that these are ways through which the abundance and ambiguity of sacredness during Ramadan are managed. While Bauer argues that, broadly speaking, this ambiguity has been diminished in the modern period, my findings in this chapter complicate this idea.

In the next section, I outline some of the key concepts for understanding sacredness in Ramadan – including the ideas of *ajr*, *baraka*, and the commemoration of significant events, and how they were discussed by participants – before moving on to discuss the ambiguity of sacredness in Ramadan more extensively.

3. UNDERSTANDING SACREDNESS IN RAMADAN

When it comes to Ramadan, it can be said there was something inherently sacred about the period in the views of my participants. While only one participant described Ramadan as a “sacred month” (Abdullah, Diary, Entry 1)⁵⁷, several indicated that Ramadan was different to “normal” time which happened for the rest of the year (Maymoona, Interview; Jennifer, Interview). Thus, respondents adapted their actions and increased their *ibadah* (worship) to suit the special nature of the occasion. The distinctiveness of Ramadan links back to traditional understandings of the sacred as being “things set apart” (Durkheim 2001 [1912], p.46) or as “wholly different” from non-sacred things or times (Eliade 1987 [1957], p.11). The obligation to abstain from food, drink and sexual relations relates to Durkheim’s idea that sacred things are “surrounded by prohibitions” (2001 [1912], p.46). I will argue throughout this chapter however, that Ramadan, and Muslim conceptions of sacredness depart from traditional understandings in other ways, particularly the sacred-profane dichotomy. To begin with, I explore why this specialness was attributed to Ramadan, and how participants described the unique nature of the month.

Firstly, participants referred to the multiplication of their good actions during Ramadan. There was no doubt for them that God increased the reward – or *ajr* - for deeds enacted in the holy month,

⁵⁷ The terms “sacred” and “sacredness” were not commonly used by my participants, only occurring four times in my dataset. This reflects the fact that these terms originate largely from Christian ideas, and reflects research Muslims which use terms like “blessing” or “*baraka*” as more familiar alternatives for Muslims (Ahmed A. 2016; Cormack 2013)

and this was an idea relayed by many. Maymoona, for example, reflected on the motivations for doing more *ibadah* in Ramadan, saying that “you’re going to get everything doubled, tripled; get in as much as you can” (Maymoona, Interview). Other statements reflected the unknown and ambiguous quantity of this reward, with Sumayya saying that “good deeds are multiplied like seven times or seven hundred or seven thousand times, you don’t know” (Sumayya, Interview). Sumayya seemed to be paraphrasing the *hadith* stating that:

Every (good) deed of the son of Adam would be multiplied, a good deed receiving a tenfold to seven hundredfold reward. Allah, the Exalted and Majestic, has said: “With the exception of fasting, for it is done for Me and I will give a reward for it, for one abandons his passion and food for My sake” (Sahih Muslim, Book 13, Hadith 213⁵⁸)

This demonstrates how participant views on *ajr* reflected scriptures. Related to the idea of reward, Hamida likened Ramadan to winning the lottery saying that, “it’s like you’ve got a lottery ticket⁵⁹ and you need to take the most amount you can from it, take as much benefit as you can from that” (Hamida, Interview). The concept of *ajr* then, is essential for understanding the sacredness of Ramadan, an idea is supported by Buitelaar’s (1993) ethnography of Ramadan in Morocco which includes *ajr* as a key theme. Echoing the participant comments here, Buitelaar notes that “the spiritual reward for good deeds [*ajr*] is believed to be higher than during the other months of the year” (p.126) concurring with Katz’s (2007) contention that a defining feature of Islamic sacred periods is “the vastly multiplied degree of religious merit reaped from acts of worship performed at these times” (p.143).

Secondly, the time of Ramadan itself was seen as “blessed” or “precious” (Mariya, Interview) and this *baraka* or blessing was seen to spread to various activities during the month. This links to Abdul-Azim Ahmed’s (2016) description of the dynamic nature of blessings describing how “*baraka* is something that can seep into all aspects of life” (p.109). He elaborates on this describing how the mosque at the centre of his ethnography is “blessed by the worship of the congregants. Yet it confers this *baraka* back to the people and activities it hosts” (A. Ahmed 2016, p.160). During interview, Rayyan described that “there’s a lot of *baraka* in Ramadan food. So even if you don’t intend to provide this much, it’s just an automatic blessing that - just food comes from neighbours; food comes from friends...supermarkets have deals.” She related an incident where her family ended up with

⁵⁸ Available at: <https://sunnah.com/muslim:1151e> (Accessed: 10 January 2022).

⁵⁹ Hamida’s comment is somewhat ironic given that gambling, including things like the lottery, is considered forbidden according to Islamic jurisprudence.

“seventeen different fruits on the *dastarkhan*⁶⁰” at *iftar* time demonstrating the result of Ramadan’s *baraka* (Rayyan, Interview). Similarly, she conveyed how she had been waiting a long time to move house and eventually moved during Ramadan, stating, “it just felt like it was part of the *baraka* or the blessing of Ramadan that it finally happened” (Rayyan, Interview). As indicated by these anecdotes, *baraka* was linked to an abundance of goodness. The multiple blessings that participants discussed highlights the profusion of sacredness during the month.

Thirdly, the sacredness of Ramadan was clearly linked with its historical religious significance in that it is thought to commemorate the first revelation of the Quran to Prophet Muhammad on *Laylatul Qadr* (The Night of Power). Participants Abdullah and Sabrina explained this in their diaries (Abdullah, Diary, Introduction; Sabrina, Dairy, Entry 17) and Sumayya referred to Ramadan as “the month of the Quran” (Sumayya, Diary, Entry 17). The historical religious significance of Ramadan was linked to tangible acts as participants described how they strived to increase their Quran recitation during the month. *Laylatul Qadr* (The Night of Power), regarded as the night on which the Quran was first revealed, is commonly believed to fall during the last ten nights of Ramadan although its precise date is unknown (see Section 4.2). The night is described in the Quran as being “better than a thousand months” (97:3, Saheeh International) and participant Abdullah paraphrased this calling *Laylatul Qadr* “the night of a thousand nights” (Abdullah, Diary, Introduction). In practice, as conveyed by participants, many Muslims try to increase their worship during the last ten nights of Ramadan to “seek this special night” (Lucy, Diary, Entry 14) and the increased *ajr* associated with it. Several participants also noted the anniversary of the Battle of Badr (17th Ramadan) in their diaries, a battle described in biographies of the Prophet Muhammad, using it as an opportunity to read about and reflect on the event. While this was less important than Ramadan’s relationship with the Quran, it serves to reinforce the Katz’s (2007) idea that the sacredness of the month had a “transhistorical quality” (p.165) which “cyclically brought close the blessings of great events at corresponding times” (p.168).

Finally, participants implied that the time-limited nature of Ramadan itself contributed to its sacredness. Jennifer, for example, linked this to *ajr* describing that “the fact that it’s time-limited and the reward is bigger, it’s greater, you try to catch every moment. It’s a very powerful way of pushing yourself to do things which normally you would find difficult” (Jennifer, Interview). Lucy similarly described how the limited time means “you’re trying to grab [laughs] the *baraka* before it goes” (Lucy, Interview). The bounded nature of Ramadan was not perceived negatively, but was seen as “that

⁶⁰ A tablecloth or mat laid out on the floor to put food on.

perfect timing, and God knows what's best for human beings" (Sabrina, Interview) and Sabrina felt that the effort and concentration required by Ramadan could not be feasibly maintained for a longer period. Similarly, the delineated periods of time within Ramadan were deemed important with Jennifer noting, "you've got this three sets of 10 days and then you've got that special thing at the last nights, and the odd nights" (Jennifer, Interview). Jennifer refers here to the idea that each '*ashra* (10-day period) of the month represents a different virtue, with Maymoona explaining these: "Ramadan's a month of mercy and forgiveness and being safe from the hellfire" (Maymoona, Interview). She paraphrases a *hadith* which highlights how these three qualities are associated with the first, second and third parts of the month respectively (Sahih Ibn Khuzaymah, Hadith 1887⁶¹). Similarly, Jennifer alludes to the ascending sacredness of the last ten nights of Ramadan and the odd nights within those which exist as part of the search for *Laylatul Qadr* or The Night of Power (Jennifer, Interview). This night is arguably the most sacred night in the Islamic calendar as explored in Section 4.2. Participants portray how the time specification of Ramadan is essential to the experience of the month and a motivating factor for undertaking sacred acts like fasting, prayer and other *ibadah*. Many respondents used phrases like "making the most of the time" emphasising the effect Ramadan had on physical activities and their mindset. The timing of Ramadan has an impact on its embodiment in physical, mental and spiritual ways.

While the Ramadan's temporality was delineated in some ways, I argue there was also a sense of ambiguity surrounding the time of Ramadan. The next section will explore this in more depth discussing the variable practices related to determining the start and end of Ramadan and the uncertainty of *Laylatul Qadr*.

4. THE AMBIGUITY OF SACREDNESS

4.1 DETERMINING ISLAMIC MONTHS

The Islamic calendar is a lunar calendar dependent on the presence of the new crescent moon to determine the start (and thus, end) of Islamic months. This means there is uncertainty around whether a particular Islamic month will last 29 or 30 days (since a moon cycle is somewhere in between). More importantly, this means Muslims following different methods of moon sighting might start and end months on different days. This is especially pertinent in Ramadan because the beginning of the fast is dependent on sighting the moon as is the celebration of *Eid-ul-Fitr* at the end of the month. This was reflected in my fieldwork as there was a variation in when participants started fasting - some starting on Friday 24th April and others on Saturday 25th - although all seemed to celebrate Eid

⁶¹ Available at: <https://www.islamicfinder.org/knowledge/ramadan-knowledge/ramadan-ashra-duas/> (Accessed: 21 July 2022).

on the same day. This meant that some fasted 29 days and others 30 days. Participants also related different methods for determining the start of Ramadan, with some following Saudi Arabia, some using the “local sighting method” (Rayyan, Diary, Entry 1), i.e. looking for the moon in one’s own country/locality, and others explaining they followed a more global method which considers any moon sighting around the world to determine the start of the month (Zahra, Interview)⁶². Noor also spoke of the method of following “Morocco, the nearest Muslim country” although implied the mosque her family used as the authority for the start of Ramadan had gone against this, starting a day earlier than other mosques in her area (Noor, Diary, Entry 1).

As Noor’s example highlights, while some Muslims actively choose a moon sighting method, others base decisions on their local mosque and are less concerned about the particular method. This is not surprising given that rituals such as Eid prayers and *taraweeh* prayers are organised largely by mosques. This highlights how sacred times amongst Muslims are socially constructed with religious institutions playing a key role. This links to a discussion of contrasting understandings of sacredness by Chidester and Linenthal (1995) who highlight “the divergence between a substantial and situational definition of the sacred”. The authors describe how some scholars – such as Eliade – see sacredness as an inherent quality of space, while others discuss “how place is sacralized as a result of the cultural labor of ritual”, reflecting the substantial and situational frames respectively (p.6). For my participants, it was clear that Ramadan was considered inherently special, as one recounted, “it’s *there* and it comes every year” (Hamida, Interview, emphasis in speech). However, Noor’s comments highlight how the sociality and collective ritual – especially the *salah* - of Ramadan is important even in defining the days on which the month occurs. It is difficult then to pin down Ramadan’s sacredness being perceived *either* substantially *or* situationally by participants as both frameworks were in operation. This links back to Beckford’s understanding of how to apply social constructionism to studies of religion (Chapter 3). These co-existing, contrasting ideas of sacredness also tie in with Bauer’s (2021) theory of cultural ambiguity.

While the variation in defining Islamic months, even amongst my limited sample of 52 UK participants, suggests the fluidity and ambiguity of time in Muslim conceptions of sacredness, it was interesting to observe how some participants accepted this ambiguity easily, while others struggled. Rayyan told me, for example, that herself and her husband followed different methods of moon sighting and said, “This has been the way for all of our 9-year marriage including different Eids with no issues” (Rayyan, Diary, Entry 1). She did, however, note during interview that extended family were

⁶² An article by American Islamic scholar, Hamza Yusuf, suggests there is a similar breadth of moon sighting practices amongst Muslims in North America (Yusuf 2006, p.4)

less happy with this practice. Similarly, Noor justified the difference of opinion saying that “Allah’s mercy is not limited to a certain day” (Noor, Diary, Entry 1) and Juwairiah said there was a “magic” about not knowing when Eid was going to fall (Juwairiah, Interview). Despite this, Noor admitted she had struggled to come to terms with the differences in the Islamic calendar over the years, previously spending hours researching moon sighting methods only to realise that “my mum actually felt more comfortable following the biggest mosque...rather than trying to sift through the evidence and make a decision” (Noor, Diary, Entry 1). Noor also relayed her desire to have Eid on the same day “if not for the whole country, for each individual city” (Noor, Diary, Entry 1). James expressed frustration that Muslims largely don’t follow local moon sightings – the method he deemed valid - but rather “follow like sheep” (James, WhatsApp message⁶³). Some of these concerns about Muslims starting Ramadan and celebrating Eid on different days concur with Bauer’s (2021) argument that a “tolerance of ambiguity” is being lost in the contemporary era, however this sentiment was not expressed amongst all, or even the majority of my participants. I maintain then that the divergent practices of Muslims in my study largely demonstrate an understanding of sacred time as fluid and ambiguous, encapsulated by Noor’s statement above emphasising the expansiveness of God’s mercy. This is supported further by the example of *Laylatul Qadr*.

4.2 THE UNKNOWABILITY OF *LAYLATUL QADR*

As described above, *Laylatul Qadr* was considered by many participants to be the highpoint of the Islamic calendar, as Zunayra deemed it, “the most blessed night of the whole year” (Zunayra, Diary, Entry 20)⁶⁴. To mark *Laylatul Qadr*’s abundance of *ajr* – it being “better than a thousand months” according to the Quran (97:3, Saheeh International) - many participants tried to increase their *ibadah* during that night. Its exact date however, according to participants, was unknown giving *Laylatul Qadr* an aura of ambiguity. This unknowability is linked to a *hadith* where the Prophet Muhammad stated:

I came out to inform you about the Night of Al-Qadr [i.e. *Laylatul Qadr*], but as so-and-so and so-and-so quarrelled, so the news about it had been taken away; and maybe it was better for you. (Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 78, Hadith 79⁶⁵)

⁶³ James sent me a WhatsApp message about moon sighting before starting his diary and agreed for me to include the contents of this message in my research.

⁶⁴ This will be discussed further in Section 5 in relation to a hierarchy of sacredness.

⁶⁵ Available at: <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:6049> (Accessed: 5 August 2022).

There was a common understanding amongst participants however that *Laylatul Qadr* fell on one of the odd nights in the last ten days, as summarised by Zunayra:

The last ten nights are the most blessed, the most blessed night of the whole year is called Laylat ul Qadr, which is thought to fall on one of the last 5 odd numbers nights- the 21st, 23rd, 25th, 27th or 29th. (Zunayra, Diary, Entry 20).

Others, however, asserted that *Laylatul Qadr* could be on any one of the last ten nights, as Iffat states, "It is very important that we try to make the most of these ten nights and not just focus on the odd nights as we don't know which day exactly laylatul qadr will fall in." (Iffat, Diary, Entry 22). One participant's diary conveyed that the night was either the 27th or the 29th (Abdullah, Diary, Entry 26), and others explained how they held particular significance to the 27th night - and thus conducted special acts of worship within it - while maintaining the exact date was unknown. Noor was amongst these, helpfully highlighting this diversity of opinion:

It's just, kind of, understood that the 27th day of Ramadan or the 27th night of Ramadan is a night with a high chance of being Laylatul Qadr...even though it could be any of the last 10 nights of Ramadan, particularly the odd ones, and some people say it could even be any night of the whole year. (Noor, Diary [Audio], Entry 27)

Noor further linked the ambiguity of *Laylatul Qadr* to the variable start dates of Ramadan, conveying how she would be worshipping on both the 27th and 28th nights "just to cover all bases" (Noor, Diary, Entry 27).

The comments and practices of participants displayed here, who accepted the unknowability of *Laylatul Qadr*, highlight the "tolerance" of ambiguity that Bauer (2021) describes. The fact this tolerance was exhibited in the context of what many deemed the most sacred time of the year, demonstrates how cultural ambiguity is an important part of Muslim beliefs and practices in the present day. This contrasts somewhat Bauer's (2021) argument that ambiguity has diminished in contemporary Muslim societies. It was interesting to observe that no participants expressed a certainty as to when the *Laylatul Qadr* fell, or expressed a desire to consolidate its precise date, in contrast with some of the opinions on moon sighting. In fact, participants seemed to revel in the ambiguity of Laylatul Qadr, resulting in what was commonly referred to as "searching for" or "seeking" *Laylatul Qadr* through increased worship during the last ten nights of Ramadan⁶⁶. This was apparent

⁶⁶ Mol (2017), exploring the occasion from a textual perspective, similarly highlights how the uncertainty of *Laylatul Qadr* led to the common practice "searching" for the night (p.93).

in Iffat's encouragement of her followers to worship throughout the last ten days, as displayed in her Instagram diary (Iffat, Diary, Entry 22). Lucy also demonstrates how the somewhat bounded, somewhat diffuse nature of *Laylatul Qadr*, seems to facilitate a sense of community and togetherness:

There is a sense of urgency now as we hope to find ourselves awake and praying on the night of Laylatul Qadr. I use the plural pronoun because whilst I am alone, at the same time there is a sense of community and connected hearts and intentions as all Muslims seek this special night. (Lucy, Diary, Entry 14)

This supports Levine's argument that such ambiguity can have a "socially binding function" (Levine 1985, pp.35-37) and links to the discussion of individual and communal worship and spirituality described in Chapter 5.

While Ramadan is a delineated time period, with the lengths of the fast following specified rules, I have highlighted in this section the ambiguous understandings of time from the perspectives of my participants. I argue that the different practices of moon sighting and the unknowability of *Laylatul Qadr* were phenomena that were largely accepted by participants demonstrating a tolerance of ambiguity. I also highlight how participants recognised the inherent, perhaps objective, sacredness of Ramadan and *Laylatul Qadr*, while also acknowledging the role of ritual – whether communal prayers or individual worship – in *making* such times sacred. This was apparent, for example, through participants' dependence on local mosques (as sites of ritual) for determining the beginning and end of Ramadan, but also through the use of *ibadah* to sacralise *Laylatul Qadr*. These findings, therefore, complicate seemingly opposed substantial and situational conceptions of sacredness (Chidester and Linenthal 1995, p.6) by displaying how both understandings of sacredness were in operation amongst participants. I turn now to a discussion of the structuring of time in Ramadan, arguing that this enables a domestication of the ambiguity and abundance of sacredness of the month.

5. STRUCTURING SACRED TIME

While the start/end of Ramadan and the precise date of *Laylatul Qadr* were ambiguous, there are ways in which the month of Ramadan and its sacredness were structured. This concurs with Katz's (2007) assertion that "the idea that time is inherently patterned...is deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition" (p.143). This structuring resulted in what I refer to as a hierarchy of sacredness. The month of Ramadan was deemed more sacred than the rest of the year by participants. Rewards for good deeds were multiplied, *baraka* increased, and participants exerted themselves when it came to acts of worship. Lucy explained the superiority of Ramadan as follows:

Everyone knows that if you wake up in the last third of the night⁶⁷ [at any time of the year], it's a better time to pray and ask Allah for your needs. Um, and then there's other times in the day which are, you know, special. Whereas in Ramadan, it's like the whole time is special - you know, the heavens are opened. (Lucy, Interview)

Throughout the Islamic calendar, some periods were deemed more sacred than others but Ramadan stood out from the rest of the year. I argue that Ramadan can form the basis for a hierarchy of time in Muslim conceptions of the sacred (Figure 13) that disrupts binary notions of sacredness.



FIGURE 13- THE HIERARCHY OF SACRED TIME IN RAMADAN

It is important to note that the relative sacredness of different periods of the Islamic calendar is debated, with Katz (2007) demonstrating how *Laylatul Qadr* and the *Mawlid* (anniversary of the Prophet's birth) compete for the position of "the best time of the Islamic year" amongst some scholars (p.146). Similarly, the Prophet Muhammad is said to have reported, regarding the first ten days of *Dhul-Hijjah* (the month of Hajj), that, "There are no days during which righteous deeds are more beloved to Allah than these days" (Sunan Ibn Majah, Book 7, Hadith 90⁶⁸). This has led to scholarly comparisons of this period with the last ten nights of Ramadan (Katz, 2007, pp. 247-248 n.60). These periods outside Ramadan were not discussed extensively by participants but it is likely there were

⁶⁷ The last third of the night, just before dawn, is seen as an especially sacred time for Muslims when God is more likely to respond to supplications as narrated in a *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad (Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 19, Hadith 26). Available at: <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:1145> (Accessed: 5 August 2022).

⁶⁸ Available at: <https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah:1727> (Accessed: 5 August 2022).

divergent opinions about their sacredness, again highlighting an ambiguity surrounding sacred time. Thus, I will present the hierarchy in this section in relation to Ramadan only, while acknowledging that for some, it can be seen as representing the most sacred times of the entire year.

Elaborating on this hierarchy, at its peak is *Laylatul Qadr* – The Night of Power – that participants reflected on during interviews and in diaries. Other scholars have similarly recognised this night as the “apex of sacredness” (Buitelaar 1993, p.162) and “the culmination of the fast” (Oestergaard 1996, p.129), with Oestergaard hinting towards the structure I outline:

Ramadan is considered to be beyond ordinary standards, though not to the same degree as *laylat al-qadr* which is likened to a thousand months (Oestergaard 1996, p.120)

For my participants, the last ten nights of Ramadan were especially sacred with many marking their arrival in their diaries. As mentioned above, these nights were special as they were associated with the search for *Laylatul Qadr*, commemorating the night during which the Quran was first revealed to Muhammad. Participant Sabrina aptly described the relation between these time periods as follows:

Islam makes certain times and places especially sacred. While a believer can certainly engage in worship such as remembering or glorifying God at any time (“standing, sitting or lying on their sides”), some periods of time have special and unique blessings associated with them... **Of the greatest of such opportunities are the blessed nights of Ramadan.** The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, “Whoever spends the nights of Ramadan in prayer out of faith and in the hope of reward, he will be forgiven his previous sins.” **The foremost of these opportunities in the last ten nights of Ramadan.** As the Prophet’s wife `A’isha narrates, “When the last ten nights began Allah’s Messenger (PBUH) kept awake at night (for prayer and devotion), wakened his family, and prepared himself to observe prayer (with more vigor).” It is no coincidence that seclusion in the masjid is also recommended in Ramadan.

By far, however, there is no day or night that has been emphasised more than the night known as laylat al-qadr (the Night of Decree). (Sabrina, Diary, Entry 25, bold added).

Sabrina highlights the levels of the sacred hierarchy, starting with Ramadan as a whole, increasing in sacredness in the last ten days, and culminating in *Laylatul Qadr*. I have depicted this relationship in Figure 13⁶⁹, including the odd-numbered nights of the last ten nights – frequently referred to as “the

⁶⁹ Zahid’s (2021) Masters dissertation on *itikaf* depicts a similar relationship though not including *Laylatul Qadr* and adding the “Last Ten Days” of Ramadan. Zahid refers to this as “the various layers of a given sacred time” (pp.48-49).

odd nights” – since participants noted their significance and put in more effort to worship during these times. Hamida, for example, tried to stay up later in worship on these nights (Hamida, Diary, Entry 21) and Hasina encouraged her children to worship with her “especially” on the odd nights (Hasina, Interview). Another structuring element of Ramadan was that of the three *‘ashra* (10-day periods) mentioned in Section 3, each being respectively linked to ideas of mercy, forgiveness and salvation from Hell. While the arrival of these periods was marked in some participant diaries, it was less clear how they influenced participant actions as was the case with the levels of the hierarchy above.

