

Article

Isolation, Community and Spirituality: British Muslim Experiences of Ramadan in Lockdown

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Abstract: Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting, is typically a time associated with individual worship and communal gatherings as Muslims meet, eat and pray together. In 2020 especially, COVID-19 had a significant impact on the observation of the holy month. With lockdown measures in place, mosques were closed and there were prohibitions on visiting family and friends, making the month an unusual occasion. This paper draws upon qualitative PhD research on Ramadan 2020 in Britain comprising more than 50 Ramadan photo diaries from diverse Muslim participants and follow-up interviews. The findings highlight how participants experienced the benefits of isolation by being able to reflect and connect more with God and via the establishment of “Ramadan corners” in homes, while at the same time missing the mosque and the Muslim community. I further highlight how communal aspects of the holy month were maintained and transformed to suit lockdown conditions, including the use of online activities, praying in congregation at home and sharing food. Emerging from these two facets of Ramadan, I explore ideas of socially dependent spirituality and how participants negotiated communal and individual elements of their spiritual lives. Through the diverse examples discussed, I argue that material, embodied, aesthetic and emotive practices were emphasised in 2020 to recreate a ‘feeling’ of Ramadan when typical expressions of the month were unavailable.



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1. Introduction

Ramadan plays an important part in the lives of Muslims in the UK and across the world. It is, for many Muslims, the highlight of the Islamic calendar and a time during which efforts to worship God are increased. It is the month of fasting when healthy, adult Muslims are required to abstain from food and drink during daylight, an act which forms one of the five pillars of Islam. Given its significance, however, sociological research on the occasion is sparse. Current literature on the occasion reflects the bodily practice of fasting focusing mainly on the medical and health impacts of Ramadan. This includes research that examines the risks of fasting to diabetes sufferers (Salti et al. 2004; Tourkmani et al. 2018) and pregnant women (Adler-Lazarovits and Weintraub 2019), as well as its impact on sleep (Qasrawi et al. 2017) and performance in sports (Zerguini et al. 2012; Nikfarjad and Memari 2016). Unsurprisingly, academic studies on COVID-19 and Ramadan also concentrate substantially on health, including papers looking at potential impacts of fasting on the risk of COVID-19 (Hanif et al. 2020) with some proposing benefits of fasting in relation to immunity (Abunada et al. 2020). There is also a body of literature around public health, including UK studies exploring Muslim attitudes towards coronavirus restrictions (Hassan et al. 2021a) and the impact of regulations on psychological wellbeing (Hassan et al. 2021b). Hassan et al. (2021b) note the impact of the pandemic on feelings associated with Ramadan, suggesting the absence of community elements led to “a sense of sadness and low mood” (p. 5). Conversely, some interviewees felt Ramadan in the pandemic enhanced family relationships and had a positive impact on spirituality (p. 8). Similar qualitative, emotive insights were shared by my participants and will be elaborated on further in this paper.

While Ramadan is associated with a physical practice, the month has sociological and metaphysical implications, as will be discussed in this article. However, the sociological study of Ramadan, particularly from a religious studies perspective, is much not explored extensively in current literature. There are a few ethnographic works on the month that start to fill this gap. Rytter (2016) for example, looks at the Islamic conception of the *nafs* (lower self or desires) through attending a Ramadan retreat in Pakistan with a group of Danish Muslims. Oestergaard (1996) brings together textual conceptions of the month and localised Moroccan customs by exploring practices related to food, bodily purity and worship. Buitelaar (1993) also advances ideas on the meaning of Ramadan in Morocco in her in-depth ethnographic study of the tradition. She discusses ideas of *ajr* (reward), *tahara* (purity) and *umma* (community) as three key themes (pp. 178–79) and concludes:

“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” (p. 178)

Following Buitelaar (1993) and adopting a Geertzian analysis of the *meaning* of sociological practices (Geertz 1973), my research sheds light on the significance of Ramadan for Muslims in the UK.

In this article, I discuss some of the key meanings and practices of Ramadan in the context of the pandemic, including how these were upheld despite the unusual circumstances. Various articles have suggested the pandemic sparked 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 (Mufti et al. 2021), though they are based on quantitative data or surveys and do not look closely at the lived impact of coronavirus on religious communities. 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 on religion’s role in the disease’s transmission (Wildman et al. 2020). While such research may be helpful, it arguably centres the virus as the topic of study; my aim is to focus on the lesser-studied experiences of Muslims amidst the pandemic. Malik’s (2020) paper interestingly conveys the interplay between theology, spirituality and social practice in Ramadan but his fieldwork may not be sufficient to justify his conclusion that “intimacy with God spread coronavirus in a country [Pakistan]” (p. 80). Malik bases 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) but it is unclear whether this point is drawn from direct observation, media articles (which he references), or other sources.