This leads to a discussion of how *Laylatul Qadr* was marked as different, or “set apart” actively by participants, namely through acts of *ibadah*. As described in Section 4.2, the sacredness of *Laylatul Qadr* was diffused throughout the last ten days of Ramadan due to uncertainty about its precise date. This meant most participants reported increasing their *ibadah* throughout the last ten nights or at least the odd nights which were deemed more likely to be *Laylatul Qadr*. Iffat comments on this in her diary posted on social media, seemingly encouraging her followers to worship throughout this period:

The first of the odd nights happened last night! How did you spend it? The last ten nights are honestly the most magical and spiritual times of the year. Nothing can compare to the transcendence of laylatul qadr. It is very important that we try to make the most of these ten nights and not just focus on the odd nights as we don't know which day exactly laylatul qadr will fall in. There are many recommended actions to complete such as extra night prayers, doing adhkar⁷⁰, giving into charity and most importantly making dua for these are the nights of power where you're dua is most likely to be accepted. (Iffat, Diary, Entry 22)

Iffat highlights some of the actions used to mark time out as sacred in Ramadan including *salah*, *dhikr*, giving charity and *dua*. These actions extend throughout the month and are ways to “set apart” Ramadan as a whole. However, they are intensified in the last ten days, especially the odd nights, corresponding to the hierarchy I have outlined. It is interesting to observe the didactic tone, aimed at a Muslim audience, of Iffat’s social media post which contrasted some of the more personal diary entries sent via one-to-one channels such as WhatsApp or email. Concurring with Iffat’s focus on *ibadah*, other participants noted how they would try to read *taraweeh* and *tahajjud* prayers during these nights (Zunayra, Diary, Entries 20 and 27) or increase their recitation of the Quran (Hasina, Interview). These sacred periods were also about reducing actions that were not deemed *ibadah*, or were deemed less worthy as *ibadah*. Hasina, a stay-at-home mum, for example, noted that, during the last ten days, “I will try to cut back on my cooking; not wasting time on all the cleaning and all of

⁷⁰ Plural of *dhikr*.

that, just try to focus on the *ibadah* things” (Hasina, Interview). Similarly, others explained they would take this period off work (Amin, Interview; Jennifer, Interview) because “working does detract from it [Ramadan], and especially the last 10 nights” (Amin, Interview). This discussion about the prioritisation of various activities during Ramadan will be continued in the next section.

I have described above a hierarchy of sacred time as perceived by my participants. This framework nuances binary understandings of sacredness stemming from Eliade’s early conception of the idea (1987 [1957]) and follows other criticisms of the sacred-profane dichotomy based in Islamic perspectives (Gottschalk 2013; Ahmed, S. 2016; Akkach 2005). The hierarchy I discuss is more fitting of Akkach’s description of sacredness as “a sacred without a profane” (2005, p. 164) highlighting varying levels of sacredness rather than ‘on’ and ‘off’ sacredness. The absence of profane time is also alluded to by Sabrina’s explanation that “Islam makes certain times and places especially sacred. While a believer can certainly engage in worship...at any time...some periods of time have special and unique blessings associated with them.” (Sabrina, Diary, Entry 25). I have further highlighted how the increasingly sacred nature of time in Ramadan spurred an increase in the sacredness of actions by participants, specifically through increased *ibadah*. I argue then, that the hierarchy acted to “domesticate” (Bauer 2021) the ambiguity and abundance of sacred time by providing periods of heightened sacredness around which participants could structure and prioritise their worship. The next section looks at the sacredness of actions of Ramadan in more depth focusing on the negotiation of *ibadah* alongside ‘worldly’ activities during the month. It will have an emphasis on an individualised sense of sacredness that existed particularly in relation to motherhood and domestic duties. The prioritisation of various acts during Ramadan, I argue, is another way through which the ambiguity of the time is “domesticated”.

6. PRIORITISING ACTIONS

Sacred time and actions were intimately linked in the views of participants. In her social media post about the last ten days of Ramadan which she deems “the most magical and spiritual times of the year”, Iffat recommends a list of activities, namely acts of worship, for her followers to undertake during this period (Iffat, Diary, Entry 22, see previous section). Similarly, Sabrina refers to *hadiths* which extol the virtues of prayer during the last ten nights of Ramadan (Diary, Entry 25). For participants, discussing the specialness or importance of Ramadan was almost always accompanied by mentioning the actions done (or not done) within the month. The fact that *ajr* was key to participant conceptions of sacred time (Section 3) further demonstrates how actions (which result in *ajr* from God) are related to the specialness of time.

I have highlighted how specific acts of *ibadah* – reading the Quran, prayer, fasting, giving charity – were seen to bring participants closer to God and were therefore increased during the holy month (Chapter 2). There was a general consensus that these were the most important acts to be undertaken during Ramadan. However, there was a tension between this idea and the understanding that any action could be considered *ibadah*, a common expression of my participants. As Sabrina notes “In Islam, eating, resting, relaxing, and even intimate relationships with our spouse are also considered acts of worship and there is a reward for each one of them when done with a good intention and with the right discipline” (Sabrina, Diary, Entry 23). This resulted in participants having to negotiate and prioritise what they did during the month. Here, I focus on how participants managed their *ibadah* (reading Quran, prayers, etc.) alongside more ‘everyday’ tasks. I argue that prioritising certain actions was another way in which the ambiguity and abundance of sacredness was domesticated during Ramadan.

6.1 CHANGING TV HABITS

Participant discussions of their TV habits give an insight into why certain actions were valued more than others. Nearly all participants noted some change in their viewing habits during the month, with most watching less and some banning TV completely⁷¹. Many told me they chose to watch only Islamic educational programming or sometimes included factual programmes too (like documentaries). Several participants said the reason for this change was that watching TV was “wasting time” (Amin, Interview) and that Ramadan was about doing things that would benefit them (Maymoona, Interview). This latter point seemed to be why some participants made allowances for factual/educational and Islamic content. Similarly, Hamida remarked on television-watching in her diary, stating, “I need to not only do worship to come closer to Allah but also get rid of those things that take me away from Him” (Hamida, Diary, Entry 4) and Rayyan felt TV “can affect my spirituality” (Rayyan, Interview). Both suggest television can reduce one’s connection with God though they did specifically refer to bingeing and “mindless” watching (Rayyan, Interview). Only one participant, Mariya, referred to the “haram”, or forbidden, when discussing TV saying that a lot of Ramadan programming in the Arab world is haram because of the inappropriate content though she did not explain fully what this meant (Mariya, Interview). Layla also noted that she changed her listening habits in Ramadan because “listening to music is haram”. However, like the discussions around television above, Layla noted that she swapped music for podcasts and Islamic content “because with music, you listen to it, and then that's it, right? You're not really getting much out of it... whereas with

⁷¹ Even participants who ‘banned’ TV in Ramadan, often made exceptions for Islamic videos (lectures and educational content) though these may be watched on a television, phone, laptop or other device.

podcasts, you actually get something out of it” (Layla, Interview). Layla echoes here the idea that Ramadan actions, and sacred actions more broadly, should be those which benefit people.

The discussions around television further emphasised the importance and prioritisation of explicit *ibadah* in Ramadan – *salah*, reading Quran etc. - with participants arguing that time should be spent on worship rather than entertainment. TV was deemed, by some, a waste of time that did not bring benefit to themselves or others, highlighting how the sacredness or worthiness of actions was judged on how beneficial they were. Evaluating actions – especially more ‘everyday’ ones – on their perceived benefit was one way in which participants’ expansive conceptions of *ibadah* (which could include almost any act) was “domesticated” (Bauer 2021) allowing them to prioritise what to do and what not to do in Ramadan. One category of day-to-day activities that was deemed essential and beneficial was childcare/domestic responsibilities which had to be negotiated alongside worship expectations during the holy month. In the next section, I discuss these in more depth highlighting how mothers considered them sacred acts, developing an individualised understanding of sacredness. Conversely, participants also opposed narratives that diminished the importance of explicit *ibadah* for mothers.

6.2 MOTHERHOOD, DOMESTICITY AND INDIVIDUALISED SACREDNESS

An interesting point highlighted by the discussion of television-watching in Ramadan is the way in which sacredness was individualised amongst participants. Despite there being a collective sense of the sacred in terms of the hierarchical structure of time during the month and a consensus about the importance of *ibadah*, day-to-day decisions about what to prioritise in Ramadan were more personalised. This was highlighted by Hamida, who included a screenshot of one of her favourite TV shows (*Casualty*) in her diary, explaining that she aimed to stop watching it completely during the holy month. She reflected on this entry during interview:

I mentioned before that when I learnt the meaning of Ramadan, the fact that it's to gain *taqwa*⁷², it's to stay away from disobedience of Allah, it's to stay away from sin, it's to stay away from those things that take you away from Allah. Someone might look at that and be like you're being too extreme here. *Casualty* keeps you away from Allah? That's a bit extreme. It's- I'm not saying that at all. What I'm saying is, it varies with each individual. And *me*, as an individual, I *know* what things take me away from Allah, and those things I find myself, when I'm trying to pray, and the thing that's distracting my mind, or the thing that's delaying me

⁷² *Taqwa* means consciousness or awareness of God. The Quran describes the reason for fasting in Ramadan is to gain *taqwa* (2:183, Saheeh International).

from prayer, I *know* that *those* are the ones... I know those are the ones that I need to work on. (Hamida, Interview, italics indicate emphasis in speech)

Hamida's statements highlight her reflexivity about the individual nature of decisions when prioritising actions in Ramadan. While watching *Casualty* might seem trivial to others, it was clearly significant to Hamida. Her ideas are echoed by other participants who included or discussed their personalised Ramadan goals – often related to *ibadah* or character development - in their diaries or interviews.

An individualised understanding of sacredness was particularly apparent in relation to motherhood. Many mothers in my study explained how they needed to adapt their expectations for Ramadan after having a child. This was largely related to their *ibadah* goals, including visiting the mosque in Ramadan. Hamida summarised this idea in her first diary entry, depicted in Figure 14, where she said, “The only aspect of motherhood I have found hardest adapting to is balance between worship and [parenting] responsibilities during Ramadan” explaining that she could no longer stay up all night, go to the mosque and increase her *ibadah* to the same extent (Hamida, Diary, Entry 1). Similarly, Jennifer noted that before having children,

I was able to have Ramadan like men do...I'll go to the mosque every night, you know. I had no one else to care for. No one else's needs to meet. So if I wanted to have a nap in the day, I could have a nap in a day. You know, and I could be in *itikaf*... I could care for myself without thinking about, is everyone else cared for? (Jennifer, Interview)

Attending the mosque, worshipping during the night, undertaking *itikaf*, reading the Quran, and conducting prayers (especially *taraweeh*) were all sacred acts that mothers told me they had to give up or reduce during Ramadan after having children. Participant Sarah even described how she had not been able to fully fast during Ramadan as she could not cope with the physical effects of the practice alongside caring for her young son during lockdown. She explained, “I couldn't handle the keto-flu like sort of detox experience that you get when you're fasting. I couldn't combine that with motherhood in lockdown because he wasn't going to school” (Sarah, Interview). For Sarah, she had to prioritise looking after her son even over the most important observance of Ramadan, the fast. The realisation that these women could not achieve as much in relation to *ibadah* after becoming mothers seemed to bring feelings of inadequacy, especially in their early years of motherhood. Sarah, for example, said she felt like “a failure when it comes to Ramadan and practising Islam...because of the whole motherhood thing and health-wise and time-wise” (Sarah, Interview) and both Hamida and Jennifer discussed needing to “accept” their responsibilities as mothers in Ramadan and the spiritual benefits attached to that role (Hamida, Interview; Jennifer, Interview).



FIGURE 14- HAMIDA'S SON STANDING ON A PRAYER MAT (HAMIDA, DIARY, ENTRY 1)

At the same time, mothers showed a degree of understanding that the actions expected of them in Ramadan would be different to those of others – in other words, what was sacred for them in Ramadan was based on their individual circumstances. This was often accompanied by a discussion of the spiritual nature of their role as a mother. Hamida mentioned this in relation to having a child:

And maybe that [responsibilities as a mother] is also in a way worship as well, that's just my responsibility, and we're rewarded for that too – for taking care of our house and taking care of our family. So I've got to look at it in a different way. Yes, I might be doing something less. But whatever I am doing, it is what I'm meant to do as a mother and that's my responsibility now as well. (Hamida, Interview)

Echoing Hamida's position, the high status given to mothers in Islamic teachings is often discussed, with Sachedina, in a work on Islamic biomedical ethics, asserting that motherhood is considered "sacred" in the Islamic tradition arguing that "the Qur'an presents woman's womb as the source of human relationships" (2009, p.116). Cheruvallil-Contractor (2016a) draws on similar ideas as Sachedina arguing that, "in Islamic foundational texts, the institution of motherhood is a valued aspect of women's roles" (p.15). Hamida highlights above that while she can't do as much *ibadah* as she used to – reading Quran, praying etc. – her role as a mother can also be seen as "worship" and she will be rewarded for it. While others might seek the *ajr* of Ramadan through things more explicitly deemed worship, for Hamida, and other mothers, they were able to access the *ajr* of Ramadan in a different way, through their caring responsibilities. The *ajr* of Ramadan was not seen as fixed nor the same for each person but was distributed depending on individuals' specific circumstances and what they were

able to achieve. For mothers, they could access *ajr* through their parenting responsibilities and whatever rituals were feasible for them. In a similar vein, Buitelaar (1993) highlights that while some *ajr*-seeking activities are shared between men and women, others are gender-specific (pp.127-133). These ideas emphasise the ambiguous and fluid understandings of sacredness that I have argued for in this chapter, demonstrating this in the context of actions rather than time.

The understanding that women's parenting and domestic duties could be considered worship also highlights a further criticism of the sacred-profane binary. The daily tasks of motherhood became something sacred in the views of my participants, concurring with the idea expressed above that everything has the potential to be *ibadah*. This further links to Akkach's idea of a "sacred without a profane" (2005, p.164) in which no actions are inherently profane. Additionally, it relates to McGuire's (2003) critique of the sacred-profane dichotomy that resulted in women's domestic roles being "defined out" (p.7) of what it means to be religious. Consequently, McGuire states:

In order to fully understand women's lived religion, we need to appreciate their ritual practices centered around the private, domestic, familial sphere (where their roles are likely to be more active and expressive). These private sphere rituals are at least as important as participation in the public, organizational sphere (where women's ritual roles have traditionally been more passive). (p.11)

The mothers in my study complicate traditional understandings of sacred and profane by adjusting their understandings of *ibadah* in light of their personal circumstances. They also demonstrate an expression of personal agency in defining their *ibadah* and prioritising their actions according to their own needs.

Despite this, there were criticisms from participants about narratives that tell Muslim women their childcare responsibilities are *ibadah*. Jennifer said that such ideas could be "quite a powerful dialogue against women" (Jennifer, Interview), and Sarah dedicated a whole diary entry to a critique of such ideas. She attached a screenshot of a Facebook post aimed at Muslim mothers which stated that, "your devotion (*ibadah*) IS looking after your children – raising amazing humans! It's a grand and very exclusive mission" (Figure 15). Sarah expressed dissatisfaction at this as explained in her diary:

I don't like when women are comforted with the thought that their motherhood is their *ibada*, I think it's not supposed to be this way that they sacrifice their religiosity (like me), I think it would be so much better if we could help each other with kids and have a more communal life (Sarah, Diary, Entry 16)

The expressions of these women echoed those of Cheruvallil-Contractor's (2016a) Muslim participants who challenged a "religious and socio-cultural over-emphasis on motherhood and becoming a mother" (p.18) and "asserted...that there is more to a women than being a mother" (p.21).

My participants seem to try and counter patriarchal narratives around gender roles, including the idea that women should sacrifice their *ibadah* to take care of their families. At the same time, however, they accepted that their religious activities in Ramadan had to change after having children. Jennifer talked about needing to "accept that all of those things [motherhood responsibilities] can be spiritual" (Jennifer, Interview). Sarah also explained she was planning to start fasting according to the length of fasts in Saudi Arabia because it was easier for her to handle as a mother as she wouldn't have to change her routine so much (Sarah, Interview). While participants critiqued narratives around women worshipping through caring for their families, they also recognised, perhaps paradoxically, that motherhood responsibilities could contribute to their *ibadah* and be rewarded by God. While this paradox could again be seen as relating to Bauer's (2021) concept of "cultural ambiguity", it also links to wider discussions of feminism and post-feminism. McRobbie (2009, p.12) for example describes a post-feminist "double entanglement" whereby both conservative and liberal notions of women's roles and family life coexist, as well as both a support and hatred of feminist ideals. These contrasting ideas seem to exist at both societal and individual levels (McRobbie 2009). Mora (2021) further highlights how this framework is demonstrated in the online sphere of *hijabi*⁷³ fashion bloggers (p.178). Similarly, through the concept of *ibadah*, my participants both upheld the importance of a mother's role in the Islamic tradition while challenging the idea that they should make sacrifices for it. Their comments can then be interpreted in a similar way as the participants in Cheruvallil-Contractor's (2016a) work whose "discussions of motherhood indicate a refreshing pairing between classical Islamic sciences and contemporary feminist thought" (p.26).

Despite their paradoxical views, the mothers in my sample demonstrated an understanding of an individualised sacred whereby the sacredness of actions in Ramadan was context dependent. *Ajr* was not, to their understanding, given consistently for specific actions, but was distributed varyingly depending on what each individual was able to achieve. In this way, mothers in my research seemed to have come to terms with an individualised sense of sacredness in contrast with other participants. These others included Noor, a medical student, who dreaded the thought of having to work in Ramadan (Noor, Interview), and Amin who described his worst experience of Ramadan as being one where he had moved away from his mosque and community and was working full-time

⁷³ *Hijabi* refers to a woman who wears the hijab/headscarf.

(Amin, Interview). Mothers' acceptance of an individualised sacred resembles academic Khadijah Elshayyal's personal reflection on Ramadan, motherhood and the pandemic where she argues that she and other Muslim mothers seem to have "come to terms with the challenges associated with a Ramadhan⁷⁴ in solitude" more than other Muslims (Elshayyal 2021, p.76).

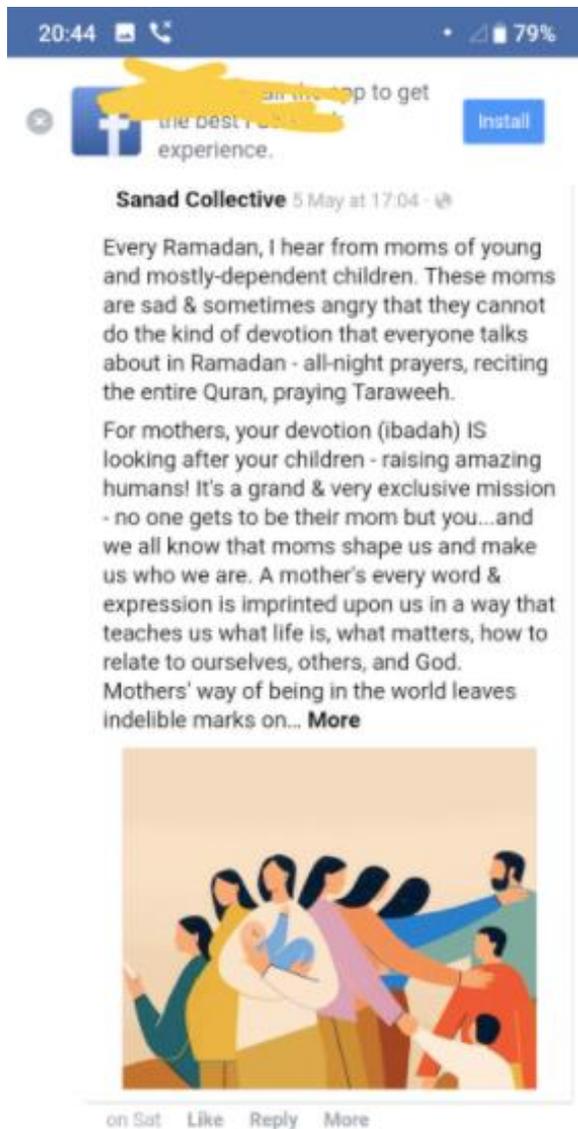


FIGURE 15- SCREENSHOT OF A FACEBOOK POST ABOUT THE VIRTUES OF A MOTHER'S ROLE IN RAMADAN (SARAH, DIARY, ENTRY 16)

I have highlighted in this section (Section 6) how participants understood sacred actions in Ramadan to be ambiguous and diffuse, whereby any action could be considered *ibadah*. They took steps to "domesticate" this ambiguity however, through prioritising actions based on whether they were explicit acts of *ibadah* (fasting, prayer, reading Quran etc.) and judging how beneficial they were.

⁷⁴ Alternative spelling of Ramadan.

I explored discussions of TV habits to demonstrate this. I have also discussed an understanding of an individualised sacredness – though within a communal religious context – particularly present amongst mothers in my sample. Through this understanding, these mothers prioritised their childcare responsibilities whilst also making effort to fulfil more explicit acts of *ibadah* during the month, with the understanding that both domestic activities and religious rituals counted as worship. This individualised and diffuse conception of sacredness complicates the sacred-profane binary arguing more towards “a sacred without a profane” (Akkach 2005, p.164) and echoing work looking at the “dynamic nature” of sacredness in the Islamic tradition (Gottschalk 2013, p.13).

7. CONCLUSION

After outlining relevant literature (Section 2), I started this chapter by outlining (Section 3) how sacredness for my participants was constructed around concepts of *ajr* (reward from God), *baraka* (blessing), and the commemoration of religious-historical events, concurring with other Islamic discussions of sacredness (Ahmed, A. 2016; Katz 2007; Gottschalk 2013). I also outlined the delineated nature of time during Ramadan concluding that Ramadan symbolised a profusion of sacredness. In Section 4, I argue however, that sacredness can also be understood as diffuse and ambiguous in line with Bauer’s theory of “cultural ambiguity” (2021). I provide examples of the variation in practice and opinion when determining the start and end of Ramadan as well as the unknowability of *Laylatul Qadr* in the views of participants.

The remainder of the chapter focused on how this abundance and ambiguity of sacredness how time was structured and domesticated during the holy month, particularly in reference to a hierarchy culminating in *Laylatul Qadr* (Section 5). The hierarchy also critiques the sacred-profane dichotomy by assigning different levels of sacredness to different periods, meaning no period is inherently profane. Another way of domesticating the sacredness was through the prioritising of actions (Section 6) with explicit *ibadah* (reading Quran, praying etc.) being emphasised and other actions judged on the benefit they provided. I discussed participants’ changed Ramadan TV habits as an example of this and elaborated on an individualised understanding of sacredness amongst mothers. Participants’ broad and expansive definition of *ibadah* – which could potentially include anything – further complicates the sacred-profane binary by highlighting the potential for any act to be sacred.

Overall, this chapter has used Bauer’s theory of cultural ambiguity (2021) as a framework for discussing the sacredness of Ramadan and the ways in which Muslims respond to that sacredness through action. I have argued Ramadan’s sacredness is perceived as ambiguous, and strategies – such as the structuring of time and the prioritisation of actions – are implemented to domesticate this

ambiguity. Contrasting Bauer however, I demonstrate how a tolerance of ambiguity was common amongst my participants complicating his argument that such a tolerance has diminished amongst Muslims today. As such, this chapter provides a basis for other scholars of contemporary Islam, and indeed other religions and societies, to apply Bauer's theory to their work. I have also built upon emerging studies on Islamic sacredness, suggesting a diffuse and ambiguous understanding of sacredness amongst my participants, supporting Akkach's concept of "a sacred without a profane" (2005, p.164). My final findings chapter expands further on the idea of cultural ambiguity, specifically in relation to conflicting attitudes and practices towards food during the holy month.

CHAPTER 7 – THE PARADOX OF FOOD: REJECTING AND REJOICING

“So I guess Ramadan- it's kind of like a paradox because Ramadan is about not eating food but it's also about food [laughing].” (Noor, Interview)

1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I describe the ways in which the various meanings attached to food in relation to Ramadan represented a paradox. On one hand, participants demonstrated a rejection of food and the physical pleasures associated with it, particularly linked to the fast; on the other, there was an apparent rejoicing in eating as food took on a celebratory tone. While fasting can be seen as an ascetic ritual, the attitudes and practices of my participants contrast Weber's presentation of the ascetic Protestant ethic (2001 [1930]) which strongly rejects material and bodily enjoyment, this ethic developing in the context of modernity and post-Reformation. Furthermore, while the paradox of food I describe is demonstrative of Bauer's (2021) concept of “cultural ambiguity” – i.e. excessive and sometimes contradictory meanings are applied to food – it also contrasts Bauer's contention that such ambiguity is being lost in modern Islamic cultures due to a Western emphasis on unequivocality. By complicating both Bauer's and Weber's arguments which rely on the impact of modernity, I critique the idea of the fundamental shift between pre-modern and modern thinking which dominates much of the sociology of religion. My findings also provide a critique of the boundaries between material and spiritual, ascetic and worldly, which have traditionally prevailed in studies of religion but are being increasingly questioned (McGuire 2003).

I begin (Section 2) by outlining the theories relevant my discussion including Bauer's (2021) cultural ambiguity (Bauer 2021) and Weber's work on the Protestant Ethic (2001 [1930]). Secondly, Section 3 provides a brief overview to the role of fasting and food during Ramadan introducing readers to the ways they were conceived paradoxically by participants. I also highlight how existing studies of Ramadan have touched upon this alimentary paradox. The remainder of the chapter explores this paradox in more depth. Section 4 discusses how food was de-emphasised during Ramadan in relation to the abstinence required by fasting, keeping food “simple” and not wasting time or food. Additionally, Section 4.4 highlights the emphasis on keeping food healthy and nutritious but not indulgent which is an apt example of the paradox. Section 5 then explores ways in which food became prominent during the holy month, through communal eating and cooking, efforts to make food special, Ramadan traditions and sharing food with others. These practices, I argue, demonstrate how the emphasis on food in Ramadan is largely aimed toward communality and sharing with others. Section 6 uses participant case studies to highlight some of the challenges in managing the ambiguous

attitude towards food in the context of Ramadan. I conclude (Section 7) that the asceticism displayed by participants in my research complicates certain ideas about the way in which modernity has influenced religion today.

2. EXISTING THEORY: AMBIGUITY, ASCETICISM AND MODERNITY

2.1 ISLAM AND AMBIGUITY

I have already introduced in Bauer's (2021) idea of cultural ambiguity which he explains as a phenomenon whereby different "discourses", "meanings" and "interpretations" are attributed to the same object, practice or idea by a particular social group (p.10). In this chapter, I apply this idea to perceptions and practices related to food arguing that, in Ramadan, food was both rejected and celebrated amongst my participants. This idea of ambiguity and paradox links to Shahab Ahmed's assertion (2016) that, to understand Islam, one must first understand the "capaciousness, complexity, and, often, *outright contradiction*" (p.6, italics in original) that has persisted throughout its history. This "non-resolution of truth" (p.278), as Ahmed defines it, is a key characteristic of Muslim societies and a running theme throughout his book. These paradoxical ideas are demonstrated in the understandings of food present within my fieldwork. While Bauer (2021) suggests that a "tolerance" of ambiguity amongst contemporary Muslims is diminishing however, my findings demonstrate how the phenomenon exists today (as also demonstrated in the previous chapter). Additionally, I build upon Levine's suggestion that such ambiguity has a "socially binding function" (1985, p.35) conveying how ambiguous conceptions of food can improve sociality.

2.2 WEBER AND THE PROTESTANT ETHIC

The practices of my participants conveyed here contrast Weber's understanding of asceticism as outlined in his influential text *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (2001 [1930]). Weber's work focuses on the development of Protestantism after the Reformation. He argues that Protestant values of asceticism combined with a focus on fulfilling worldly duties contributed (somewhat) to modern, Western capitalism. Weber's discussion of, as he terms it, "worldly Protestant asceticism" (p.115) is most relevant here, which he contrasts to Catholic monasticism, which aimed to drive people "farther away from everyday life" (p.74). On the contrary, the development of Protestantism, according to Weber, saw a "transformation of asceticism to activity within the world" (p.73) meaning there was religious emphasis on working and particularly the idea of a "calling". While fasting amongst my participants cannot really be defined as a monastic activity – it is not limited to a particular group within society who are expected to withdraw from everyday life – it can, to some

extent, be viewed in the context of worldly asceticism. My participants exercised self-discipline and restraint whilst going about their daily lives, which included work, study and family responsibilities⁷⁵.

Weber further argues the Protestant ethic “acted powerfully against the spontaneous enjoyment of possessions” and served as a “campaign against the temptations of the flesh, and the dependence on external things” (p.115). While some such ideas were apparent in my study – including feelings of guilt amongst participants who over-indulged (Section 4.4) – overall, my findings demonstrate how the enjoyment *and* denial of food were held together, and paradoxically tolerated, during the month of Ramadan. Thus, Weber’s theorisation of the impact of modernity did not fit the experience of my participants. This calls into question the relevance of the premodern-modern framework in the context of my study. In the next section, I introduce the concept of Muslim fasting in Ramadan and some of the key rituals and roles of food, before moving on to discuss the paradox in more depth.

3. FOOD AND FASTING IN RAMADAN

Fasting for Muslims, almost by definition, is a practice which encourages a shift of attention away from food and bodily desires. The ritual involves abstaining from food, drink and sexual intercourse for a significant portion of the day: dawn until sunset. In Ramadan, the fast is obligated on healthy, adult Muslims⁷⁶ for 29 or 30 days having a clear impact on their daily life and routine, as my participants described. As explored in Chapter 5, there was a strong emphasis on spirituality in Ramadan and the fast played an important role. This role was described by Sarah, who felt fasting was “to get to a higher spiritual plane...when you stop feeding your body, you’re feeding the soul, and it has more space” (Sarah, Interview). Sarah highlights the idea that moving the focus away from food and the body in Ramadan allows one to focus on the spiritual side. Other participants linked this to the Islamic concept of the *nafs* – the bodily self and desires – describing how fasting is about “fighting your *nafs*, making your *nafs* smaller” (Jennifer, Interview) and “not surrendering your *nafs* to food and drink” (Layla, Interview). Similar ideas about controlling the *nafs* are discussed in Rytter’s (2016) study of a Ramadan *itikaf* retreat with Dutch Muslims, and Hellman’s (2008) discussion of eating practices during Ramadan in Java.

⁷⁵ However, it is important to note these worldly responsibilities were not the priority for religiosity in Ramadan and had to be managed alongside participant’s *ibadah* as discussed in Chapter 6, Section 6.

⁷⁶ Those commonly understood to be exempt from fasting include pregnant, breastfeeding and menstruating women, children before they reach puberty (although many start fasting before this point), those with a physical or mental illness/ailment which makes it difficult to fast, a travelling person (although there is a difference of opinion on this).

Conversely perhaps, food also plays an important role during the holy month. Participants described how their food intake in Ramadan largely revolved around '*suhoor*' (also known as '*sehri*'), the meal before dawn, and '*iftar*', the meal after breaking the fast at sunset. While *iftar* was a communal meal for nearly all participants (unless they were living alone or away from a wider Muslim community), practices around *suhoor* varied. Some participants however, expressed a sense of nostalgia when recounting memories of waking up for *suhoor* with their families as a child (Rayyan, Interview). The collective act of eating, as well as the sharing of food in Ramadan (as highlighted in Chapter 5, Section 3.2) demonstrate the important social and communal function of food during the month, somewhat contrasting the rejection of food described above.

These arguably contradictory attitudes towards food were consciously acknowledged by participants, as highlighted in the comments below:

Every year I try and calm people down with the food because it's not about food, but it kind of is about food and [laughs]... (Jennifer, Interview)

So I guess Ramadan- it's kind of like a paradox because Ramadan is about not eating food but it's also about food [laughing]. (Noor, Interview)

Even though my mum *did* provide all this food, the point was not to provide all the food [laughing] (Rayyan, Interview)

It is interesting to note that the recognition of the paradox was often accompanied by laughter. The laughter seems to symbolise a recognition of the unusual and paradoxical nature of food in Ramadan, but also perhaps an awkwardness stemming from a difficulty reconciling competing ideas. One could speculate this discomfort is reflective of an "intolerance" of ambiguity that Bauer (2021) outlines. Given other findings that will be discussed in this chapter however, it seems more likely that such discomfort is a result of trying to express this paradox in a modern and/or Western context that, according to Bauer, rejects ambiguity. This point may be particularly salient since most of my participants were brought up in the UK.

Paradoxical attitudes towards food have been highlighted in other contexts in relation to Ramadan. Marjo Buitelaar notes how "fasting is paradoxically accompanied by a preoccupation with food" (1993, p.184) in Moroccan conceptions of the month. Hellman (2008) further outlines the social

function of eating in Ramadan and describes the “ambiguity of *nafsu*⁷⁷” (p.222). Rather than symbolising a paradox however, Hellman argues that:

During Ramadan, the ambivalence towards consumption is resolved... understandings about eating and personal needs (*nafsu*) are reformulated through the experience of fasting (p.220)

I uphold through my findings that paradoxical attitudes towards food persisted in Ramadan. The remainder of this chapter elaborates on this paradox in the context of my fieldwork beginning with ways in which participants rejected the focus on food during the holy month.

4. REJECTING FOOD: “IT’S NOT ABOUT THE FOOD”

4.1 ABSTINENCE

In 2020, fasting was observed by all participants in my research except two whose illnesses prevented them from doing so; other participants did not fast specific days due to illness or menstruation (which gives women an exemption from the practice). Regardless of whether they were fasting or not, the ritual was held to be an important and virtuous practice by all. As already described, the physical element of the fast involves abstaining from food and drink between dawn and sunset. It also includes refraining from sexual relations though this was rarely mentioned by participants. Inherent in the practice is a denial of bodily desires. Mariya referred to the abstention from food, drink and sex saying that “you suppress your animal side, the body needs to focus on your spiritual...then you know your body needs are minimal, less than you expect” (Mariya, Interview). Mariya suggests fasting is about the denial of food and the physical in order to prioritise the spiritual.

This emphasis on spirituality was echoed by others. When asked what the most important part of Ramadan was, discussions of spirituality and connection with God commonly featured in responses. Participants also conveyed how controlling the *nafs* (bodily desires) helped enhance spirituality as described in the previous section. However, the body was not completely relegated in Ramadan, but rather the focus shifted – both physically and spiritually – from eating to worshipping, as Layla describes:

When you don’t eat and when you aren’t surrendering your *nafs* to food and drink and all of that stuff, you know, you do have time and you do have- your energy is focused elsewhere. And that inevitably goes towards prayer and goes towards Allah. (Layla, Interview)

⁷⁷ Alternative word for *nafs* amongst Hellman’s (2008) participants.

The emphasis on embodied *ibadah* in Chapter 5 further supports this idea, as does Winchester and Pagis' (2022) study suggesting that religious fasting can heighten physical awareness rather than diminish the body's role. The physical and spiritual aspects of fasting discussed here complicate some of the existing binaries between physicality and spirituality in studies of religion (as discussed in Chapter 5). Nonetheless, the abstinence required by fasting also represents a way in which the month symbolised the turning away from a bodily need in relation to food.

4.2 KEEPING IT "SIMPLE"

The reported simplicity of Ramadan food was another way participants used the holy month as an opportunity to reject the prominence of food in their lives. The word "simple" was often used to describe food in diaries and interviews. Mariya's photo of her fish-finger sandwich (Figure 16) epitomises this, with Mariya noting that she chose it as her first diary image "because I want to emphasize that Ramadan is not about food. Simple iftar works well too!" (Mariya, Diary, Entry 1). This insistence that Ramadan is "not about food" was something Mariya conveyed repeatedly throughout interview, setting her apart from other participants who were more moderate in their approaches. Despite this, others echoed the idea that food consumption should be limited and treated as a necessity during the month. Sarah explains this:

It's not about the food. It's about being grateful for just satisfying your stomach, having the moisture in your veins, you know, from the *dua*⁷⁸, experiencing that your body is blessed with and satisfied with little, just enough to get to the next day...we don't make a very big deal out of food in Ramadan. (Sarah, Interview)

Sarah went on to describe how Ramadan food in her household was "simple", "easy" and "quick to cook" (Sarah, Interview). Similarly, Rayyan said that although there is a tradition of making "fancier food" in Ramadan amongst her mother's generation, she simplified meals:

I won't have a starter every day. And if sometimes the starter is how long it takes me to chop a fruit salad or d'you know, something very simple. And the drinks as well it's just literally just squeezing lemonade. It's not time-consuming. And I don't make dessert and I only make one meal. (Rayyan, Interview)

⁷⁸ Sarah paraphrases here a commonly read *dua* for breaking the fast: "Thirst has gone, the arteries are moist, and the reward is sure, if Allah wills" (Sunan Abi Dawud, Book 14, Hadith 45). Available at: <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:2357> [Accessed: 8 August 2022].

While this discourse of “simple” Ramadan food was common among participants, there was no clear consensus on what it meant. In the examples above, Sarah implies simple food is about eating a small amount while Rayyan suggests it means cooking a small number of dishes or reducing cooking time. Images from participant diaries which describe their food as “simple” further highlight different ways this idea is interpreted. Mariya’s fish finger sandwich (Figure 16) appears rather frugal in comparison to both Nicola’s (Figure 17) and Syeda’s (Figure 18) photos, and contrasts them in consisting of presumably pre-made ingredients (fish fingers, bread, shop-bought coleslaw). There is also a variation in the number of different items with Syeda’s image including several, apparently home-cooked, dishes including samosas, pakoras, a wrap and some noodles or spaghetti, contrasting Nicola and Mariya’s photos which contain a more limited selection. For Syeda then, meals need not be limited to one type of food, and it is possible she described her “simple vegetable bake” as such due to the absence of meat (Syeda, Diary, Entry 28). While the idea of simple food was supported by many participants, their photos and comments implied they held varying understandings of what this meant.

It was interesting to observe, as with Rayyan, that some participants perceived their parents’ generation to be more extravagant when it came to food in Ramadan. These participants tended to be in their twenties and thirties and were often second-generation migrants with their parents having settled in the UK from abroad. Amin, for example, described the food he and his wife made in Ramadan as “simplistic” in contrast to meals his parents prepared:

I think when it comes to my parents, it's more like, not spectacular, but they *do* make an effort to make like- have more food on the table and it's more of a special thing. And I think it's more because- I guess for them, that's what they're used to. And like when their kids come home, they want to make it a special thing for them as well. So I guess food's special, but not *as* special when it's just me and my wife. (Amin, Interview, italics indicate emphasis in speech)

I observed similar narratives online, including in a cartoon created by a UK-based Muslim illustrator depicted in Figure 19. The cartoon also uses the term “simple” in a humorous, almost mocking way, which seems to be linked to the myriad and contradictory meanings ascribed to the word. These examples point to a possible generational shift in attitudes and practices towards food in Ramadan with a younger generation being more conservative in their preparation of food. However, participants generally did not negatively criticise the practices of their parents with Amin noting his parents’ desire to make food exciting for him and his siblings and Rayyan noting that her mother was a stay-at-home mum so had time to devote to cooking. I argue the change in practice amongst these participants did not necessarily symbolise a negative perception of food or an intolerance of its

ambiguous nature in Ramadan, but likely resulted from various contextual factors. It is worth noting that these discussions were, inevitably, not present amongst the converts in my sample and were less common amongst participants who were still living at home with their parents.

While I have demonstrated the variable interpretations of “simple” food amongst my participants, I have highlighted that keeping food “simple” was an important discursive principle. The linguistic ambiguity around this descriptor, I argue, acts as part of the cultural ambiguity around Ramadan food more broadly. This relates to Levine’s idea of the “socially binding function” (1985, p.35) of ambiguous terms since my participants agreed that Ramadan food should be simple, while interpreting its meaning variably. The term “simple” also demonstrates the paradoxical space food occupied in Ramadan. While this was apparent between different participants, through their contrasting views of the ideal Ramadan meal, it was also apparent in individual cases. Deena provides an example of this in a diary entry in which she describes her simple iftar and experimental baking during Ramadan, noting that “Ramadan is definitely one of those times in the year when everything slows down so much you put effort into simple elements of life” (Deena, Diary, Day 21). The contrast between the words “simple” and “effort” is noticeable yet not something Deena is uncomfortable with. Nonetheless, the discourse of simplicity was one way in which participants sought to reduce the focus on food in Ramadan.



FIGURE 16- MARIYA’S IFTAR (MARIYA, DIARY, ENTRY 1)



FIGURE 17- NICOLA'S *IFTAR* (NICOLA, DIARY, ENTRY 1)



FIGURE 18- SYEDA'S *IFTAR* (SYEDA, DIARY, ENTRY 28)

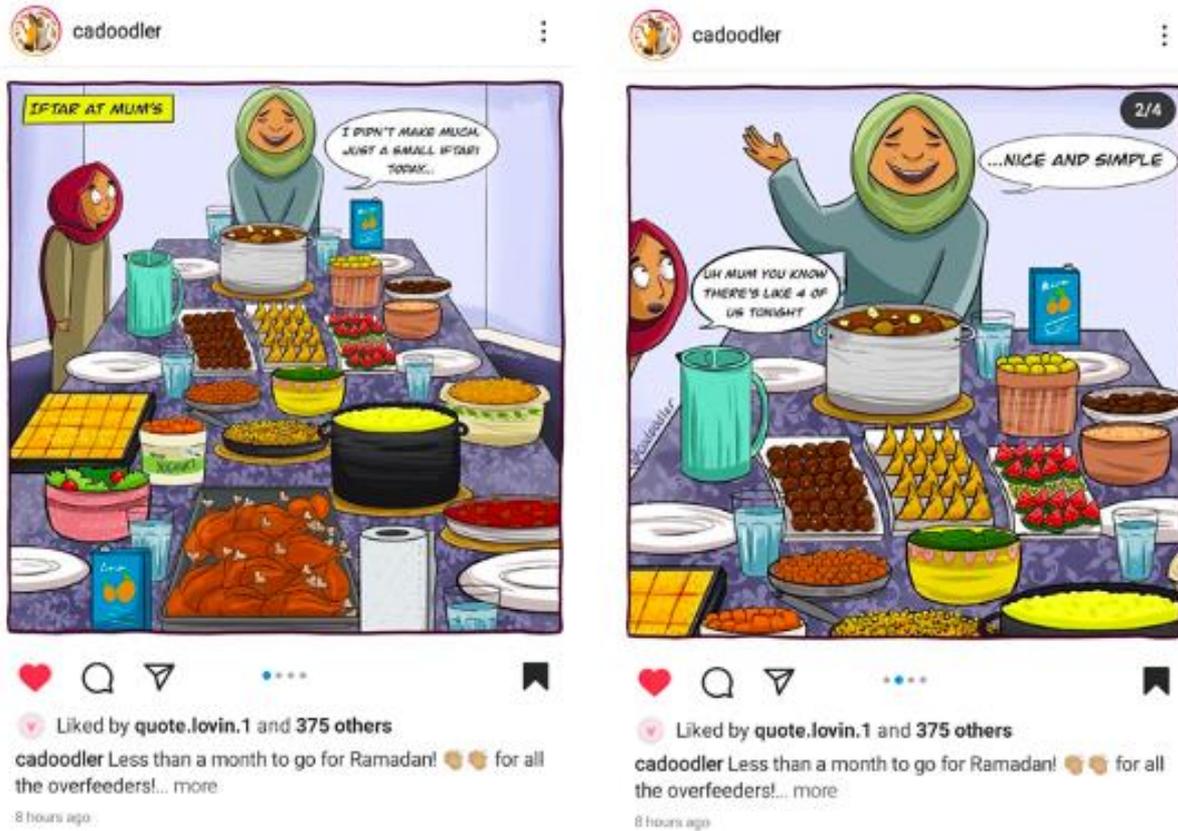


FIGURE 19- CARTOON CREATED BY UK-BASED ILLUSTRATOR “CADOODLER” / “JESSIEB” POSTED ON INSTAGRAM ON 6TH MARCH 2022 (ACCESSED: 6 JUNE 2022)

4.3 NOT WASTING TIME AND FOOD

Linked to the concept of simplicity was the assertion that one should not spend too much time cooking in Ramadan or make lavish amounts of food. Rayyan’s suggestion above that cooking should not be “time-consuming” (Rayyan, Interview) was echoed by others with an emphasis on not “wasting” time in the kitchen. As Amin notes:

I think we basically just try and keep food really simplistic for us in Ramadan, like when it's just me and my wife, because we don't want to waste time basically spending hours cooking every day, and not have that time to just sit down and focus on *ibadah*. (Amin, Interview)

Amin’s statement highlights again the idea that the body is not disregarded in Ramadan, as mentioned in Section 3, but the focus moves from food and eating to *ibadah*. Similarly, Sarah suggested it was better to spend time “being together or doing *ibadah*” (Sarah, Interview) rather than cooking, emphasising the role of family and communality during the month (see Chapter 5). Sabrina also notes how not wasting food reduces the prominence of consumption in Ramadan:

For me, fasting was switch off from, not thinking about food, but switch off from making it as important as it is...making a lot of food, I believe during Ramadan is wrong. From all aspects.

From wastage, because in Ramadan, you have to learn and you must learn how poor people, they live. (Sabrina, Interview)

Sabrina continued to describe how excessive food is bad for your health and contributed to “wasting a lot of time in the kitchen” (Sabrina, Interview).

The importance of not wasting time in Ramadan was emphasised throughout my data and concurred with the need to “make the most of the time” described in Chapter 6. This was due to the sacredness and *ajr* inherent in Ramadan as participants sought to attain as much reward from God as possible during the period. This relates to Weber’s discussion of the puritan idea that wasting time is perceived as “the deadliest of sins” with the emphasis on righteous activity to “increase the glory of God” (2001 [1930], p.104). It is interesting that discussions during my fieldwork reflect the ascetic ethic Weber describes as participants were critical about the excessive waste of time or food. Simultaneously, however, there is a conflict with the Protestant condemnation of “enjoyment” and “temptations of the flesh” (p.104) regarding the celebratory tone of food that will be outlined in Section 5. Nonetheless, the narratives of not wasting time or food further evidence how participants sought to decrease the importance of food during the month. Before turning towards the celebratory elements of food in Ramadan, I discuss the concept of healthy food arguing that it helps bridge the gap between the denial of bodily pleasures on one hand and the fulfilment of them on the other, with an emphasis on food being nutritious but not excessive.

4.4 HEALTHY FOOD: NUTRITIOUS NOT INDULGENT

Related to the concept of eating simply in Ramadan, were discussions around the healthiness of food. A common ideal was that food consumed in Ramadan should be “healthy” and not indulgent suggesting a shifting of focus away from food during the month. However, this was accompanied by an understanding that food was needed to nourish oneself through the difficulty of the fast. Eating healthily, I argue, was a way for participants to maintain balance and moderation in relation to food in Ramadan.

Evidencing this, participants often described their *iftar*, *suhoor* or other snacks as “healthy” in their diaries. Nabilah included an image (Figure 20) captioned, “My healthy fotour⁷⁹” in her first entry (Nabilah, Diary, Entry 1) and Rayyan depicted the “healthy” fruit salad (Figure 21), also known as “fruit chaat”, she had prepared (Rayyan, Diary, Entry 7). It is notable that both images contain fresh fruit or vegetables, something shared by many photos described as “healthy” by participants. It was much less common for food to be described as unhealthy, indulgent or similar. Participants also documented

⁷⁹ A variation of the word *iftar* (with the same meaning).

ways they had adapted recipes to make them healthier. Rayyan sent an example of this in Figure 22 noting the following: “Traditional fried food iftar, although we now cook it in the oven/grill or shallow fry to make it healthier, I still only prepare it once a week” (Rayyan, Diary, Entry 2). Similarly, Taiba prepared a traditional Singaporean dish (Figure 23) but described how she “made it vegan with tofu and vegetables. Usually it is a meat dish” (Taiba, Diary, Entry 15).

It is interesting that Taiba refers to her food as “vegan” suggesting participants’ perceptions may have been influenced by wider discussions of lifestyles and dietary preferences. Similarly, participant efforts to avoid or reduce fried food seem to reflect public health messages about Ramadan in Britain. Advice to avoid fried foods, use alternative cooking methods and even “keep your food intake simple” is listed amongst a range of tips for fasting Muslims on an NHS website (NHS Basildon and Brentwood, undated). That is not to say discourses of health are absent from traditional emic understandings of Ramadan. Buitelaar’s study in Morocco, for example, noted the common perception that fasting “promotes health” and “is good for the body” (1993, p.108). My findings demonstrate however how public discourse interacts with Islamic teachings about fasting.

It seemed that discussions around the generational differences in attitudes towards the simplicity of Ramadan food were replicated in discussions of the healthiness of food. Rayyan, for example, described “trying to balance between tradition and health” (Rayyan, Diary, Entry 2), or elsewhere “health and culture” (Rayyan, Diary, Entry 7), in reference to adapting traditional Ramadan foods or borrowing traditions from other cultures. Similarly, Hamida stated the following, criticising an older generation’s attitude to food:

The food in our house is very different to the foods in other Asian people's houses. Most of the South Asians - you probably may know [laughs] - is very unhealthy food, fried food. As soon as Ramadan comes, *my* side, the Pakistani side is that you make unhealthy food, unhealthy drinks and that's your food that you eat. My husband's side is a bit um [pause] not very healthy at all but they've got traditional food. (Hamida, Interview)

Particularly among South Asian participants, there was a perception that their ‘traditional’ Ramadan foods, those prepared by their first-generation parents, were not as healthy as they should be. This hints towards elements of social control when it comes to food in Ramadan although it was difficult to observe this more explicitly in my data. This is perhaps linked to the impact of the lockdown in that people were more isolated and not visiting each other for *iftar*.

On the other hand, participants demonstrated how they judged their own standards of eating during the month. Whilst healthy food was the goal, participants seemed self-critical – often with some humour – when they strayed from this ideal. Some examples of this are below:

Still trying to be healthy, I did a bit more exercise before maghrib & then had soup & fruit & something sweet afterwards which probs spoilt all my efforts 😞 (Jane, Diary, Entry 2; emoji in original entry)

It's time for the weigh in.. gained 700g! Must of been all the treats and cakes at iftar! (James, Diary, Entry 29)

My stomach didn't feel so good. Heartburn. I guessed from all the spicy food, black tea, vinegar, and fasting. Luckily, had my period so could take the medicine. Need to take care more of what I eat. Being healthy is something that you appreciate more when it's gone. (Hasina, Diary, Entry 12 and 13 [combined])

These comments emphasise the importance placed on healthy eating even when participants did not perceive themselves to have met this goal. The sense of guilt represented by the above statements again links to Weberian ideas about the Protestant disdain for the enjoyment of worldly things, namely food in this instance. At the same time, the humour used suggests participants were not judging themselves too harshly.

The emphasis on health amongst the majority seemed to be that food should be moderate: nutritious but not over-indulgent. Batool summarised this aptly:

This Ramadan I'm very proud of myself, keeping it healthy and light for iftar and not over indulging in an overload of unhealthy food. (Batool, Diary, Entry 2)

Participants also noted that eating too much in Ramadan negatively affected their bodies, and, consequently, reduced one's ability to worship: "And it *is* true that if you overfill yourself, you're more likely to feel sleepy, you're less likely to want to stay up at night [in worship], you're more likely just to want to sleep" (Jennifer, Interview). Countless times during interviews, participants described how, despite the hunger one feels when fasting, it's not possible to eat a lot due to the physical impact of fasting on the body resulting in feeling fuller, quicker. Despite this, participants recognised the need to sustain the body and nourish oneself against the physical challenge of the fast. Jennifer comments on this, gesturing towards the paradoxical relationship with food during the holy month:

Every year I try and calm people down with the food because it's not about food, but it kind of is about food and [laughs] I think that there is- [pause] with these very long fasts that we're

having at the moment [pause] people do need the food. You know, and it has to be balanced and it has to be healthy. But you've got to get what you need in that very short amount of time, haven't you? (Jennifer, Interview)

Others similarly noted the importance of hydration throughout the night, as emphasised in George's diary. George attached a photo of a 2.5 pint beer glass that he owned before he became Muslim, which he had repurposed for use in Ramadan (Figure 24) noting that "I finish at least one of those every night and then try and drink on top of that as well" (George, Diary, Entry 7). Annabel also mentioned the importance of "long lasting carbohydrates" for nutrition (Annabel, Interview [Email]). It seemed however, that navigating the balance between nutrition and indulgence was aimed towards enabling the body to worship, again highlighting the embodied shift from eating to *ibadah*.

In common with the aim for "simple" food in Ramadan, the concept of "healthy" food was suitably ambiguous with no clear rules on what it meant. Participants described various ways in which they strived to be healthy including not frying food, avoiding meat, or losing weight, and images of "healthy" food were diverse. The ambiguous nature of healthy eating again points to the paradoxical relationship with food in Ramadan. Navigating the delicate balance between nutrition and indulgence, however, seemed to be a way of "domesticating" (Bauer 2021) the ambiguity of this relationship. Participants used food to nourish themselves through the fast and fulfil their *ibadah* whilst avoiding excess which could inhibit their worship. They had a moderate approach to food which reduced eating and enabled *ibadah*. Hellman's (2008) research reported a similar recognition of the role of the body in Ramadan rituals, suggesting that "even the needs of the soul must be moderated so that they do not exhaust the body, which is necessary for worship" (p.219). While this section has highlighted how food was de-emphasised in Ramadan - through the focus on abstinence, simplicity, not wasting, and health - the next section demonstrates the other side of the paradox in which the role of food and eating was more overtly pronounced.



FIGURE 20- NABILAH'S "HEALTHY" FIRST *IFTAR* (NABILAH, DIARY, ENTRY 1)



FIGURE 21- RAYYAN'S "HEALTHY" FRUIT SALAD PREPARED FOR *IFTAR* (RAYYAN, DIARY, ENTRY 7)



FIGURE 22- RAYYAN'S *IFTAR* (RAYYAN, DIARY, ENTRY 2)



FIGURE 23- TAIBA'S VEGAN CURRY *IFTAR* (TAIBA, DIARY, ENTRY 15)



FIGURE 24- GEORGE'S GLASS WHICH HE USES TO KEEP HIMSELF HYDRATED IN RAMADAN (GEORGE, DIARY, ENTRY 7)

5. REJOICING IN FOOD

5.1 COOKING AND EATING TOGETHER

Despite efforts to reduce attention on food in Ramadan, there were indications that food was something to be celebrated. *Iftar*, typically, was an important ritual where participants came together with their families or wider communities to eat. While this was enacted differently during the lockdown, *iftar* was still an occasion where those living in the same households often ate communally. These collective meals were described as distinctive to Ramadan since the temporal boundaries of the fast meant people were forced to come together at the same time, either at home or in the mosque. Deena describes this tradition in her home:

Regular life always means we all eat at different times but Ramadan is the one time we all sit together watching a terrible Arab tv show and laughing together. Nothing fancy but wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. (Deena, Diary, Day 4)

Deena's final sentence highlights the value placed on eating together, something echoed by others. Layla, for example, told me in her interview how she really struggled with Ramadan under lockdown because of the absence of the mosque. Layla would normally go to the mosque for *iftar* nearly every day with her mother and sister as well as staying for *taraweeh* prayers. She highlights below how the *iftar* meal is prioritised in Ramadan.

You know, work isn't everything. And that if I need to leave early to make *iftar*, you know, I'm not going to sit on a train and have *iftar* - that's just not happening [laughs]. You know, life is better than having *iftar* on a train by yourself. It's bigger than that, it's bigger than work. (Layla, Interview)

Sitting together and breaking the fast as a family – especially given the pandemic - was described fondly by numerous participants. Additionally, nostalgic childhood memories of Ramadan often recounted occasions of eating together during *suhoor* or *iftar*.

This communality was extended to food preparation, especially in the context of the lockdown in 2020. Cooking was often described as a family activity and a way to bring families closer during the holy month. Leena documents several instances of cooking with her children, especially baking cakes and breads together to share with others (Leena, Diary). Rachel also included images of her young daughter helping her prepare *iftar* (Rachel, Diary, Entry 4) and making dinosaur-shaped biscuits together (Rachel, Diary, Entry 12). Contrasting the discussion of wasting time in the kitchen above, such opportunities were valued by participants. Thus, the collective aspects of cooking and eating in Ramadan was a way in which food was emphasised and celebrated.

5.2 MAKING FOOD SPECIAL

There was also a sense that food was made more special or 'fancy' during Ramadan, although, as mentioned above, this was often referring to participants' parents' generation. While Amin described the "simplistic" nature of Ramadan food in his household, he contrasted this with the tradition of his parents who "make an effort" to make meals more "special" in Ramadan (Amin, Interview). This was similar to the comments shared by Rayyan noting that her mother prepared "fancier food" for *iftar*. Similar thoughts were expressed by Noor – an undergraduate student living at home with her parents – who reminisced on the way food was used to make fasting "more exciting" when she was younger.

I remember like for example, going to the supermarkets and picking out treats to eat at *iftar*. My parents, even when my younger siblings and stuff were starting to fast, they would always make sure that they bought some treats for us at *iftar*, just like to encourage us and to make the fasting something a little bit more exciting. (Noor, Interview)

Ramadan seemed to be a time of culinary experimentation, even amongst those who described their meals as simple. Participants tried making new dishes they had never made before or did not usually make throughout the year. Zahra, for example, described how her mum had made pizza from scratch for the first time (Figure 25). Rayyan attached a photo of the *sharbats* (fruit-based

drinks) she had made (Figure 26) implying they were a new cooking experience for her (Rayyan, Diary, Entry 10). Rayyan further described, in both diary and interview, how she used Ramadan as a chance to cook popular Ramadan foods from diverse cultures. Thus, there was an emphasis on cooking in Ramadan, particularly on putting in more effort and trying different things, which contributed to the celebratory nature of the month.

Treating yourself in Ramadan was seen as an acceptable practice by some, as described in Noor's comment above. Jennifer, a mother of three children, expressed a similar sentiment. Whilst she highlighted the importance of controlling the *nafs* (desires) in Ramadan and "feeling hunger", Jennifer continued with the following:

But then again, I sort of say that in an awareness of being kind of compassionate to yourself? And kind of going, yeah, but it's okay to give myself a little treat. So what I will do for me is that I will say, 'yes, you know, I'm not going to give myself a luxury banquet'... but once or twice, we'll have a really nice meal and we *will* have, you know, a few nice things. And it's okay to treat myself with things that normally might make me feel a little bit guilty every now and then. You know. And for the kids, it's absolutely fine that they have stuff they wouldn't normally have every day. Because, because they're still very young. I want them to, more than anything, I want them to love Ramadan, even if that's partly through their *nafs* [both laugh].
(Jennifer, Interview)

Jennifer's comments further highlight the paradoxical nature of food in Ramadan through the contrast between controlling the *nafs* and bodily desires, and also somewhat indulging them through the enjoyment of food. These contrasting ideas were something Jennifer attempted to reconcile in her comments highlighting the importance of moderation - i.e. not having a "luxury banquet" – which resembles Weber's (2001 [1930]) discussion of the Protestant condemnation of "luxury" (p.104). Jennifer's ambiguous attitude towards food and the *nafs* however, sheds light on Rytter's (2016) ethnographic work where he suggests Muslims on *itikaf* failed in "a fight against the *nafs*" (p.56) by opting for Hardee's takeaway burgers instead of the pure food (*langar*) of the Sufi lodge they attended. It is worth recounting Rytter's reflections again here:

Again and again they gave in to their lust and desires, almost as if hypnotized by the illuminated Hardee's sign shining in the dark night, which came to represent all the things they were supposed not to think about during *itikaf*. (p.56)

Conversely, Jennifer's comments suggest the *nafs* (and food) is not always a bad thing that must be battled against, noting how she wants her children to "love Ramadan, even if that's partly through

their *nafs*” (Jennifer, Interview). This adequately reflects Hellman’s (2008) description of “the ambiguity of *nafsu* (being both God-given and potentially destructive)” (p.222). Accordingly, Muslim attitudes towards the *nafs* and desires may be more complex and ambiguous than Rytter suggests, reflecting Bauer’s (2021) and Shahab Ahmed’s (2016) discussions of the place of contradiction within the Islamic tradition. The paradox of food was something Jennifer seemed to have reflected on and articulated well - she seemed comfortable with the idea that Ramadan is, in her words “not about food, but it kind of is about food” (Jennifer, Interview). The efforts by my participants and their families to make food special show the emphasis placed on food during the holy month, representing one side of the paradox of food.



FIGURE 25- A PIZZA MADE BY PARTICIPANT ZAHRA’S MUM (ZAHRA, DIARY, ENTRY 9)



FIGURE 26- SHARBATS (FRUIT-BASED DRINKS) MADE BY RAYYAN DURING RAMADAN (RAYYAN, DIARY, DAY 10)

5.3 FAMILY FOOD TRADITIONS

Following the festive tone of food in Ramadan, some participants had specific foods they associated with the occasion. Often these were traditions inherited from particular ethnic cultures, other times they were more distinct to individual families, but they seemed to be enacted within a family context. They were often linked to nostalgic feelings about the month. Some such culinary traditions included Sabrina’s traditional Moroccan cookies (*shabakya*) that she made every Ramadan (Figure 27). Sabrina’s attached diary entry described how her daughter had smelled food cooking in the kitchen and asked her mother to make the biscuits. Sabrina continues:

It brought me back many years ago myself, when I was young, and I was maybe her age and I used to remember smelling the food, and smelling the orange blossom water and roasted sesames and having maybe similar feelings. (Sabrina, Diary, Entry 2 [Audio])

Similarly, Noor discussed eating *penya*⁸⁰ for *suhoor* (Figure 28), a tradition inherited from her father, and Rayyan reminisced over “*Tesco Finest* all butter croissants”, a staple of her childhood Ramadans. The prominence of food is apparent in Rayyan’s retelling of her earliest Ramadan memory:

⁸⁰ *Penya* is a vermicelli-like food which, according to Noor, is soaked in milk overnight and eaten hot or cold. She described it as “similar to sevayya [a pudding made of vermicelli boiled in milk, sugar and spices] but I suppose in function it’s similar to cereal” (Noor, Diary, Entry 25).

I think it must be waking up at *suhoor*, even though we were not supposed to. Because we were very young and we were told that you don't need to fast. And then we'd get up and... our traditional *suhoor* and my mum's house was tea - *desi*⁸¹ tea - made with milk and sugar - dipped- and you'd dip your croissants into it, *Tesco Finest* all butter croissants, packs of 8 or packs of 16. And that was- that was *suhoor*. And at the same time, you've got Sunrise Radio playing in the background, and I can't remember the name of the hostess, but she had this lovely voice and she'd always play the same *nasheed*⁸² ...that's probably my earliest memory. (Rayyan, Interview)

The maintenance of family traditions around food in Ramadan serves again to emphasise the celebratory nature of food during the month. Rayyan's account in particular highlights how these foods were part of a distinct material and sensory culture associated with Ramadan. These findings demonstrate the importance of perspectives on embodiment and materiality when it comes to studies of religion, and particularly, following McGuire (2003), analyses of practices related to food.



FIGURE 27- TRADITIONAL MOROCCAN COOKIES (*SHABAKYA*) INCLUDED IN SABRINA'S DIARY (SABRINA, DIARY, ENTRY 2)

⁸¹ South Asian term used to refer to things that are 'traditionally' South Asian.

⁸² A *nasheed* is an Islamic devotional song.



FIGURE 28- PENYA, A TRADITIONAL SUHOOR FOOD IN NOOR'S FAMILY (NOOR, DIARY, ENTRY 25)

5.4 SHARING FOOD

A final element which highlights the emphasis placed on food in Ramadan is the widespread practice of sharing food. Nearly all participants recorded instances of giving and/or receiving food from others in their diaries. The practice was often described as something virtuous and encouraged by Islamic scripture. As Hamida notes:

The most beautiful thing about Ramadan is sharing. It is regarded as following of the sunnah⁸³ (hadith: give food to your neighbour even if hoof of a sheep), a culture and a way to create love and bond between people subhanAllah⁸⁴. (Hamida, Diary Entry 9)

This sentiment was echoed by George who used one of his diary entries to explain how he had volunteered to deliver cakes to local retirement homes. He emphasised the importance of charitable acts in Ramadan and stated, "it's really important to think about others before yourself. You know, make sure that your neighbour's not starving before you feed yourself." (George, Diary Entry 14). Here, George paraphrases a *hadith* highlighting the importance of feeding others within Islamic scripture (Al-Adab Al-Mufrad, Book 6, Hadith 112⁸⁵). For female participants, sharing food was often

⁸³ The *sunnah* is the actions or practices of Prophet Muhammad which Muslims are encouraged to emulate.

⁸⁴ *SubhanAllah* means 'glory be to Allah'.

⁸⁵ Available at: <https://sunnah.com/adab:112> (Accessed: 25 July 2022).

described as a way they could receive the reward for fasting – an idea derived from a *hadith* explaining someone who feeds a fasting person will receive the same reward (Jami` at-Tirmidhi, Book 8, Hadith 126⁸⁶) – when they were unable to fast themselves (usually due to menstruation). Buitelaar (1993, p.96) similarly notes how women access the *ajr* of Ramadan primarily through preparing food and charitable activity since they are unable to access rituals which take place in the mosque. This links back to discussions in Chapter 6 about the prioritisation of activities in Ramadan especially in the context of motherhood.

Sharing food with others was such an important ritual of Ramadan that it was maintained and adapted despite the lockdown, and participants recorded various ways in which they did this. Whilst participants could not meet with people outside their household face-to-face, many images depicted food that had been cooked at home and distributed amongst neighbours, family or friends (Figure 29). Additionally, some participants, including George, were involved in charitable campaigns to support the needy. This often involved giving food to those struggling because of the pandemic highlighting another way participants maintained the tradition of sharing food during the holy month (Figure 30). Even when there were hesitations about the transmission of coronavirus on surfaces, respondents found ways to keep the tradition going with Rumaisa recounting how her parents had given her money to order a takeaway as “a great way of giving iftar whilst social distancing” (Rumaisa, Diary, Entry 10).

Some participants explained how the special effort made preparing food in Ramadan was primarily motivated by sharing it with others. Discussing the “fancier food” associated with Ramadan, Rayyan noted:

I really just think it's um [pause] to take care of the fasting people. Like that's all we were taught. Like, my mum would get extra reward for- you know, there is a *hadith* I think something along the lines of: whoever feeds a fasting person food for *iftar*, then they get additional reward. (Rayyan, interview)

Rayyan highlights how giving food is a way of attaining the *ajr* of Ramadan too⁸⁷. Similarly, Mehmooda, while seeming self-critical over the “extravagant” food she prepared in her household, explained this was partly motivated by the idea that “in the Pakistani culture, we say if you feed someone during iftar, it's really good that they go *above...above* the limits, like, they go and make *everything*”

⁸⁶ Available at: <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi:807> (Accessed: 25 July 2022).

⁸⁷ Anderson (2018) describes a similar understanding of the religious merit associated with feeding a fasting person (p.621) amongst his participants, linking this to the circulation of “*thawab*” (similar to *ajr*).

(Mehmooda, Interview, emphasis in speech). Other participants noted instances where they had received food from others and described how they appreciated and enjoyed these gifts. Even Mariya, who most strongly rejected the focus on food in Ramadan, appreciated a meal given by her colleagues describing it as “their delicious food and kind gesture” (Mariya, Diary, Undated).

Overall, I have demonstrated in this section how food was emphasised and celebrated during Ramadan, though not in a self-indulgent way. As with the other topics discussed – eating/cooking together, making food special, and family traditions – sharing food was linked to an ethic of communality and generosity, that was keenly associated with the month of Ramadan. Jennifer emphasises how the focus on food should not be empty and materialistic but rather aimed towards enhancing this communal spirit: “Ramadan can drift into being about the food which is problematic. But certainly the giving and sharing of food is meaningful and beautiful” (Jennifer, Diary, Entry 8). Noor further explains how the ethic of generosity runs throughout her understanding of the holy month:

I think that's what Ramadan is all about, to a large extent, just sharing food that you have with other people and sharing of yourself with other people as much as you can.... I think that generosity is really what underpins what Ramadan is about to people even, you know, from the parent who tries to make Ramadan more special for their children, to sharing with your neighbours, to the mother who maybe doesn't have the time or the peace and quiet to engage in worship but spends those moments caring for the people around her. (Noor, Diary, Entry 13)

Contrasting Weber's (2001 [1930]) discussion of the Protestant ascetic ethic focused on work, the asceticism of Ramadan seemed to be linked to generosity and giving. This is enacted through the sharing of food, but also more broadly, as Noor⁸⁸ highlights, through the giving of attention and time to one's family and community. This links to the discussion of motherhood and individualised sacredness in Chapter 6. While there are some commonalities between Ramadan and Weber's description of Protestant asceticism, the condemnation of “sociability” he describes (Weber 2001 [1930], p.104) contrasts my participant's understandings of the holy month suggesting a different model of asceticism is in operation.

⁸⁸ While Noor is not a mother herself (she is a university student living with her parents), her comments demonstrate how she has reflected on the contexts of others in Ramadan.

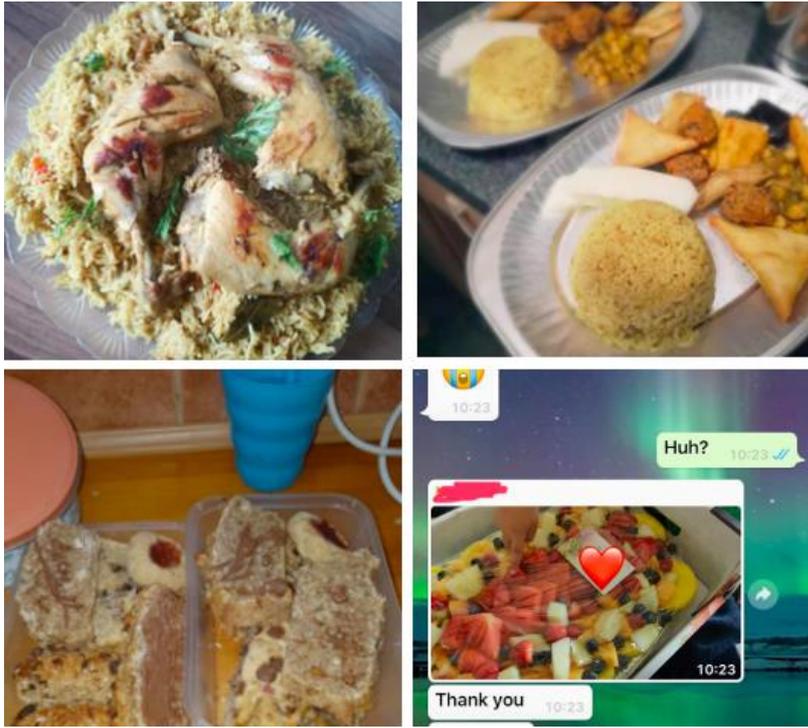


FIGURE 29- FOOD SHARED WITH OTHERS BY PARTICIPANTS (VARIOUS DIARIES)



FIGURE 30- FOOD SHARED BY PARTICIPANTS VIA INVOLVEMENT IN CHARITABLE FOOD CAMPAIGNS (VARIOUS DIARIES)

6. CHALLENGES OF THE PARADOX

While I argue participants largely accepted and “tolerated” (Bauer 2021) the paradoxical relationship with food during Ramadan, that is not to say this paradox went without challenges. In this section, I present case studies of three participants showing ways in which they struggled with, and in the case of Mariya outright rejected, the ambiguities surrounding food during the month. These examples show that while such a paradox was maintained, there were obstacles to be overcome in maintaining such contradictions in day-to-day practice. Rayyan’s example particularly highlights how such challenges were gendered referring to the fact that women seemed more responsible for food preparation during the month.

6.1 MARIYA – REJECTING THE PARADOX

While most participants displayed a moderate attitude towards food in Ramadan, Mariya strongly rejected the place of food during the occasion. This is summarised in the quote below, where she discusses her first diary image (Figure 16):

But, Ramadan is not about food [laughs]. That you should be like as simple as possible. And I wanted to say this is how I eat in Ramadan, as simple as possible, which, whenever you look at the picture it wasn't that simple. But, you know, food should be as simple as possible - Ramadan is not about food. (Mariya, Interview)

This idea was a common theme throughout Mariya’s interview as she lamented about the attitude towards food in Ramadan in her home country in the Middle East. She described how people back home would make a large amount of food in Ramadan and cook several dishes to please different family members. She also expressed exasperation at the fact that lentil soup would be relegated to a side dish whereas during the rest of the year it would be a main meal. Her rejection of the prominence of food was also the subject of her first diary entry, depicting her “simple” *iftar* (Mariya, Diary, Entry 1; Figure 16).

Mariya felt she was addressing a “misconception” amongst Muslims and insisted that:

Foods should be simpler than any other day because God said you don't eat from dawn to sunset, not to then spend hours preparing for food and then eat a big meal afterwards. It's wrong. Come on! It's the opposite of the meaning of fasting! (Mariya, Interview)

She also recounted an incident where friends had cooked her food for *iftar* because they felt sorry for her in terms of the food she was eating during the month. Mariya’s attitude seemed to reject the

physical elements of Ramadan, concurring with her statement that during the month, a person must “suppress your animal side, the body need, to focus on your spiritual” (Mariya, Interview).

It is worth highlighting that Mariya was in an unusual situation during the fieldwork. She was an international student, studying in the UK, with a husband and son who lived in the Middle East. As with others, Mariya was subjected to the lockdown during Ramadan 2020 but she was probably more isolated than most given her circumstances. It is possible these contextual factors influenced her attitude towards food, or gave her the freedom to practice Ramadan to her own preferences, away from wider societal pressures. Simultaneously however, Mariya was an outlier in her opinions in other respects. Mariya was very critical of those who slept in the day during Ramadan and insisted one’s routine should not change, as well as asserting it was best to be in isolation and focus on oneself in Ramadan, downplaying the communal significance of the month (Mariya, Interview). Because of her context, it is difficult to make generalisations about Mariya’s attitudes in reference to Bauer’s (2021) thesis but it did seem she was more much less tolerant of ambiguity in relation to food and other aspects of Ramadan than other participants.

It is interesting to observe how other participants responded to such extreme positions about food. I posed questions to participants about the idea that Ramadan is unequivocally not about food. These examples demonstrate the strong opposition some participants had to such black-and-white opinions:

Laura: What’s your attitude towards food and Ramadan? Because you know, Ramadan’s about fasting and not eating in the day. And some people have said things like you shouldn’t think about food too much in Ramadan, but what do you think about that?

Abdullah: Yeah, during daytime, yes, you must not. You must not. But in the evening [pause] it doesn’t say anywhere in the Quran or *hadith* to state that- you know, you can have a nice *iftar*, it doesn’t say anywhere ‘no, cut it down’. Okay?... Yes, it’s best to cut out on heavy meals, I agree, take light meals, take it easy - but it doesn’t say you can’t eat! Go to Birmingham, go to London - restaurants are full in Ramadan! Honestly! (Abdullah, Interview)

You can’t say to people you can’t think about food [laughs]. That’s a survival thing. And no matter how much your faith is strong, you are still going to think about food whether you like it or you don’t like it. Because your stomach is telling you to think about food. I don’t know how people they say you cannot think about food because, we cannot, we cannot; just as simple as this. Now, saying this, I used to enjoy fasting because thinking *too* much about food is bad. (Sabrina, Interview)

While Abdullah and Sabrina were clear that food had an important role to play in Ramadan, both emphasised, like other participants, that there was a balance to be struck in terms of the consuming lighter meals and shifting the focus away from food. They both rejected an extreme stance against food in Ramadan in favour of a more moderate though arguably paradoxical opinion. Abdullah suggested this was justified through scripture and evident in lived practice.

These negative participant responses to unequivocal stances on food in Ramadan supports Levine's argument that ambiguity can have a "socially binding function" (Levine 1985, p.35). The paradox of food displayed here demonstrates that ambiguous ideas have more capacity to be supported by a broad, diverse community than narrower, unequivocal ones. While Mariya rejected the paradox, it was clear her rigid insistence that "Ramadan is not about food" was an uncommon opinion. Even Mariya acknowledged this, stating, "I thought everyone would think like me and then it's the opposite. Most people don't think like that" (Mariya, Interview). Her statement that "everyone else...I think they're wrong" (Mariya, Interview) highlights how such unequivocal positions are potentially more divisive than ambiguous ones. For Mariya, the paradox of food was irrelevant because Ramadan was, clearly, "not about food". While her position could be seen to support Bauer's (2021) argument that discomfort with ambiguity has pervaded modern Islamic societies, it is also notable that Mariya's attitude was atypical compared to the rest of my participants and seemed to be rare within her own social circle.

6.2 MEHMOODA – GENEROSITY VS. EXCESS

In Section 4.4, I highlighted how participants occasionally criticised themselves for not achieving a balance regarding food in Ramadan. Mehmooda however – a mother of adult children who was brought up in Pakistan – expressed regret about her own family practices around food throughout the month. She described Ramadan food as in her house "extravagant" and stated that "during Ramadan food is the main focus. Like, 'oh, what are you gonna eat?' I know it shouldn't be like that, but it's just how it is." (Mehmooda, Interview). She also noted the numerous dishes she cooked for *iftar* admitting that "I know it's a waste because no one's going to eat it all, but it's just something that we do". There seemed to be an unsatisfied acceptance for Mehmooda that excessive food was part of Ramadan in her household although she believed it was not the way Ramadan *should* be. Mehmooda felt that the emphasis on food was, to an extent, motivated by the virtues of sharing food with others, although she expressed uncertainties around this:

In the Pakistani culture, we say if you feed someone during iftar, it's really good that they go *above...* above the limits, like, they go and make *everything*. And I'm sure it's meant for like poor people, I don't know. Yeah, I'm sure that, you know in Islam they talk about feeding the

poor? But here, I don't know, it's just if we called someone for iftar, we'll make everything for them, put everything out, and the same likewise if they call us. (Mehmooda, Interview, italics indicate emphasis in speech)

Mehmooda's uncertainties about the level to which food should be made special for others in Ramadan, reflected her uncertainties about whether her household food practices embody an ideal Ramadan. In part, this may be related to her lack of confidence about her own level of Islamic knowledge (which she mentioned during interview), but it also represents the way in which she was struggling to negotiate the paradoxical nature of food within her own lived experience. Her comments suggest she was wrestling to match her own perceptions of an ideal Ramadan with expectations of family, friends and community. Mehmooda worked as a foster carer and seemed to be primarily responsible for cooking in the home, demonstrating the potentially gendered nature of such challenges. This resonates with Rayyan's comments in the next section about the social expectations of women to prepare special food for others whilst also not wasting time which could be spent on *ibadah*.

6.3 RAYYAN – COOKING VS. WORSHIPPING

Rayyan highlighted the potential conflict between ideas about making food more special in Ramadan and not wasting time cooking, particularly the impact this tension has on women. She emphasised this as we discussed her mother's practice of making "fancier food" during the month. After explaining that special food was prepared to "take care of the fasting people" and gain the extra rewards of feeding someone who was fasting (Rayyan, Interview), she continued:

There is a balance...it's actually a lot of pressure on women because you're not only having to feed the fasting people, but you're also having to fit it around your own spirituality and being told you can't waste any time in the kitchen. And Ramadan's not for the kitchen and you know, you have it all prepared before. (Rayyan, Interview)

Rayyan suggests there is a social pressure - particularly on women - to gain the spiritual benefits of preparing and sharing special foods, whilst also "being told" not to waste time cooking in Ramadan. While Rayyan doesn't suggest where these discourses come from, other participants criticised the notion of wasting time cooking in Ramadan (Section 4.3) and I observed social media posts and online guides reflecting the conflicting advice and "pressure on women" Rayyan describes. Figure 31 is one example of this. It depicts a Ramadan food preparation guide advising Muslim women how to "get out of the kitchen and into a deeper relationship with Allah SWT, while still having delicious nourishing home-made meals" reflecting the pressure to fulfil one's spiritual *and* domestic duties during the month, while also, conversely, getting "out of the kitchen".

While I argue the paradoxical nature of food is largely navigated quite comfortably, Rayyan highlights a practical challenge of dealing with the ambiguous nature of food in Ramadan, a challenge which seems to be particularly gendered. The problems Rayyan encounters are also reminiscent of McGuire’s (2003) argument about the way in which domesticity and women’s roles – particularly in relation to eating and cooking – have been “defined out” of modern understandings of religion and spirituality. While the emphasis placed on food and its communal significance (Section 5), suggests food does hold religious value for my participants, they sought to strike a balance between domestic tasks and more explicit *ibadah* (as discussed in Chapter 6) which gave space for them to do both during the holy month. Though, as Rayyan highlights, this balance was sometimes difficult to maintain.

The screenshot shows a mobile browser interface with the URL mindful-muslimah.ck.page/a5a. The main content is a promotional banner for 'The Ultimate Ramadan Food Prep & Recipe Guide'. The banner features a photograph of a table set with various dishes, including a bowl of fruit, a glass of orange juice, and several plates of food. Below the photo, the text reads 'The Ultimate Ramadan Food Prep & Recipe Guide' and 'www.Mindful-Muslimah.com'. To the right of the banner is a form to request the guide, with the heading 'THE ULTIMATE RAMADAN FOOD PREP & RECIPE GUIDE' and the text 'Get the FREE Guide Now!'. The form includes fields for 'First Name' and 'Email', a 'GIVE ME THE GUIDE!' button, and a testimonial from Ayesha, UK, stating: 'Having these tips will make any woman realize that having amazing meals and having focused and deep ibadah (worship) is TOTALLY possible. Great advice, tips and recipes. Everyone needs to get this!'.

FIGURE 31- SCREENSHOTS OF THE MINDFUL MUSLIMAH WEBSITE ADVERTISING THEIR RAMADAN FOOD PREPARATION GUIDE. ‘MUSLIMAH’ MEANS ‘FEMALE MUSLIM’ EMPHASISING THE GENDERED NATURE OF SUCH ADVICE.

7. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have demonstrated two sides of a paradox in relation to food in Ramadan. After introducing relevant existing theory (Section 2), I outlined the role of food and fasting in Ramadan (Section 3) with reference to spirituality and the *nafs*, as well as introducing the paradox discussed. Section 4 expanded on one side of this paradox highlighting how, in some ways, food and consumption were rejected. There was an emphasis on abstention, simplicity and not wasting amongst participants. Additionally, participants insisted Ramadan food should be healthy, i.e. not indulgent but nutritious enough to sustain oneself through the fasts. This understanding of healthiness gestures towards the paradoxical nature of food during the month with food. In Section 5, I demonstrated ways in which food was rejoiced in and celebrated, particularly through communal eating and cooking, preparing special foods, Ramadan traditions and sharing food. It was clear that this focus on food was part of a sociability and an ethic of generosity in relation to Ramadan, which contrasts the work ethic emphasised by Weber's discussion of Protestantism (2001 [1930]). Finally (Section 6), I have highlighted some challenges of the paradox raised by particular participants including an outright rejection of the ambiguous nature of food as well as more practical challenges in negotiating contradictory perspectives. While this section suggests there were difficulties in maintaining ambiguous ideas, the paradox was still maintained and largely accepted by participants (except perhaps Mariya) demonstrating a "tolerance" of ambiguity.

Overall, I have argued that the paradoxical understandings attributed to food in Ramadan by participants are demonstrative of Bauer's theory of "cultural ambiguity" (2021). Opposing Bauer's thesis that modern Muslims are becoming increasingly "intolerant" of ambiguity, my findings suggest such ambiguity has not lost its place in the contemporary Islamic tradition. Similarly, while my participants' understanding of fasting shared some features of ascetic Protestantism (Section 4), there were clear points of departure in relation to the enjoyment of food and sociability (Section 5). Noor expresses this aptly, demonstrating a moderate view towards the asceticism of Ramadan which takes into account lived experience:

The thing is we don't live in a perfect ideal world where everyone is just an ascetic. Like this is the real lived world that we live in. And if you told people that 'Oh, Ramadan is not about special- like, eating good foods', I think, you know, for a lot of people that's why they love Ramadan. (Noor, Interview)

Both Bauer (2021) and Weber (2001 [1930]) depict modernity as a critical juncture in human and religious history, separating that which came before and after. My own findings belie the universality of this contention, and instead highlight some continuity pre- and post-modernity in relation to a

tolerance of ambiguity. I have also demonstrated how Bauer's (2021) concept of "cultural ambiguity", which he applies largely in historical contexts, can be a useful framework for contemporary sociological studies of religion.

CHAPTER 8 – DISCUSSION

1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I elaborate on the contribution my research makes to wider fields of study. This ranges from the study of Ramadan, to the broader fields of British Muslim studies, Islamic studies, religious studies and the social sciences. I demonstrate my contribution in terms of four main themes. Firstly (Section 2), I demonstrate how my study has contributed empirically to the study of Ramadan, which despite its religious significance for Muslims, has been minimally explored from a sociological-religious perspective. I extend this contribution to the study of Islamic rituals which again have been somewhat neglected in existing literature. Secondly (Section 3), I convey how my work promotes and enhances the exploration of new paradigms in Islamic studies, including theories around contradiction, paradoxes and ambiguity, and a conceptualisation of Islamic sacredness. I also question the prominence of frameworks relating to religion and modernity in current works arguing that the influence of modernity was less apparent in my own findings. Thirdly (Section 4), I discuss how my work provides a unique snapshot of lived religion during the pandemic in part due to my novel research methods. Finally (Section 5), I discuss my important methodological contribution, advocating for flexibility and innovation in research methods and arguing that this has benefits for both researchers and participants. Throughout these themes, I outline how my work contributes to opposing the stereotyping of Muslims that has been apparent in related research and broader spheres. I also question the utility of some Western frameworks of religion for the study of Muslims, providing alternatives in Section 3.

2. ENHANCING THE STUDY OF RAMADAN AND ISLAMIC RITUALS

2.1 RESEARCH ON RAMADAN: FILLING THE VOID

As outlined in Chapter 6, Ramadan was “set apart” from the rest of the year in the views of my participants and deemed an especially sacred period. The month was imbued with a unique religious significance associated with its increased *ajr* (religious merit), *baraka* (blessings) and the commemoration of the first revelation of the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad. Hamida emphasised its importance, describing it as “a one-time chance you get, and you don't know whether you're going to get it again” (Hamida, Interview). Given this, the lack of sociological and religious studies literature on the month is striking. While there have been sociological studies exploring Ramadan's religious significance in Morocco (Buitelaar 1993; Oestergaard 1996), Indonesia (Hellman 2008; Moller 2005a; Moller 2005b) and Egypt (Schielke 2009), the field is dominated by health and medical literature (see Chapter 2). This study therefore contributes to filling this gap in and extending academic knowledge of Ramadan.

Additionally, it is interesting to observe the dearth of research on Ramadan in Muslim-minority contexts especially, and my thesis helps address this. Buitelaar's chapter (2006, pp.78-82) on Ramadan in the Netherlands resembles mine in its sociological focus. However, the author is more interested in the particularity of Muslims living in a non-Muslim society, discussing public iftars which are open to the wider community and perceptions of non-Muslims towards those fasting. Similarly, a study of British university staff mentions how respondents valued the opportunity to answer questions about their religion from others during the month (El-Sayed et al. 2015). Rytter's (2016) study of Danish Muslims⁸⁹ in *itikaf* attempts to address an emic perspective on Ramadan through the concept of the *nafs*. However, as I argue below, Rytter unhelpfully applies a Western sacred-profane framework which may not reflect the understandings of his participants. Contrasting these works, I have attempted not to focus on the particularities of Ramadan in a largely non-Muslim context which I feel somewhat prioritises 'outsider' perceptions of Islam. I have also tried to avoid privileging Western understandings of religion following critiques that such Christo-centric frameworks have been imposed on non-Western conceptions of religion (Woodhead 2011, pp.121-122). Rather I have sought to let my participants' voices speak to portray what is important about Ramadan to them. This includes my exploration of sacredness in Chapter 6, which questions existing theories based on the sacred-profane dichotomy and develops a hierarchy of sacred time (Figure 13) rooted in participant perceptions and practices. While it could be argued this approach may not comprehensively explore the idiosyncrasies of Ramadan in Britain, I argue that it more fully reflects what was valued by my respondents. My thesis then is a valuable exploration of Ramadan in a Muslim-minority context that provides an alternative perspective to existing work in this area.

In the UK, the contribution of my thesis is even more pronounced, it being one of the only works to explore Ramadan in-depth from a social scientific perspective⁹⁰. Apart from a recent MA dissertation on *itikaf* (Zahid 2021), and my own Masters research exploring an 'open *iftar*' initiative (Jones 2017), very little work has been done. This PhD thesis exploring the first-hand experiences of Ramadan from 51 Muslim participants based across the UK and with diverse demographics then, provides a needed contribution to the field. Given the lockdown that was in place during my fieldwork, there are other aspects of a British Ramadan yet to be researched especially physical gatherings. These include events such as mosque activities (*iftars*, *taraweeh* prayers, educational events), charity

⁸⁹ Note that while Rytter's (2016) participants lived in Denmark, the study itself took place at a retreat in Pakistan meaning it was not a straightforward exploration of Muslims in a minority context.

⁹⁰ As with global studies of Ramadan, there are many more studies engaging with health issues related to Ramadan in the UK (Hui and Devendra 2010; Hui et al. 2010; Mughal 2014; Hassanein et al. 2009; Bravis et al. 2010) as discussed in Chapter 2.

fundraisers, and communal iftars in homes. Fergusson (2017), writing as non-Muslim journalist ‘trying out’ Ramadan, provides helpful details of some collective iftars he attends (in mosques, restaurants and elsewhere), but his account comes across as polemical and not academically rigorous. My thesis provides a much-needed contribution to British Muslim Studies by exploring the fundamentals of Ramadan in a UK context and can act as a starting point for other research about the holy month and associated practices like *salah*. While my thesis explores Ramadan from a holistic perspective, as described below, future research would benefit from examining the face-to-face communal activities which are missing from my account. I propose that ethnography would be an especially useful tool for this.

2.2 A HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE ON RAMADAN

The heavy bias towards scientific studies in the extant literature does not adequately reflect the ways my participants engaged with the month. There is a tendency to explore the physical effects of fasting, marginalising emotive and spiritual facets. As I argued in Chapter 2, this suggests a prevailing positivist and Cartesian view of Ramadan which ignores its metaphysical elements. For my participants, Ramadan *was* a time for abstaining from food and drink which affected them physically, but it was also an occasion that went beyond the physical. As discussed, especially in Chapter 5, the month was heavily focused on *ibadah* (embodied worship), spirituality and sociability, things which had metaphysical, emotional and social elements. Through my thesis then, I have attempted to provide a holistic perspective on Ramadan which engages with the physical *and* the spiritual to paint a broader view of the holy month than the predominant emphasis on health. Not only does this more accurately reflect what Muslims value about the month – my participants explained that spirituality and their connection with God was paramount – but it also counters Western dichotomies of religion, such as the spiritual-material and sacred-profane. Such binaries do not, as I have argued, fit with Islamic theological conceptions but are also being brought into question more broadly in the study of religion (McGuire 2003). This thesis then provides a holistic perspective on Ramadan that transcends some of the dualities that scholars of religion engage with.

Beyond Ramadan, this work contributes to the study of rituals, particularly Islamic rituals. Moller (2005b) argues:

...that Islamic rituals have been surprisingly meagerly [sic] studied, and that non-Muslim theories of Islamic rituals habitually have been detached from the lives, experiences, and explanations of Muslims themselves. (Moller 2005b, p.401)

I would agree with the contention that there have been surprisingly few in-depth studies of Islamic rituals considering their important place within the Islamic tradition. The ‘five pillars’ of Islam, for

example, are largely based on active worship including fasting in Ramadan, pilgrimage and formal prayers (*salah*). I have already highlighted the lack of religious studies literature on Ramadan but beyond that there is little exploration of other rituals. In the UK, Ramadan has only been explored quite peripherally (see above) and there is barely any focused work on *salah* except perhaps El-Sayed et al.'s (2015) paper exploring the performance of prayers in a workplace. This study is, however, more interested in the use of technology to facilitate the practice rather than its significance for Muslims. McLoughlin's project on Hajj amongst British Muslims (McLoughlin 2009; McLoughlin 2015) stands out as an exception with a focus on space and sacredness in the context of the pilgrimage to Makkah. Besides this, Bill Gent has contributed several works to the study of Quran recitation particularly amongst British *huffaz* - those who have memorised the holy book (Gent 2016; Gent and Muhammad 2019). Aside from these few studies, very little has been done to understand Islamic rituals - as Moller suggests - from the perspectives of British Muslims themselves. This thesis then, which has attempted to foreground the priorities of Muslims who observe the holy month, makes a valuable contribution to elaborating on Islamic rituals. This is especially relevant to the study of Muslims in Britain but is also useful for those interested in Islamic ritual elsewhere. Many of the conceptions of my participants have been reflected in wider studies of Ramadan and the fact that participants were diverse in terms of ethnic background and place of birth means their opinions are of interest to those studying Muslims globally.

My research attends to the communal elements of the month, alongside individual perspectives and understandings. This is particularly true of Chapter 5 but runs throughout my chapters. While the communal nature of Ramadan has been explored in some sociological and anthropological works (Buitelaar 1993; Hellman 2008; Anderson 2018), with Buitelaar arguing that fasting during the month "unifies the Islamic community" (1993, p.178), the sociability of Ramadan is inevitably missing from the broad spread of articles studying its effect on health. On the other hand, my research contrasts somewhat Anderson's (2018) assertion that Ramadan was "a time not of individual moral discipline but of a delicious collectively achieved sociability when people experienced the "atmosphere" (*ajwa'*) together" (p.620). While participants acknowledged the collective atmosphere Anderson describes, with Sulaiman describing how praying with family during lockdown made the house feel like a mosque and made it feel like Ramadan (Chapter 5), they also recognised the importance of individual spiritual development. As Maymoona noted:

I think community is *so* important and it's an integral part of Islam...*But* at the same time, I think part of Islam *is* the idea of, of isolating yourself and reflecting, and sitting down on your own, and not having that influence from other people. (Maymoona, Interview)

Thus, Anderson's assertion that Ramadan was not about "individual moral discipline" (2018, p.620) did not ring true for my participants. As I have highlighted, there were both individual and communal facets of Ramadan that were valued by participants, and my thesis provides a more holistic analysis of the occasion. This is in keeping with my understanding of everyday religion in which individual *and* social factors come together, echoing Cheruvallil-Contractor's (2021) description of everyday life as "the 'tactics' or negotiations through which people individualise societal structures" (p.38). I argue then that future studies of lived religion would benefit from recognising the multifaceted nature of religious expression addressing Ammerman's (2020) concern that failing to "take larger structural settings into account has been a major weakness of lived religion research to date (Repstad 2019)" (p.33). Considering both individual and communal factors simultaneously can help broaden our understanding of religious traditions and act as "a way to link micro and macro analysis" (2020, p.34) that Ammerman advocates. In this thesis, this is especially demonstrated by my discussion of the individual, familial, communal and global embodiment of *salah* and other rituals (Chapter 5), a framework which could be useful for other studies of religion.

2.3 COUNTERING NEGATIVE PORTRAYALS OF THE HOLY MONTH

My Literature Review (Chapter 2) highlighted the tendency in existing studies of Ramadan to focus on the harm caused by fasting. This is especially true of medical literature, but also of research which explores road traffic accidents in Ramadan (Radin et al. 1996; Al-Houqani et al. 2013; Tahir et al. 2013; Tlemissov et al. 2017; Mehmood et al. 2015), and that which suggests increased violence in different contexts (Carter 2011; Bashir 2015; Leone 2016). I have argued that such perspectives are shaped by a wider discourse which depicts Islam as harmful and aggressive, and there is a need to balance these with emic understandings of the month. Participants in my study valued the opportunities Ramadan provided – social, spiritual and physical – and often perceived it as the best and most sacred time of the year. While they acknowledged the physical challenge of fasting, they also felt there was a benefit in such difficulty, as Sarah mentioned "when you stop feeding your body, you're feeding the soul, and it has more space" (Sarah, Interview). Contrasting the fascination with aggression in Ramadan, my participants focused on the ways in which they tried to improve their character during the month. While this was not always achieved and flaws in character were acknowledged, Ramadan was largely a time of generosity, sharing with others and maintaining social relationships as highlighted throughout my findings. My research then serves as a corrective to literature that focuses on negative outcomes of Ramadan and wider prejudices against Muslims.

Particularly, I described how studies have explored the harm caused by depriving oneself from food during the fast, but also by excessive eating on breaking the fast (Chapter 2, Sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2). I argue that such studies again play to stereotypes of Muslims by framing them and their

religion in terms of extremes. Rytter (2016) is critical of the excesses of participants in his study of an *itikaf* retreat. He argues that his Muslim respondents essentially failed in “a fight against the *nafs*” and “gave in to their lust and desires” (p.56) by consuming takeaway burgers for *iftar* instead of eating the pure food (*langar*) provided by the lodge they inhabited. On the contrary, while my participants recognised the struggle against the *nafs* inherent in fasting, they largely displayed an attitude of moderation, describing how they made efforts to eat food that was nutritious to sustain them through the day, but not over-indulgent (Chapter 7). My findings then counter discourses about Muslims which view them as ‘extreme’, a framing which I argue has seeped into academic literature about Ramadan.

While participants expressed moderation regarding fasting, simultaneously, a level of indulgence was deemed acceptable, as Jennifer noted, “it’s okay to treat myself with things that normally might make me feel a little bit guilty every now and then” (Jennifer, Interview). I argue that accounts like those of Rytter (2016), which display a puritanical attitude, may have benefitted from considering the paradoxical nature of food and fasting that I explore in Chapter 7. Indeed, Hellman (2008) reflects upon the “ambiguity” of the *nafs* in that it is “both God-given and potentially destructive” (p.222), whereas Rytter uses the framework of the “sacred-mundane divide” (2016, p.57) to explain his findings. As such, I suggest studies of Ramadan - and of Muslims more broadly – may be enhanced by explorations of ambiguity and contradiction such as those discussed by Bauer (2021) and Shahab Ahmed (2016). Such theories more helpfully shed light on the simultaneous rejection of and rejoicing in food present during the month, as well as other seemingly contradicting aspects of Islamic practice (some of which I have discussed elsewhere in this thesis). I argue these recent academic theories are more useful for studying Muslims than Western post-Enlightenment frameworks such as the sacred-mundane dichotomy used by Rytter (Section 3 below elaborates on this). My thesis has displayed how utilising frameworks of paradox and contradiction can counteract perceptions of Muslims as ‘extreme’ by providing nuance to existing narratives and displaying how Muslims ‘tolerate’ the ambiguity present in their everyday lives.

3. NEW PARADIGMS IN ISLAMIC STUDIES

3.1 AMBIGUITY, CONTRADICTION AND PARADOX

Continuing the discussion above, this thesis presents several new theoretical directions for Islamic Studies, the first of which is the exploration of ambiguity, paradox and contradiction. My ideas on this are largely drawn from Thomas Bauer’s concept of “cultural ambiguity” (2021) and Shahab Ahmed’s *What is Islam?* (2016), with Ahmed arguing that Muslims “conceptualize Islam in terms of contradictory meaning-making” and “live as Muslims in those contradictory terms of Islam” (p.404). Ahmed’s and Bauer’s ideas reflect the paradoxical conceptions and practices of my participants such

as the variations in determining the beginning/end of Ramadan and the unknowability of *Laylatul Qadr* (Chapter 6), as well as the ways in which acts of worship are embodied simultaneously as individuals and as a community (Chapter 5). The paradoxical attitude towards food (Chapter 7) is a further example of this ambiguity. I advocate that utilising theories about the ambiguity and contradiction present in Islamic practice and theology may be useful for researchers in various fields.

While Shahab Ahmed (2016) and Bauer (2021) draw more on historical and/or textual sources which explore a broad range of topics⁹¹, this thesis serves as a focused empirical case study of cultural ambiguity in a contemporary society. My work demonstrates how these theories can be applied by researchers studying Muslims today, and I argue they are valuable for developing sociological approaches to the study of Muslims in the present day. However, while Bauer (2021) asserts that modern Muslims are becoming increasingly “intolerant” of ambiguity, my study demonstrates how Muslims today are happy – to an extent - to maintain contradictions in their everyday practices, and indeed sometimes revel in these ambiguities. *Laylatul Qadr* is a prime example, whereby the unknowability of the date of this sacred night was not a cause of distress amongst participants but rather an opportunity for increased *ibadah* throughout the final period of the month. As Lucy explained enthusiastically, describing the last ten nights of Ramadan, “you're trying to grab the *baraka* before it goes” (Lucy, Interview). The concept of ambiguity seemed to more closely reflect emic perspectives of participants than existing frameworks such as the sacred-profane (discussed below). I have highlighted, in my critique of Rytter (2016) above, how current studies of Muslims may benefit from considering paradoxes and contradiction rather than relying on Western, Christo-centric frameworks which are widespread in the study of religion (McGuire 2003; Woodhead 2011, pp.121-122). My application of Bauer’s (2021) theory then, while somewhat critiquing his argument, demonstrates how the concept of “cultural ambiguity” can be applied today and help elaborate on, in the words of Shahab Ahmed, the “ways in which Muslims have conceptualized *being Muslim*” (2016, p.209; italics in original). I suggest that other researchers of contemporary Islam – sociological, theological or otherwise – would do well to consider the relevance of Bauer’s (2021) and Ahmed’s (2016) ideas in their work.

Furthermore, I argue that examining Muslim societies in terms of their “tolerance” of ambiguity may help counter narratives of Muslims as sectarian, prone to conflict and intolerant. Journalist, Innes Bowen’s book on Muslim groups focuses on tensions between sects throughout, for

⁹¹ While Bauer (2021) draws on some contemporary examples amongst historical cases, these are largely investigated through textual analysis. S. Ahmed’s (2016) work is largely a historical case study of the “Balkans-to-Bengal complex” (p.73) though he opens with some contemporary anecdotes (pp.3-4).

example, describing “mosques and organisations which divide along sectarian as well as ethnic lines” (2014, p.9). I also highlighted in my Literature Review how some studies of Ramadan have focused on violence and conflict during the month (Chapter 2, Section 2.2.3). Islam is practiced in myriad ways, as discussed in the current thesis and other works about Ramadan. Moller (2005a) for example, describes the variations in *taraweeh* prayer between “modernist” and “traditionalist” Javanese Muslims in his study, Shavit (2016) highlights different practices in the length of fasts in Iceland, and Ali (2015) discusses debates about the determination of *Fajr* prayer time (and consequently the time to begin fasting) in Britain.

Despite clear differences in practice however, there is evidence that Muslims largely accept the varying opinions of their fellow religious adherents – as I have demonstrated in this thesis – which, I argue, can be theorised as a “tolerance” of ambiguity. The way in which such differences are framed, seems more a choice of the author than anything inherent in the data. For example, while Shavit (2016) emphasises the “split” (p.414) between the two mosques at the heart of his study and defines the experiences of Muslims in Iceland under the term “challenges and divisions” (p.405), Moller (2005a) adopts a different approach. Moller notes that he could have portrayed his findings as “riddled with ‘fierce antagonism’ between modernists and traditionalists” (p.50), but instead focused on “how smoothly Javanese Muslims handle their differences, and how easily such differences are overcome” (p.49). Moller’s reflexive approach is important, I feel, in countering wider stereotypes of Muslims that view them as divisive. As Moller notes, the differences in ritual practice between Muslims in Java “have led observers to depict the relationship between modernists and traditionalists as one steeped in bitterness, criticism and constant feuds” (p.49) which contrasts, according to Moller, his participants’ “tendency to regard such diversity as *rahmat*, as a blessing” (p.50). I argue then that other researchers should consider exploring the “tolerance” of ambiguity within Muslim communities, which may address some of the wider prejudices against the religion that exist in society.

Leading on from this, a recent study has suggested Britons are more likely to perceive Islam (compared to other religions) as “literalistic, without any scope for poetic meaning or historical context”, something the authors argue is “an indicator of prejudice” (Jones and Unsworth 2022, p.19). Applying Bauer’s (2021) theory, which can be used to demonstrate how Muslims are tolerant of ambiguity and difference, could potentially help reduce some of this prejudice. The examples I highlighted in Chapter 6 about the ambiguous timings of important Islamic moments are examples which complicate literalist perceptions of Islam. I am sure that future studies of contemporary Muslim practice could provide further examples of such “tolerance” of ambiguity (Bauer 2021).

Finally, I assert that Bauer's (2021) "cultural ambiguity" may be particularly helpful for studies of British Muslims. My findings have demonstrated the vast diversity of practices and opinions around Ramadan in the UK which are drawn from different ethnic cultures from which my participants and their families originate. Examples include various traditional foods associated with the month (Chapter 7) and the divergent practices of moon sighting (Chapter 6, Section 4.1). Some traditions were also hybrid or more rooted in a UK context, such as Rayyan's experimentation with different cultural foods during the month (Chapter 7, Section 5.2) and the "Tesco Finest all butter croissants" (Rayyan, Interview) that were a staple of her childhood *suhoors*. The way in which British Muslims can be viewed as a "melting pot" (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2021, p.35) of different ethnic cultures and theological backgrounds provides a ripe opportunity for the exploration of "cultural ambiguity". This is true of Muslims in other minority contexts but particularly in Britain where the ethnic make-up is so diverse. Bauer's (2021) theory, I argue, can shed light on the ways in which divergent opinions and practices come together in Britain and must be negotiated or tolerated. I further assert that cultural ambiguity should be utilised more widely in British Muslim Studies as a way of discussing such differences, and as a tool to counter "the tendency to homogenise or 'essentialise' Muslims" (Change Institute 2009, p.5) prevalent in research and wider public discourse.

3.2 ISLAMIC SACREDNESS

Drawing on several works (Akkach 2005; Ahmed S. 2016; Ahmed A. 2016; Bauer 2021; Katz 2007), I have outlined a conception of Islamic sacredness from the perspectives of my participants. I argue that future studies would do well to develop theories of Islamic sacredness which provide alternatives to dominant Christo-centric framings of the concept, such as those of Durkheim (2001 [1912]) and Eliade (1987 [1957]). While Ramadan was "set apart" from the rest of the Islamic calendar – following Durkheim (2001 [1912], p.46) – Islamic emic ideas about *ajr* (religious merit), *baraka* (blessing), and commemorating religio-historical events were also fundamental to the month's sacredness (Chapter 6). In particular, conceptions of Islamic sacred time – which others have started to elucidate (Ahmed, A. 2016; Mol 2017; Katz 2007) – would benefit from being developed further. I do not advocate that existing theories of sacredness be completely abandoned – Durkheim and Eliade have been useful starting points for discussions in this thesis – but rather such theories should be critiqued and adjusted to suit perceptions and experiences of participants. Particularly in the case of non-Christian religions, it is important to draw on emic practices and theological concepts (*ajr* and *baraka*, for example) to enrich understandings of sacredness for a broad range of people. I would promote the development of Islamic conceptions of sacredness as well as those rooted in other religious traditions.

My conception of a hierarchy of sacred time (Figure 13) provides a valuable contribution to the growing literature on Islamic sacredness too, which can potentially be adapted to suit other studies. The use of a hierarchy also disturbs traditional theories by suggesting that Islamic sacredness might exist in the absence of a 'profane' (see Akkach 2005). I have already critiqued Rytter's (2016) application of the sacred-profane dichotomy in his study of *itikaf* and argued that an understanding of ambiguity may have helped. I argue here that a hierarchical approach to sacredness, which recognises the complexity of the concept, may have benefitted his analysis also. Rytter consistently contrasts the "pure *langar*" food of the lodge (p.51) with the takeaway burgers "which came to represent all the things they [the *mutakifs*] were supposed not to think about during *itikaf*" (p.56), positioning these foods on two sides of the "sacred-mundane divide" (p.57). I argue however, that recognising *levels* of sacredness, whereby the *langar* sat at the top of a hierarchy and burgers were *less* sacred but not completely impure (as Rytter implies), could have more fully reflected the approach of Rytter's participants. In this way, my hierarchical framework disturbs the sacred-profane binary, further supporting my idea that academics must question applying Western or Christo-centric frameworks of religion to Muslim practices. Beyond Islamic Studies, McGuire (2003) suggests binaries like the sacred-profane may be outdated in current studies of religion as a whole. I concur with her that contemporary sociologists of religion should be critical and cautious when utilising traditional frameworks of religion, adapting them as necessary.

3.3 THE (IR)RELEVANCE OF MODERNITY

My findings make a significant contribution to understandings of religion in modernity, particularly in critiquing the tendency to apply the framework of modernity universally. I outlined this most clearly in Chapter 7 (The Paradox of Food) in my critique of Bauer's (2021) and Weber's (2001 [1930]) ideas which draw heavily on the influence of modernity and the Reformation on religion. Regarding Bauer (2021), I questioned his argument that Muslims have become increasingly opposed to ambiguity and that this "intolerance of ambiguity in modern Islam is a phenomenon of modernity" (p.29). Rather, my findings demonstrate the presence and sometimes celebration of ambiguous approaches to food, sacred time and other ideas. Regarding Weber (2001 [1930]), my findings contrasted his depiction of post-Reformation (Protestant) asceticism which condemns the "enjoyment of possessions" and "temptations of the flesh" (p.115), including "sociability" (p.104). Rather, my participants demonstrated a celebratory attitude towards food (Chapter 7) and valued the communal spirit of the month (Chapter 5). Aside from this, Chapter 5 highlighted the overlap between embodied acts of worship and spirituality complicating existing binaries between spirituality and physicality. This concurs with McGuire's (2003) argument that researchers "should not uncritically accept" (p.7) modern binaries developed out of post-Reformation thinking, including the spiritual-material.

McGuire also questions the utility of the sacred-profane dichotomy, something highlighted by my findings as discussed above (Section 3.2).

Building on McGuire's (2003) argument, and the findings of my thesis, I suggest current studies of Muslims particularly should question the perception of modernity as an irreconcilable challenge to modern religious practice. Indeed, Mahmood (2005) makes an argument that modernity is not analogous to secularism regarding women's practices related to the Quran in contemporary Egypt. As Butler (2019) notes in her discussion of Mahmood's work:

They [Mahmood's participants] were living in contemporary Egypt with its consumer values, its television shows, its sartorial styles, its modes of transportation and public life. But they were also embodying and transmitting a tradition, and so engaged in a daily way in the reproduction of the temporal continuity of the religion. Saba Mahmood...refused the presumptive equivalence of secularism and modernity. (p.7)

This is not to deny the broad influence of post-Reformation ideas – indeed, I would agree with some of Bauer's conclusions about modernity's impact on Muslim thinking - but rather to acknowledge that Islam has its own theology and traditions that have developed independently of this critical period in Christian history. Again, I encourage the development of emic perspectives on sociology and theology and the deeper interrogation of concepts based on modernity. Additionally, it may be helpful for religious studies more broadly to reconsider the extent of the impact of 'modernity' on contemporary forms of religion. As McGuire (2003) describes, binaries developed out of this period may be unhelpful in conceptualising the ways in which everyday practices – food practices and singing in the examples she outlines - can have religious and spiritual relevance.

4. A SNAPSHOT OF RELIGION DURING THE PANDEMIC

While I did not intend to study the pandemic and it is not the primary focus of my work, my thesis inevitably contributes to literature in this field. Again, literature on Ramadan during the pandemic is, expectedly, dominated by health-based research (Hanif et al. 2020; Abunada et al. 2020) including UK-based public health studies exploring Muslim attitudes and responses to coronavirus restrictions (Hassan et al. 2021a; Hassan et al. 2021b). Such research related to the health impacts of COVID-19 during Ramadan was likely pronounced since there was evidence that ethnic minorities – of which Muslims in the UK form a substantial portion – were at greater risk of the virus than white populations (Platt and Warwick 2020). However, I also feel such research is linked to a fixation on the physical impact of fasting amidst current research as highlighted in my Chapter 2. My thesis, and my article focusing more specifically on the lockdown (Jones-Ahmed 2022a), works to broaden the

academic picture of Ramadan and religion during the pandemic by looking at the social and religious implications of the virus.

Furthermore, my work provides a unique insight into everyday religious experience during the height of the pandemic, as also discussed in my journal article (Jones-Ahmed 2022a). While some studies suggested an increased 'religiosity' during the period (Bentzen 2021; Boguszewski et al. 2020) including studies of Muslims (Fahrullah et al. 2020; Mufti et al. 2021) they are based largely on quantitative data and do not look at the pandemic's lived impact in depth. Other articles are more concerned with viral transmission during Ramadan (Alotaibi et al. 2021; Malik 2020) or amongst religious groups more broadly (Wildman et al. 2020). These studies, I argue, focus more on the virus than on the experiences of religious communities. Conversely, I have aimed to prioritise everyday religion as experienced by my Muslim participants during Ramadan. While the pandemic was of less interest to me, some of its implications have been drawn upon throughout this thesis including the ways participants valued performing *salah* with family (Chapter 5), how isolation enhanced spirituality (Chapter 5), and the way that sharing food promoted a sense of community (Chapters 5 and 7). These social and spiritual implications of the pandemic are largely absent from existing research on COVID-19, and something I feel can only be captured through in-depth qualitative research. My thesis fills an important gap in this respect.

As with general research on Ramadan, there has been a tendency amongst some to focus on the harm caused by Ramadan and Muslims within the pandemic period (Chapter 2). This is exemplified by research discussing potentially increased risks of COVID-19 for those fasting (Hanif et. al 2020), as well as Malik's (2020) paper on mosque practices in Pakistan which argues that during Ramadan, "intimacy with God [through mosque attendance] spread coronavirus in a country" (p.80)⁹². I argue that such works again reinforce prejudices against Islam as a harmful and 'bad' religion. They also echo UK media coverage at the time which implicated Muslims in the spread of the disease (Hellen et al. 2020). As mentioned previously in this chapter, my intention was to question such stereotypes. My thesis's emphasis on lived religion provides a fuller picture of Muslim experience than discussions of the 'Muslim threat' during the pandemic.

In religious studies work on the pandemic more broadly, there is an apparent trend in studies exploring digital aspects of religion (Vekemans 2021; Sabaté Gauxachs et al. 2021; Barreau 2021; Mukherjee 2022) something reflected in media discussions (*Beyond Belief* 2022). This is expected to an extent since there was a sudden shift of activities – work, educational, social and religious – online

⁹² My critique of Malik's (2020) argument is outlined further in my paper (Jones-Ahmed 2022a, p.2).

due to social restrictions. These restrictions also meant that in-person research was more difficult and online methods were one of the few viable options. Indeed, my own research methods were almost exclusively online including all of the photo diaries and most of the interviews. While I touched upon digital elements of Ramadan in lockdown elsewhere (Jones-Ahmed 2022a), I have chosen not to focus on them in-depth here. Digital activity was apparent in participant diaries (via online lectures, courses, and social interactions), but the majority of posts referred to in-person manifestations of religion that persisted despite the lockdown. These included praying with one's immediate family (Chapter 5) and gifting food to those outside the household (Chapter 7). For my participants, religion transcended the digital – even during the lockdown – and physical, embodied worship and experience were more valuable than 'remote' activities. As one of my participants stated, "everything was online, but...it's not the same" (Sumayya Interview, in Jones-Ahmed 2022a, p.17). I argue then that future studies (should lockdown regulations be enacted again) or retrospective research on the pandemic should make efforts to consider the role of religion outside online spheres. My thesis helps to broaden academic output on religion and the lockdown by going beyond the digital.

Finally, my thesis provides a unique snapshot of everyday religion during the pandemic. While I have highlighted the lack of exploration of lived religious experiences during this unique period, a study by Piela and Krotofil (2021) is one exception. The authors look at the experience of "pluralist" Muslim women largely in the US and UK during Ramadan 2020 highlighting some similar findings as those in this thesis. These include the way in which isolation was valued during the month, and how some missed interacting with the mosque and wider Muslim community (Chapter 5). My study complements Piela and Krotofil's (2021) survey-based research, by my use of multiple research methods that are arguably more suited to gaining an ethnographic insight (see Section 5 below). Additionally, my use of photo diaries combined with interviews provide a snapshot of Ramadan at one of the most unique points in history, allowing others to 'see' what religion looked like during this unusual time. Diaries were one of the few methods available at the time that could explore people's private lives when face-to-face research was largely prohibited; I advocate their use by other social researchers who are not able to meet participants physically. My study serves as a valuable resource for those interested in the history and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic by displaying a unique academic insight into Ramadan in the UK during the period.

5. FLEXIBLE AND INNOVATIVE METHODS

5.1 FLEXIBILITY IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The contribution of this thesis to sociology and the social sciences is largely in terms of my research methods. To begin, I argue that the flexibility of my method provides valuable lessons to

other sociologists in various ways. Firstly, I advocate an approach of flexible ethnography whereby researchers are not bound to the traditional ethnographic method of observation but instead adopt an ethnographic “way of seeing” (Wolcott 1999) using whichever methods suits their research best. My approach resembles Bird’s (2003, p.10) argument about “interrogating the ethnographic encounter” wherein she asserts that although her methods – solicited letters and phone interviews – may not be deemed proper ethnography by some, they were the best way to achieve an ethnographic insight with her participants. Bird particularly takes issue with the idea that defining an ‘ethnography’ should be dependent on spending a long period of time “in the field”, and it is worth citing her again:

I believe we should be thinking more carefully about matching suitable methods to the subtle questions we are trying to ask. Our aims should be to achieve an “ethnographic way of seeing” (Wolcott 1999) whose goal Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) define as “to get close to those studied as a way of understanding what their experiences and activities *mean to them*” (p.12, italics in original). (Bird 2003, p.8)

As with Bird’s methods, my use of photo diaries and online interviews seemed an effective way of ‘getting close’ to my participants with them revealing personal insights such as struggles with their mental health or family arguments. Additionally, the data I received went beyond recording day-to-day activities of participants and revealed the meaning and significance of these through Ramadan, the pandemic and their lives. As such, my research methods, though not perhaps a ‘traditional’ ethnography, upholds the way in which Geertz understands ethnographic analysis as “an interpretive one [science] in search of meaning” (1973, p.5).

While my research methods were well-suited to the limitations imposed by the lockdown, adopting a traditional ethnographic approach of participant observation may not have been effective even outside the pandemic. Firstly, it is less likely participants would agree to having a stranger in their home compared to the remote methods I employed. Secondly, physical observation of the intimate domestic practice of religion may have changed my findings, with my presence altering substantially the way in which participants went about their daily routines. This sort of research would perhaps be akin to shadowing which Gilliat-Ray (2011) has described as “highly disruptive” (p.469) and less able to observe “business as usual” (p.480). Conversely, the photo diaries I collected seemed to record a broad spectrum of daily events including seemingly mundane activities like going for a walk or working, alongside explicitly religious ones. As I have highlighted earlier, Couldry et al. (2010) remark that diaries are particularly useful to study “phenomena that the presence of the researcher would distort” (p.46). I am conscious here that any research method, and indeed any social interaction, involves a level of “performance” as discussed by Goffman (1990 [1959]). However, I would tentatively

suggest that the research diaries are less disruptive and distorting of a participant's typical daily routine than traditional ethnographic observation. Again, I would reiterate that ethnographic researchers be flexible in their methods to allow greater exploration of the everyday lives and routines of participants.

Building on Bird's argument in the quote above, my flexibility in the medium through which participants submitted their diary supports her argument for utilising methods "in which the participant is invited to define the terms of that encounter" (p.12) to achieve an ethnographic way of seeing. Indeed, participants commented on the ease of the research methods used in this study (Chapter 3). I assert that part of this ease came from the fact that respondents could *choose* a communication method that was suitable for them. I argue then that while studies using participant observation are valuable and needed⁹³, they were not the best method for my research questions nor the specific context of my fieldwork. Ethnographers, therefore, should carefully consider their research environment and adopt research methods which reflect forms of communication that are "comfortable" to their participants (Bird 2003, p.12). As Bird elaborates, the solicited letter method she used "worked better for women, because the idea of writing such documents made sense to them" (2003, p.12). Like Bird then, I argue that social researchers should be flexible in allowing participants to choose the medium through which to interact during fieldwork if they want to develop a personal insight that can ethnographically understand the meanings participants ascribe to their actions.

Furthermore, my research demonstrates how flexibility with one's method can have pragmatic benefits too. As highlighted in Chapter 3, Couldry et al. (2010) suggest that giving participants a choice of media through which to complete diaries helps maintain engagement. For me, only four participants completely stopped sending diary entries before the end of the fieldwork, and Rayyan noted how the research "didn't feel burdensome" (Rayyan, Interview) because it was so accommodating. Rayyan particularly commented on participants' choice in the regularity of their diary entries, something that seemed to make participants feel included even when they could not submit entries every day. My final request for participants to send entries/photos of *Eid-ul-Fitr*, for example, gave several an opportunity to continue and cement their participation in the project. This was particularly true of those who had seemed to drop out of the research earlier in the month but nonetheless submitted one or multiple images reflecting their Eid activities. Aside from maintaining engagement, my success in recruiting participants – 51 UK participants and 2 international ones – and

⁹³ Indeed, I used observational methods in a previous study of Ramadan 'open *iftar*' events (Jones 2017)

the diverse media participants chose for their diaries (email, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, personal blogs), suggest the flexibility of the research medium also facilitated recruitment. While this vast range of data was sometimes difficult to manage, I nonetheless argue that social researchers should consider being lenient in their approach to data collection allowing participants greater choice, in order to enhance participation and maintain engagement.

My final reflection on flexibility in the research process is how it contributes to participant agency, something of benefit to all social researchers and particularly those working with marginalised communities. Flexibility allows participants to have a say in the way they contribute to the research, and thus addresses the imbalance of power between researcher and researched. Addressing this imbalance is particularly important, I argue, when researching minority or marginalised groups as emphasised in feminist methodological approaches (Skeggs 2001). In my study, participants commented on the negative portrayals of Muslims in the wider public sphere, but felt that their contribution to this project would be different. As Maymoona noted “I know that this is going to be portrayed in the right way” (Maymoona, Interview). This resembles the ways in which Cheruvallil-Contractor’s participants were “motivated by their individual desires to challenge stereotypes of Islam” (2021, p.33). While Maymoona may have had various reasons for her confidence in the research, I felt that the flexibility of the project gave her, and others, agency to feel they were really able to have their voices heard. Maymoona herself chose an unusual form of submitting her diaries – via Instagram stories – demonstrating her agency in the process. I suggest that other sociological studies, particularly those investigating marginalised groups, consider ways they can give participants more choice in the research methods in order to empower them and increase their agency. My use of flexible research methods in this thesis contributes to broadening understandings of ethnography as a method and encouraging researchers to consider more the agency of their participants.

5.2 INNOVATIVE METHODS

5.2.1 DIGITAL PHOTO DIARIES

Drawing from Bird’s (2003) use of solicited letters, my use of digital photo diaries contributes to current sociological research as a tool for encouraging engagement with research as well as developing the closeness to participants which allows researchers to gain an ethnographic insight. It does this by replicating a form of social communication that participants were familiar with. Gaining closeness to participants was particularly achieved through diaries submitted via WhatsApp and email⁹⁴ which were ‘one-to-one’ between myself and participant rather than being accessible by a

⁹⁴ 37 participants sent diaries via WhatsApp and 7 via email (out of 53 participants).

wider audience (like diaries submitted on outward-facing social media channels). These one-to-one diaries seemed to solicit more personal information and reflections than other media, with participants including images of family members, details of personal struggles with anxiety/depression or private information on family relationships. While most participants acknowledged their diaries were informing my research, some suggested they were directed more towards themselves than to others, commenting during interview that the diaries aided personal reflection on Ramadan. This was emphasised by Hamida, who said, “I didn't take it only as that you're going to read it...I just literally was putting it down as I am talking to myself” (Hamida, Interview). Others acknowledged that, as with any research data, the diary account was partial. As one participant explained, there were some things she omitted from her WhatsApp diary:

It wasn't the whole story; because you don't put down if you've had a bad day or you know, if you've had an argument with one of your kids or something like that - I didn't include any of that. (Participant, Interview – see Chapter 3)

While others *did* include the things described in this quote, such statements show there were different levels of disclosure participants were comfortable with, even on WhatsApp. Nonetheless, as Bird (2003) describes how her female participants were “more likely to see letters as a personal form, and may be more comfortable expressing themselves in a letter” (p.11), I argue the same can be said of WhatsApp communication. Rayyan’s comments supported this (Chapter 3) as she described how sending her diary entries on WhatsApp was similar to sending images and messages to her sisters⁹⁵ or her mum: “it was very much...normal” (Rayyan, Interview). Rayyan emphasises how her WhatsApp diary replicated social communication with other women she had a close relationship to. I advocate that other social researchers take more effort to make their methods reflective of social interactions their participants engage in routinely. While WhatsApp might be a useful tool, it will be important to consider the demographics and habits of potential participants to choose the appropriate method (or indeed, allow participants to choose their own, as discussed above).

Additionally, the novel research methods used here are particularly valuable for other studies of lived religion. I have demonstrated how solicited photo diaries can give an important insight into, and visual representation of, daily religious practices that may otherwise be difficult to observe. Ammerman and Williams (2012) note in their study utilising photo elicitation that “religion is itself visual and material, and our methods should reflect that fact” (2012, p.5) but the use of participant-

⁹⁵ It wasn't clear whether Rayyan meant familial sisters or friends who she considered 'sisters' in Islam. Nonetheless, she demonstrates how she used WhatsApp to communicate with other women in a social way.

solicited photos is yet to become popular in the study of religion. My combination of visual and diary methods is particularly novel in religious studies, and something that I feel captures the quotidian aspects of religious practices that may be missed when using less temporally-located methods like interviews. Participant diaries are also useful for exploring how religion operates within more private spheres such as the home, or in locations which might be difficult to access like education settings. These environments are nonetheless key spaces in which religion is experienced and are therefore of interest to scholars of lived religion. Aside from this, the use of diaries and images, I argue, reflects Ammerman's and William's assertion that "images may act as bridges between culturally distinct worlds, allowing researchers and subjects to come to a shared understanding" (2012, p.7). Through the course of my research, I certainly felt that participants' diaries and their daily interactions with me (for those who sent entries contemporaneously) helped develop a rapport and mutual understanding. I was also surprised at participants' openness during interviews, something which seemed have developed out of the intimacy of the diary phase of the research. My thesis has highlighted how photo diaries can be an important research method for scholars of lived religion and I advocate their wider adoption in the field.

5.2.2 ONLINE ZOOM INTERVIEWING

My research, I argue, also complicates a prevailing idea that face-to-face interviews are the ideal when it comes to qualitative, social science interviewing. Bird (2003) again highlights this perception when she writes that researchers have "bought into the idea that phone interviews are by definition a poor substitute for face-to-face contact" (p.13). While I believe there are advantages to in-person interviews, and perhaps a level of social interaction that can't be replicated online, there are also benefits to interviewing remotely. Like Bird, I largely used remote interviews for pragmatic reasons (most importantly, restrictions related to the pandemic) but found participants to be largely very comfortable and open during these interactions. One of the most obvious benefits of online interviewing is their convenience as participant and researcher do not have to be in the same physical space. Aside from the lockdown, this was advantageous for me as my participants were situated across the UK (including Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales). I also found participants were able to attend to other duties while interviewing, with Rayyan, for example, pausing our interview to answer the door and collect a package. Online interviews have pragmatic benefits that may be useful to both participants and researchers.

Another benefit of remote interviews is that they allow both researcher and participant to be on so-called 'home ground' (as I discussed in Chapter 3, Section 3.4). Bird highlights ongoing debates around whether interviewing is best done in the researcher's space or in a space more familiar to the informant (2003, p.14). She argues that while researchers may benefit from analysing the

surroundings of their participants, “where does it leave the interviewee, whose most personal milieu is being studied?” (p.14, 2003). “Impression management” as discussed by Goffman (1990 [1959]), is a key concern in these situations for Bird (2003, p.13) and she gestures towards the imbalanced power relationship between researcher and researched (pp.14-15). While this is something present in any social research, I feel it can be mitigated somewhat by interviewing online. Bird argues phone interviewing “removes much of the power charge” (p.15) by eliminating the visibility of participant, researcher and the spaces they inhabit. While online interviewing is different in that people and spaces are often visible, the specifications of interviewing platforms (such as Zoom) mean those involved can be selective in what they choose to present to the other party. Only a single rectangular framing of a participant’s space was visible to me so it was easy for them to choose a space they deemed ‘presentable’. Indeed, Maymoona switched to a virtual background after moving an area that seemed more cluttered. While I reassured her the background did not matter, she responded, “I still want you to like it” (Maymoona, Interview) hinting towards the “impression management” Bird describes. Online interviews potentially reduce the need for impression management by participants, and should be considered a viable option for research rather than a “poor substitute” (Bird 2003, p.13) for face-to-face communication.

Additionally, while I expected participants to have their cameras on during interviews, and kept my camera turned on to indicate this, one set of participants chose to interview without being visible at all. Instead of turning the camera on, their screen was replaced by an image of a rose, something I did not query following my commitment to be flexible and participant-led. These interviewees were family members who compiled their diary together, and only two out of the four who contributed to the diary attended the interview. This meant I had to confirm who I was speaking to at the outset and clarify which participant was speaking throughout its duration. It was an unusual and somewhat uncomfortable situation to be in as a researcher in that the participant was observing me on their screen, but I could not see them. It reminded me of Foucault’s (2019 [1975]) discussion of the panopticon, a system in prisons through which a central tower containing a prison inspector is used to observe and exert power over the prisoners in their cells that surround it. Foucault describes how, in this context:

Power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so...in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen (Foucault 2019 [1975], p.240)

I am not asserting that the interview scenario I describe resembles the level of discipline intended by the panopticon, but there are similarities. The participants I interviewed were visible to me only in the sense of the image which replaced their camera recording, and their username. However, this visibility was unverifiable in that I had no idea when or if they were looking at me through their screen. To use Foucault's terms, I was "totally seen, without ever seeing" and my participants saw "everything without ever being seen" (p.240) which could account for the discomfort I experienced. Nonetheless, as with Foucault's insights on the power of the gaze, my participants' choice to be unobservable acted to redress the power imbalance inherent in social research. Zoom and similar platforms give participants the agency to choose when, how and to what extent they can be observed by a researcher. Online interviewing, I argue, is an important research method that can help redress the imbalance of power in social research. This is particularly important for those working with marginalised communities or who intend for their work to be meet emancipatory goals. I assert that that other researchers, particularly those drawing on feminist approaches, consider the benefits of online interviewing for enhancing the agency of their participants.

6. CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined the key contributions of my thesis according to four main themes. Firstly (Section 2), I discussed how my thesis has enhanced the study of Ramadan. I argued my study fills a gap in the lack of sociological and religious studies research on Ramadan and Islamic rituals and works to provide a holistic perspective of the month that goes beyond its physical ramifications. My thesis also counters prejudiced portrayals of Ramadan in some current works. Secondly (Section 3), I argued that my thesis provides new paradigms and theoretical insights for the field of Islamic Studies. Specifically, I encouraged wider use of theories of ambiguity and paradox and further exploration of Islamic conceptions of sacredness. Additionally, I called into question the reliance on the impact of modernity in studies of Muslims and religions more broadly. Thirdly (Section 4), I highlighted the contribution my thesis makes to research on the COVID-19 pandemic arguing that my work provides a unique insight into lived religious experience during the period and again counters prejudices suggesting a 'Muslim threat' regarding the spread of the virus. Finally (Section 5), outlines the methodological contribution of my work. I advocate more flexibility with methods in social research as well as summarising the advantages of the innovative methods I used – photo diaries and online interviews. I argue these methods are beneficial for scholars of lived religion and play a role in empowering participants in the research process.

CHAPTER 9 – CONCLUSION

“Ramadan is a precious time and time passes fast. And you really have to benefit. And it’s a blessed time and it’s only for 30 days” (Mariya, Interview)

Ramadan represented the peak of sacredness and blessings (*baraka*) for the Muslims in my study, qualities which were recognised through increasing their worship (*ibadah*) during the month. Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to highlight the significance of Ramadan for Muslims in the UK as well as shedding light on the practices associated with this special time. These perspectives are lacking in existing research on British Muslims and thus provide a foundation for future studies of the month. Beyond academia, this work can act as an important resource for others seeking to understand the experience of Ramadan for British Muslims. Already, I have contributed to online articles and radio broadcasts about the month and produced an online video resource for schools, and some of these outputs are highlighted in Appendix 1. The findings of this research, I hope, can contribute to further educational and media resources, as well as guidance for journalists, teachers, employers and others. In this sense, the research may help promote religious literacy and understandings of Muslims in a climate where they continue to be stereotyped and misrepresented. This also reflects my participants’ goals “to change the discourse on Muslims in the UK” (Noor, Diary, Entry 28) through their participation in the project.

I have provided an account of Ramadan in the UK in 2020 from the perspectives of over 50 British Muslims from diverse demographics. While the fieldwork took place during the COVID-19 lockdown, and was undoubtedly influenced by this unprecedented situation, I focused my findings on understandings of Ramadan more broadly. Some of the important themes emerging in my chapters represent aspects of Ramadan valued and prioritised by my participants. These included *ibadah* (worship) and spirituality (Chapter 5), sacredness and time (Chapter 6), and food (Chapter 7). Methodologically, my innovative use of digital photo diaries and interviews (Chapter 3) has provided a unique insight into lived religion in private/domestic spaces during Ramadan (and during lockdown) and can be useful for others wishing to explore areas where in-person interaction with participants is difficult or inappropriate. I argued that my flexibility with methods increased participant agency and encouraged disclosure by allowing methods to replicate ‘everyday’ communication. Theoretically, I have put forward a case study of “cultural ambiguity” (Bauer 2021) in the context of Ramadan in the UK, as well as extending understandings of Islamic sacredness. I have argued that some of the practices and attitudes of my participants represented an acceptance and embracement of ambiguity that stems from early conceptions of Islam and has resisted modernity’s attitude of “intolerance” towards ambiguity (according to Bauer 2021).

The inter-disciplinary nature of my research reflects the multifaceted nature of Ramadan. I have elaborated on the individual and communal elements of the month, the spiritual and the material/aesthetic, the embodied and the metaphysical, while also trying to complicate these binaries and demonstrate how they overlap. I hope I have shown how the effects of Ramadan are sprawling and seep into different parts of life including family/domestic life, work, education, and health. I have also tried to prioritise the explicitly 'religious' and spiritual aspects of Ramadan that participants seemed to value most. In this sense, Ramadan can be viewed as Islam in microcosm, encapsulating and emphasising some of the major rituals and perspectives of the religion while demonstrating how Islam is 'lived' day-to-day. This study is thus valuable not only for understanding Ramadan, but for conceptualising Islam more broadly and how it is practiced in the UK.

Additionally, positioning my research as a study of 'lived' religion has allowed me to provide a valuable critique of Bauer's (2021) ideas. It could be argued that Bauer's focus on discourse and texts led to the conclusion that Muslims today are largely "intolerant" of ambiguity since he engages heavily with written debates amongst Muslim scholars. My focus on the everyday practice of Islam, however, highlights areas which Bauer's textualist focus may have missed, leading me to conclude that ambiguity was celebrated amongst the Muslims in my study. I argue then, that studies of everyday, mundane aspects of religion are vital in illuminating our understanding of Islam in the modern world.

1. A BASELINE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This thesis act as a baseline for future studies of Ramadan in the UK, and indeed in other contexts, since religious and sociological studies on the month are lacking. Despite the comprehensive nature of my research, there were inevitably areas that could not be covered. I chose to focus on the significance and practices of Ramadan through the theoretical lens of 'lived' religion. I felt this would honour the experiences of Muslims and would be most helpful as a starting point for research in this field. Participant comments during fieldwork seemed to support this. It is worth hearing from Will once again:

I think it's important that Muslims are understood generally um, and I think there's not enough focus on our religious life, because that is really the most important part of being Muslim for the vast majority of us... You know, Muslims are being studied for all sorts of reasons but not why we pray or what Ramadan means for us and things like that. (Will, Interview)

Since research on Ramadan in the UK was so sparse, it made sense to explore how Ramadan was lived and enacted day-to-day, as well as the significance of the month for Muslims. Another participant Noor seemed to appreciate this approach saying that it was important that researchers explored "the

lived experiences of Muslims, rather than studying obscure things that don't affect the average Muslim's life" (Noor, Interview). I hope then, that while my account is partial, it is something my participants would recognise and appreciate, and represents the things they most valued about the month of Ramadan. Nonetheless, there are plenty more avenues of research that would benefit from further study as I outline below.

2. FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

2.1 LIVED RELIGION AND RAMADAN

While I have been fairly comprehensive in investigating the 'lived' religious dimensions of Ramadan, there are areas which could be developed further. The first of these is engagement with the Quran in Ramadan which, I feel, has the potential to form a research project in itself. The revelation of the Quran was one of the key reasons for Ramadan's perceived sacredness amongst my participants (Chapter 6), with one denoting it "the month of the Quran" (Sumayya, Diary, Entry 17). Most diaries included at least one image of a Quran and participants recorded how they interacted with it in multiple ways – through reciting and memorising it in Arabic, reading English translations, teaching about the Quran, personal reflection on its verses and studying the Quran through reading *tafseer*⁹⁶ or attending classes. Figure 32 below depicting Rayyan's engagement with the Quran while cooking remains one of my favourite diary entries yet failed to feature elsewhere in this thesis. However, it demonstrates the potential of research on the Quran in Ramadan to enrich the study of everyday religion. I am disappointed that I could not delve into the Quran further but feel that future studies could elaborate on this vital aspect of the month, perhaps utilising diary methods as I have here. These could build upon the works of Gent (2016), Maurer (2014) and Hardaker and Sabki (2015; 2016) which explore the religious significance of the Quran amongst British Muslims, as well as studies discussing the embodiment of the Quran more broadly (Boyle 2004; Ware 2014).

⁹⁶ *Tafseer* texts are those which elaborate on the meaning and interpretations of the Quran.



FIGURE 32- RAYYAN’S COOKING PREPARATION ALONGSIDE HER PHONE SCREEN DISPLAYING A PAGE OF THE QURAN. CAPTIONED BY PARTICIPANT, “MAKING EVERYDAY TASKS SPIRITUAL WITH INTENTION AND QURAN PRACTICE” (RAYYAN, DIARY, ENTRY 4)

Secondly, future research would benefit from looking more closely at sensory, visual and material elements of Ramadan. Again, these elements came through in my data, but I was unable to explore them in depth. However, I did discuss how sensory aspects helped recreate a ‘feeling’ of Ramadan during the lockdown in my associated journal article (Jones-Ahmed 2022a). Thus, I would argue that the senses are an important tool for helping researchers and research audiences really get a ‘taste’ of the lived experience of the month. The senses also came through strongly when participants discussed childhood memories or expressed nostalgic emotions in relation to the occasion, such as Sabrina’s recollection of “smelling the orange blossom water and roasted sesames” when the traditional Moroccan *shabakya* cookies were made in preparation for the month (Sabrina, Diary, Entry 2; Figure 27), as well as other participants’ memories of listening to Sunrise Radio at *suhoor* time (Rayyan, Interview; Layla, Interview). This, of course, is not to mention the richness of the visual material I received, only a tiny portion of which could be featured in this thesis, suggesting a sensory and material culture analysis of Ramadan would be fruitful. Future studies of the month then would highly benefit from an in-depth sensory and visual analysis of the practices, objects and experiences associated with the period.

The third element of lived religion during Ramadan that is lacking in this thesis is the vast array of communal gatherings associated with the month. While I have discussed sociability and communality throughout – including in the context of *ibadah* (Chapter 5) and food, especially sharing food and eating together (Chapter 7) – the pandemic-induced lockdown meant that in-person gatherings were limited to individual households in 2020. As such, key Ramadan events like mosque activities (*iftars*, *taraweeh* prayers, educational events), charity fundraisers, halaqas, dhikr circles, and group *iftars* (*dawats*) in homes did not feature prominently in fieldwork. Additionally, there was little exploration of outward-facing Ramadan events like the ‘open *iftar*’ initiative I explored in previous MA work (Jones 2017). Before the pandemic arrived, I hoped participant diaries might capture some of these activities but the unusual circumstances meant this was not possible. While communal activities were not explored in-depth in my research, participant comments suggested they were highly valued. As outlined in my article (Jones-Ahmed 2022a, pp.7-8), several respondents explained, quite emotionally, how the absence of the mosque and wider community was sorely felt in 2020. I also touched upon this in Chapter 5, Section 4 in this thesis. Amin captured this sentiment stating:

It’s on nights like this that my heart yearns for home. And by home, I don’t mean my parents’ house, or my city. I mean my mosque. The one place where the majority Muslim of my loved ones congregate every Ramadan (Amin, Diary, Entry 25 in Jones-Ahmed 2022a, p.8)

While journalist Fergusson (2017, pp. 281-344) records his attendance at Ramadan events in his book on Muslims in Britain, he states how he is writing as a non-Muslim ‘trying out’ Ramadan rather than trying to understand Ramadan from the perspectives of Muslims. There has been little discussion of such events in the context of British Muslim Studies and there is a ripe opportunity for future researchers to explore the significance of these face-to-face communal events from a lived religion perspective. I propose that ethnographic participant observation, as used in my MA work (Jones 2017), would be a particularly suitable method to explore these group activities.

A final aspect of lived religion that could be investigated further in the context of Ramadan in the UK is religious transmission to children. Previous research has suggested rates of inter-generational religious transmission are higher amongst Muslims in the UK than other groups (Scourfield et al. 2013) and the diaries I collected suggested Ramadan was a particularly important period for religious nurture. Both Sarah and Rachel’s diaries had a predominant focus on educating their children about Islam, including activities like making binoculars to ‘sight’ the moon, and learning how to do *wudu*. Other diaries had aspects of this religious nurture peppered throughout including the poster made by Syeda’s children describing their Ramadan goals (Figure 8). During interview, Sarah said, “I felt like I have to make something of Ramadan because my child's getting older...to make

it a special month” (Sarah, Interview) highlighting how she made more of an effort during Ramadan to pass on religious teachings to her child. Scourfield et al. (2013, p.129) also highlight how children in their study started fasting, or partially fasting, from a young age, something echoed by my participants. This suggests childhood fasting could have a role to play in religious transmission. These Ramadan activities may be linked to the nurturing of a religious habitus, i.e. “the development of deeply-rooted social dispositions...via micro-level socialization within families and communities” (Scourfield et al. 2013; p.207). As such, I think there is ample space for a study on religious transmission during Ramadan in the UK that could draw upon Bourdieu’s theories of embodiment and habitus that Scourfield and colleagues (2013) utilised. Additionally, such a study could shed light on the innovative ways that parents, especially mothers, are passing on Islam in a Muslim-minority context.

2.2 THE ‘MAINSTREAMING’ OF RAMADAN

While the above examples relate to the significance of Ramadan for Muslim communities, there are myriad possibilities for research on the holy month’s place in British society more broadly. Indeed, the role of Ramadan in the wider public sphere was one of my key research interests on starting this PhD which eventually fell outside the scope of the thesis. Over the four years of conducting my research however, I observed what seemed to be an increased presence of Ramadan and Eid in the mainstream media, the commercial sector and other areas. In 2022, for example, a song and video about *Eid-ul-Fitr* was produced by Disney (and was shown to my son and his friends at school). Eid and Ramadan also featured prominently in supermarket magazines (Tesco Magazine 2022a, 2022b; Waitrose Food Magazine 2022), and Marks and Spencer announced its ‘Countdown to Eid’ calendar (Marks and Spencer 2022). While I had seen hints of this sort of ‘mainstreaming’ of Ramadan/Eid in previous years, it was nothing like the explosion of activity I witnessed in 2022. Alongside this however, there was still some misunderstanding of Ramadan and Islam, as I experienced when visiting a local school to talk about the month. Leading on from this, one of the key research questions for future studies could be “to what extent is Ramadan being ‘mainstreamed’ in Britain?” something which could feed into various academic fields discussed below.

Explorations of Ramadan and commercialisation are already present in existing works though none look at Ramadan in the UK. Armbrust (2002) argues, somewhat disapprovingly, that Ramadan may be undergoing a process of “Christmasization” in his case study of an Egyptian Ramadan TV programme discussing ideas about commercialisation and consumerism. Two other studies however, comment on the commercialization of Ramadan in a less negative sense describing it as a confluence of Western and non-Western values and practices (Sandikci and Omeraki 2007; Touzani and Hirschman 2008) with the latter emphasising that “a core part of a given Muslim observance can be –

and is – enacted through consumption” (Touzani and Hirschman 2008, p.379). Both studies look at this process in Muslim majority contexts, namely Turkey and Tunisia. I think it is a good time for a study of such issues in a British context particularly as they seemed relevant to debates being had amongst my participants. While some specifically commented on the commercialization of Ramadan (Sarah, Interview) or bemoaned the over-emphasis of fundraising on television and in mosques which “has become an expected part of a British Ramadan” (Rayyan, Interview), the debates around the place of food during the month (Chapter 7) also tie into wider discussions of consumerism and materialism in Ramadan. Thus, research on the commercialisation of Ramadan, from the perspectives of mainstream businesses, Muslim-led businesses and Muslim consumers, would broaden the academic picture of Ramadan in the UK. I would also be interested to see debates about commercialisation of Ramadan amongst British Muslims and how they perceive the ‘mainstreaming’ I have described.

Secondly, a study of media coverage of Ramadan in the UK would make a welcome addition to existing work. While there have been many studies exploring media coverage of Muslims and Islam – including a large-scale Cardiff University project of print news media (Moore et al. 2008) – there does not seem to be anything specifically exploring the holy month. However, as I observed before and throughout my fieldwork period the mainstream news media seems to be increasingly paying attention to Ramadan with articles explaining the fundamentals of the month (Hughes 2022) or explaining the experience from the view of Muslims (Akbar 2018). While these examples seem intended to explain the occasion to the wider non-Muslim public who may be unfamiliar with it, other stories displayed prejudiced attitudes towards Muslims, including an article about the potential risk of Ramadan in spreading coronavirus (Hellen et al. 2020). Ramadan could provide an interesting media case study to explore depictions of Muslims in the media to see whether it follows the same pattern of stereotyping that has been observed elsewhere in terms of Muslims being perceived as terrorists or in opposition to Britain and the West (Moore et al. 2008). Additionally, there are avenues to explore the agency of Muslims in creating or contributing to their own stories about Ramadan whether in mainstream media or via Muslim-led platforms. Furthermore, it would be worth exploring what impact media coverage of Ramadan is having on Muslims and other audiences. Can such coverage act to build bridges between communities and develop mutual understanding? Does it provide a platform to increase Muslim agency in Britain? Or does such coverage perpetuate stereotypes of Muslims? The time-bound nature of Ramadan, and intensified media activity that accompanies it, provides a great opportunity for a media case study of this sort.

Finally, the mainstreaming of Ramadan and fasting could also be explored through research on what seem to be increasingly popular ‘fasting diets’. The 5:2 diet book popularised partly via a BBC TV show, while different in its specifications to Muslim fasting, makes several references to Islamic teachings and even suggests choosing Mondays and Thursdays as the two fasting days in the week following the habit of the Prophet Muhammad (Mosley and Spencer 2014, p.127). Anecdotally, I engaged in a discussion with fellow Muslim mothers on WhatsApp in 2020 who explained how they often followed the 5:2 fasting diet outside Ramadan to improve their general health and because it was easier to fit around their daily lives, especially when caring for young children. Even my participant James explained how he continued intermittent (5:2) fasting outside Ramadan, and in the winter months when the days are shorter, combines that with Islamic fasting – i.e. fasting from food and drink during daylight, and limiting his calorie intake even on breaking his fast (James, Interview). I think then, research exploring Muslim perspectives on Islamic and ‘secular’ fasting practices could elaborate further on the significance of Islamic fasting and also delve into issues of religion and secularism in the modern world. As in James’ example, it might also be an avenue to investigate how Muslims are being innovative with their religious practice in a British context. It would also be interesting to explore non-Muslim perspectives on fasting – religious and otherwise – to explore perceptions of Islamic practices in contemporary Britain. Discussions about these different forms of fasting could also act as a starting point for inter-faith conversations about the role and influence of religion in the modern world.

2.3 A BRITISH RAMADAN

Further exploration into the particularities of Ramadan in Britain – perhaps in comparison to other contexts – would make another valuable contribution to the field. The current thesis provides a starting point for such studies but I suggest other avenues that could be pursued. Firstly, research mapping the variety of Ramadan traditions present in the UK would be valuable especially since Muslims in Britain draw their heritage from diverse parts of the world. Food traditions – such as those I discussed in Chapter 7, Section 5.3 – would be a useful avenue of research. Such studies could look at whether there are any widely-accepted culinary staples of a British Ramadan such as the Moroccan *hrira* soup which Buitelaar argues is so ubiquitous that it “has come to symbolise the ‘Moroccan way’ of fasting” (1993, p.179). I would suspect that besides the Prophetic tradition of breaking the fast with dates, such ubiquitous traditions are unlikely due to the “melting pot” (Cheruvallil-Contractor 2021) of cultures and traditions present in the British Muslim make-up. However, such studies would also give opportunities to explore the hybridisation and adaptation of different ethnic traditions. This was mentioned by participant Rayyan who explained she used the month to experiment with Ramadan culinary traditions from different cultures (Chapter 7, Section 5.2). It also seemed that her childhood tradition of having Tesco croissants for *suhoor* was a way to mimic the traditional Gujarati fried breads

that the older generation of her family would make or source for *suhoor* but were otherwise difficult to obtain. Ramadan events and activities would also be useful cases to explore Ramadan traditions in the UK, particularly those events which are aimed at the wider non-Muslim community – such as the open *iftar* events I explored previously (Jones 2017) – which would perhaps be less prominent in Muslim-majority contexts.

Secondly, comparative studies of traditions in Britain and elsewhere in the world could also shed light on the distinctiveness of Ramadan in the UK. While I asked my participants how they felt Ramadan in the UK compared to other countries, I was not able to elaborate on their answers much in this thesis. Some drew on personal experiences of Ramadan abroad and others speculated on what they perceived Ramadan elsewhere to be like. While some felt the public celebration of Ramadan - similar to the “atmosphere” or “*ajwa*” in Syria that Anderson (2018, p.620) describes - and adjustment to work schedules was better in Muslim-majority contexts, others felt the sense of a Muslim community in the UK was greater and there was too much peer pressure in Muslim countries to attend events (such as social *iftars* in homes) that distracted from more important aspects of Ramadan. There was unfortunately not space to analyse and unpick these ideas in this thesis, and some acknowledged they were discussing only their perceptions of Ramadan abroad while not having experienced it. Thus, a comparative study of Ramadan, perhaps using the diary methods I employed here, would be useful in elaborating on the differences in the enactment of Ramadan globally as well as shedding light of some of the distinguishing features of Ramadan in Britain.

Thirdly, an exploration of Ramadan in more secular/mainstream contexts, such as workplaces, education environments, and healthcare settings, could shed light on the ways in which such environments are suited (or unsuited) to meet the need of Muslims who inhabit them. I have already highlighted in Chapter 2 (Section 2.4) the way in which Muslims, especially those in Muslim-minority contexts, become more ‘visible’ to the wider public during Ramadan and seem to be questioned more about their religion during the month (e.g. El-Sayed et al. 2015, p.45). An exploration of the dynamics of these interactions could look at whether they help build bridges between communities or are perhaps spaces of discrimination and prejudice as suggested by Buitelaar’s Dutch participants (2006). Additionally, investigating the practice of Islam during Ramadan in various spaces could provide recommendations and examples of good practice which could enable organisations and institutions to cater better for Muslim needs, especially during the holy month.

3. RAMADAN: A MONTH OF AMBIGUITY

To close, I remind readers of one of the key themes drawn upon throughout this thesis that has led me to describe Ramadan as a ‘month of ambiguity’. Ideas of ambiguity, paradoxes and

contradiction, informed largely by the works of Bauer (2021) and Shahab Ahmed (2016), seemed to appropriately reflect what participants conveyed to me through their data. While Ramadan might be seen as a time of rigidity with a fixed routine of fasting which refutes materialism and worldliness⁹⁷, my findings demonstrate an alternative perspective. While there are undoubtedly rules and regulations in relation to fasting, which I have not explored extensively here, my findings suggested there was also an abundance of ambiguity and paradoxical ideas. While some participants struggled to reconcile such paradoxes, these ambiguities were largely tolerated and even enjoyed.

This was demonstrated by the way in which participants rejoiced in the unknowability of *Laylatul Qadr* using its ambiguousness as an opportunity to increase their closeness to God through *ibadah* and increase their connection with the wider Muslim community. It was also demonstrated through the diverse practices and opinions used to determine the start and end of Ramadan which were largely tolerated by my respondents. Additionally, it was displayed through attitudes and practices towards food which conveyed a rejection of materiality alongside a simultaneous appreciation of it. Understanding the ambiguity present in Muslim practices, I argue, not only enriches our understanding of the lived, human experience of religion but demonstrates the humanness of Muslims amidst wider discourses which seek to dehumanise them. It suggests that many Muslims perceive “diversity as *rahmat*, as a blessing” (Moller 2005a, p.50) rather than viewing it as a source of division. My focus on everyday religious practice highlights this point and informs existing conversations around Islam in the modern world such as that of Bauer (2021) whose focus on discursive ideas and texts arguably presents a skewed view of contemporary Muslim practice.

Understanding the ambiguity present within Ramadan is essential to understanding its significance for Muslims. Ramadan is both a time of rejection of the material *and* a time for celebrating worldly blessings. It is a time of sacredness *as well as* mundaneness. It is a time of communality *and* a time for isolation. All these competing, contradictory aspects converge during the month of Ramadan as it encapsulates the ambiguity that is part of the Islamic tradition, and arguably part of the human condition more broadly.

Being desirable means being comfortable with your own ambiguity. The most ambiguous reality is that we are flesh and spirit at the same time. Within everyone there is light and shadow, good and evil, love and hate. In order to be truthful, you must embrace your total

⁹⁷ This impression comes across in a recent academic work on Ramadan which describes how “strict Muslims...abhor leanings toward materialism and worldly pleasures and reject the elated festive mood on Ramadan nights” (Beck 2022, p.252).

being. A person who exhibits both positive and negative qualities, strengths and weaknesses is not flawed, but complete. (Rumi⁹⁸)

⁹⁸ Quote attributed to 13th century poet and Islamic scholar Jalal ud-Din Rumi. Available at: <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/854696> [Accessed: 11 August 2022].

APPENDIX 1 – LIST OF DISSEMINATION ACTIVITIES RELATED TO PHD FINDINGS

May 2020

- Contributed to BBC Radio Cymru programme discussing Islamophobia, COVID-19 and Eid in lockdown (not available)
- Contributed to BBC Wales and BBC Cymru Fyw news articles about Eid in Lockdown:
English - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-52764555>
Welsh - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/cymrufyw/52746840>

October 2020

- Published a blog for the British Sociological Association (SocRel group) about my research methods:
<https://socrel.medium.com/lockdown-ramadan-researching-religion-using-visual-methods-ee3153d90f81>

January 2021

- Participated in BBC Radio Wales' religion programme on the topic of Fasting:
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000rcvr>

March 2021

- Wrote a blog for the Islam-UK Centre, Cardiff University about the radio programme I contributed to:
<https://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/islamukcentre/laura-jones-radio-programme-on-fasting/>

April 2021

- Contributed to BBC Radio Cymru programme marking the beginning of Ramadan (chose nasheeds and Quran recitation to be used and explained the significance and spirituality of fasting):
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000v28n>

May 2021

- Co-produced a short video on Ramadan with Now in a Minute (Wales-based Muslim media company):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p2oZwTWX6vE>
- Co-produced an infographic with Now in a Minute based on my research:
https://www.instagram.com/p/COF-BS6AqMw/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

January 2022

- Contributed to a BBC Radio Cymru about fasting and pilgrimage:
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00138cx>
- Published a journal article about Ramadan in lockdown (Jones-Ahmed 2022a):
<https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/1/74>

April 2022

- Visited Ysgol Pwll Coch, Cardiff to talk about Ramadan to Year 5 pupils
- Talked about Ramadan with BBC Radio Cymru which was made into an online article on BBC Cymru Fyw: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/cymrufyw/60970127>

May 2022

- Produced online talk about Ramadan and Eid for high schools:
<https://vimeo.com/706107800>

APPENDIX 2 – PARTICIPANT INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLETING DIARIES

Observing Ramadan in Britain: Instructions for Participants

Diary Content: Please produce a daily photo diary during Ramadan 2020 (29 or 30 days) documenting one thing each day that reflects your Ramadan (this could be an object, activity, person/people, place or anything else). Each entry should include:

- one photograph (or more if you wish)
- some explanatory text/audio/video

For the explanations, please tell me about the image including what it is, why you chose to include it in your diary, and anything else you want to add. Don't worry about the quality of photos. If there is some repetition in your diary that is not a problem.

Diary Format: The diary can be completed in any format you like (e.g. via email, WhatsApp, or on an Instagram account) as you have specified in the initial survey.

- If you change your mind about how you want to compile/send entries (now or later on) please let me know.
- If you wish to use a social media account – such as Instagram or Facebook – please send me your handle (@...) or a link to your page so I can follow you.

N.B. If you are using WhatsApp for your diaries, please send your entries to this number ([REDACTED]) rather than the number that was sent out on the posters etc.

Regularity: Ideally, entries will be sent daily (or however often you complete them). If it is easier for you to compile a few entries then send them afterwards, let me know before Ramadan so I know what to expect. If you don't manage to do an entry every day, that is no problem at all! Just do as many as you can manage and is easy for you.

Feedback: I won't be able to respond immediately to every entry you send but I am very grateful for you taking the time and effort to complete them! I will aim to contact you once a week to check in and see how things are going. If you have any questions in between, you can always contact me (details below).

Anonymity: Your entries and information will be anonymised in any research outputs even if you use a social media account to compile them (e.g. Facebook/Instagram). Some verbatim quotes may be used but will be anonymised as outlined.

Follow-up Interviews: Some participants will be selected for a follow-up interview 2-3 months after Ramadan (online or by phone) but you are not obliged to take part in this and can decide later.

I look forward to receiving your diary entries once Ramadan begins. Thank you again for your participation!

Laura Jones

[phone number]

Jonesla24@cardiff.ac.uk

APPENDIX 3 – INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interview Schedule

Notes: This schedule was edited a few times during the interview stage. The main points to be covered by the interview were numbered, while the sub-points are denoted by letters. I did not stick to the specific wording of most questions during interview aiming for a more relaxed tone and giving flexibility to explore areas of interest.

Thanks // Overview of interview // Record // Tell me about yourself

INTRODUCTION/'ICE-BREAKER'

1. Firstly, tell me how you came across the project and why you decided to take part?

THE DIARISING PROCESS

2. Tell me about how you compiled your diary entries – where, when and how you compiled the text/audio and images.
 - a. When did you take photos/write text?
 - b. How did you date your entries – what counted as the start/end of each day (or night)?
 - c. Where did you take photos/write text?
 - d. How did you decide what images to include?
 - e. Did you take multiple images and choose one?
 - f. Did you do text first or photo first?
 - g. Did something else inspire your entries?
 - h. Did you take photos on the day or use photos taken at another time/by someone else?
 - i. Did you talk to anyone else about what you included in our diary? Or did you get anyone else to read it / listen to it?
 - j. Did you have a target audience in mind – who was going to read them?
3. How did you find the process of compiling the diary?
 - a. What did you like about keeping the diary? Or your favourite thing?
 - b. What was challenging about it? Or your least favourite thing?
 - c. Did you find it burdensome or easy?
 - d. What did you find it helpful or beneficial about the process, if anything?
 - e. How did it affect your experience of Ramadan (positively or negatively) if at all?
 - f. How did lockdown affect the way you filled in your diary (frequency, detail etc)? How would you have done it differently if we weren't in lockdown?

ABOUT RAMADAN (GENERALLY)

4. Meaning/significance of Ramadan
 - a. What are some of the most important things about Ramadan to you?
 - b. How important is Ramadan in your life?
5. Experiences of Ramadan / Significance of Ramadan
 - a. What is your earliest memory of Ramadan?/ What do you remember about your first Ramadan (converts)?
 - b. What was your most memorable Ramadan? And why?
 - c. What do you enjoy about Ramadan? What do you find difficult about Ramadan?
 - d. What do you look forward to in Ramadan? Is there anything you don't look forward to in Ramadan? How do you feel when Ramadan finishes (relief/missing things)?
 - e. Tell me about your best experience of Ramadan that. Now tell me about your worst experience of Ramadan
 - f. How did your Ramadan go this year? Was it easy/enjoyable/difficult?
6. Tell me about any Ramadan traditions that you have (food, worship, activities/events/things you do)

- a. Are there certain things you only or mostly do in Ramadan? Are there things you always do in Ramadan?
 - b. Are these traditions you have created in your family? Are they inherited from parents/relatives? Have you adopted traditions from other cultures?
 - c. Are these traditions that take place in other countries or just in the UK?
 - d. Are there any traditions you couldn't do this year because of lockdown?
7. Tell me about a typical 24 hours in Ramadan. How is it different to the rest of the year.
- a. Does your timetable change in Ramadan? How?
 - b. How does Ramadan fit alongside other commitments in your life like work or studying?
 - c. [Discuss worship/ibadah if it comes up]
8. Fasting and not fasting in Ramadan
- a. (For women) You told me in your diary about when you weren't fasting – how is Ramadan different when you aren't fasting? Does it change things?
 - b. (For men) Have you ever not fasted in Ramadan? How is it different? Does it change things? Perhaps as a child, or as a traveller etc.
 - c. (For those not fasting at all) Is Ramadan different when you aren't fasting? In what ways?
9. Food and Ramadan
- a. Tell me about food in Ramadan
 - b. Everyone has different perspectives, but some people have said things like Ramadan is not about food, or you shouldn't think about food too much in Ramadan – what do you think about this?
10. Because my study is about Ramadan in Britain, tell me a bit about what Ramadan (and Eid) is like in this country compared to other places do you think?
11. Ramadan/Eid in lockdown
- a. What would have been different/the same in your diary if you had done it in a more typical Ramadan? / If I had asked you to do this diary a year ago, how would it have been different? /What photos would have been in the diary that weren't in it this time?
 - b. How were the sense of community of Ramadan and Eid affected by lockdown? Was the 'community spirit' still there? (Ummah?)
 - c. How did you find Eid in lockdown? Etc.

PHOTOS AND PHOTO ELICITATION

[Before the interview, ask participants review their diaries and pick one photo that they would like to talk more about in the interview, or that stands out to them in their diary]

12. About the photo:
- Tell me more about this photo /Tell me the story behind this photo
 - Why did you include this in your diary? [Rose 2016 – 'why did you take this one?']
 - Why did you pick this photo to talk more about?
 - How does this relate to your Ramadan? Why is it important?
 - [Other things - Where it was taken? What is it? When it was taken? How were you feeling? Who were you with?]
13. Were there any photos you wanted take for your diary but didn't? What were they? Why did you not include them? [Rose 2016, p.324]

ENDING

14. Is there anything I haven't asked you that you want me to know about Ramadan or Eid (in 2020 or generally) and what the month means to you? // Is there anything else you want to add?
15. Is there anything I could improve on as a researcher in terms of the diary and interview process?

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