Some academic works, however, 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. They 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. 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. More closely related to my research is Maravia et al.’s (2021) analysis of British-based guidance documents issued by imams, Muslim scholars and others before Ramadan 2020. The documents analysed relate to Ramadan and other religious activity but the authors’ conclusions are more about linguistic construction and “symbolic capital” of documents than Ramadan itself.

Whilst I touch upon the digital implications of the pandemic on Ramadan, I discuss the impact on daily life more broadly, something made possible by my use of solicited photo diaries during Ramadan 2020. I also highlight an ‘everyday’ perspective on religion involving participants from various demographics, rather than focusing on authority figures and organisations. This seems to be a perspective that is not widespread in existing research but which can shed light on the day-to-day interaction between the pandemic and wider aspects of society. My research complements an existing study of Muslim women

largely based in the US and UK (Piela and Krotofil 2021) which examines the everyday implications of the pandemic on the religious experience of Ramadan. Through survey data, the authors' findings echo some of those presented here, such as the ways participants appreciated the solitude of Ramadan in lockdown. I am able to build on these conclusions through my use of research diaries and photos, through which I elaborate further on the embodied, material and aesthetic elements of the month.

2. Research Methods

To explore everyday aspects of religion in the context of the pandemic, I adopted an ethnographic approach to my research which took place during and after Ramadan 2020. Following Geertz (1973), I focus on the *meaning* of Ramadan for my participants and use the ethnographic method flexibly following Wolcott's (1999) encouragement towards an ethnographic "way of seeing". As such, my fieldwork comprised two primary methods. Firstly, I collected solicited photo diaries—images alongside text/audio explanations—from 51 UK-based participants during Ramadan 2020 (April–May). These participants were recruited via an open call for participants distributed through social media and email with the main criteria being that participants would be spending Ramadan 2020 in the UK and were willing to submit a photo diary during the month. Different networks were targeted which ensured the sample included diversity in age (from 18 years to those in their 60's), geographic location within the UK, gender and ethnicity. For the second stage of fieldwork, I conducted interviews with 22 diarists (August–October 2020) who were selected based on an adequate level of engagement during the diary phase, but also to be broadly representative of the wider sample in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and living situation. These criteria were fluid, however, and some were interviewed because they provided a unique or interesting perspective. Most interviews took place via online video call (Zoom), with the remainder being conducted by phone (2 participants), email (1 participant) and face-to-face following social distancing guidelines at the time (1 participant). Pseudonyms have been used and place names have been replaced with imaginary names to protect participant anonymity. I include photos from participant diaries throughout this paper, ensuring that individuals are not identifiable in images.

Whilst I explored the importance of Ramadan beyond the pandemic in my fieldwork, the findings below focus on the distinctiveness of Ramadan 2020 in relation to the unique circumstances of early lockdown in the UK. In particular, I focus on the framework of individual and communal elements of the month, in line with discussions arising amongst my participants. In Section 3, I discuss the sense of isolation brought on by COVID-19 restrictions and how this impacted the holy month. I focus on participants' experiences of reflecting and connecting with God during lockdown, the phenomenon of "Ramadan corners" established in homes, and the sense of missing the mosque and community. In Section 4, I turn to communal elements of Ramadan 2020, examining engagement with online activities, the practice of praying together as a family, and the act of sharing food with others. Section 5 discusses ideas of socially dependent spirituality, a topic raised and negotiated by my participants especially in light of their unusual circumstances under lockdown. In the concluding section, I reflect on these diverse findings and the importance of embodied, aesthetic, material and emotive expressions of religion during the pandemic. These aspects, I argue, helped to construct a 'feeling' of Ramadan when more typical elements of the month were absent.

3. Isolation

3.1. Reflection and Connecting with God

Along with the closure of places of worship and other institutions (including shops, schools and workplaces), the activity of many organisations wound down drastically during Ramadan 2020 while people adjusted to working from home, caring for children, and interacting online. The resulting quietness and lack of activity during Ramadan was something many participants regarded positively. It was common for respondents to reflect

on the benefits of being in lockdown during Ramadan and to describe the occasion as a “blessing” or a “blessing in disguise”. One of the important facets of this was the advantage of being in isolation. The ways in which solitude increased opportunities for reflection and connecting with God—ideas which fed into each other according to participants—were conveyed in both diaries and interviews. My participant Lucy, a mother of teenage children who lived alone, introduces this idea discussing how the lack of her normal routine and being alone enhanced her experience of the month:

“So all that routine had stopped and so for me I really enjoyed the fact that everything was—suddenly life was more still . . . I think because I was doing the Ramadan diary at the same time, it just became much more of a reflective Ramadan, just because of lockdown and because I was by myself a lot more. And so I really, really enjoyed it in that sense”. (Lucy, Interview)

Like Lucy, many participants told me that engaging in reflection was important during Ramadan, within or outside lockdown. In fact, reflection and isolation were seen as devotional acts for which lockdown provided the ideal circumstances. Maymoona, who attended the mosque regularly before marrying and having a child, summarises this below:

“I think part of Islam is the idea of isolating yourself and reflecting, and sitting down on your own, and you know, not having that influence from other people. And so Islam I think caters for lockdown [laughs] . . . There’s no peer pressure. 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” (Maymoona, Interview)

The lack of social interaction then, according to Maymoona and others, gave participants the space, time and focus to develop their connection with God. Improving this relationship with God was something participants described as a key goal of Ramadan and for some, was the most important aspect of the month. It is interesting then that participants felt the apparently difficult circumstances in 2020 facilitated reaching this goal and enhanced their Ramadan experience. Sulaiman, who normally lived alone but moved in with extended family during lockdown, describes how this worked for him suggesting the lack of communication with others facilitated a more direct communication with the Divine:

“This year was a very, very personal Ramadan . . . And I think that is what made this Ramadan one of my best Ramadans. I found it, um, it was one-to-one with the Creator” (Sulaiman, Interview)

3.2. Ramadan Corners

A primary way in which participants built their connection with God, as discussed in interviews, was through *ibadah*, or acts of worship. This included practices like reading the Quran, formal prayers (*salah*), supplications (*du’a*), giving charity, doing *dhikr* (remembrance of God) and for some, reflection (as discussed in Section 3.1). Whilst these acts can be individual or collective, I discuss here the individual practice of *ibadah* in relation to “Ramadan corners”, a phenomenon displayed in participant diaries and a term applied by participants. Whilst these physical spaces set aside for worship were not unique to Ramadan 2020, they seemed to enhance the individual experience of Ramadan which was arguably more pronounced during my fieldwork than in other years.

Reiterating the ways in which lockdown reduced distractions from the wider world and enhanced participants’ ability to connect with God, Jennifer, a mother of three, discusses how her Ramadan space is about focusing on Allah:

“You’re not in this world for anything *dunya*¹ at night . . . you’re choosing that quietness, and that time with Allah instead of sleep . . . And having a place for that has really helped me as well” (Jennifer, Interview)

Jennifer again emphasises here the importance of time, space and mental focus in developing her relationship with God. Ayah, who spent Ramadan 2020 in student accom-

modation, further explains the use of her corner (Figure 1) for *ibadah* and describes how designating a space for worship will, she hopes, help her connect with God.

“I can’t just go out to the garden to feel the breeze while I read Quran, I can’t use a different room for different activities (studying, praying, eating etc.); all of them happen in the same space. So I have made myself a Ramadan corner where I’ll do all my worship, except *salah* prayers. I’m hoping this will help me concentrate better and feel more connected”. (Ayah, Diary Entry 1)

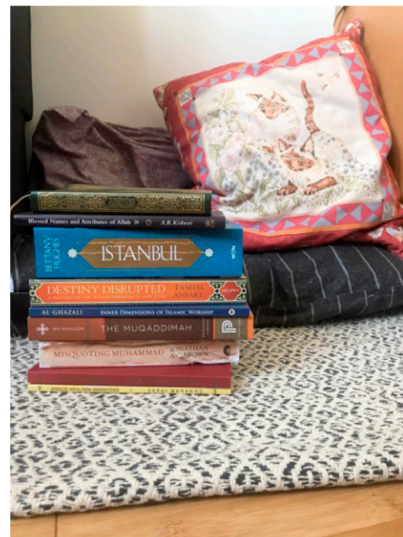


Figure 1. Ayah’s Ramadan corner (Ayah, Diary Image, Entry 1).

Following the excerpt above, Jennifer described how she had set aside a corner of her living room with fairy lights and, as depicted in Figure 2, worship materials, such as a Quran and prayer mat, to make things “a bit different” and “a bit special” (Jennifer, Interview). Using such decorated spaces, to make Ramadan *feel* different or special was an idea echoed by others. Sumayya, a teacher who lived with her parents, said about her Ramadan corners (Figures 3 and 4), that “it just gave you a vibe that yeah, it’s Ramadan at the moment” (Summaya, Interview) and Maymoona told me she would turn on the lights in her prayer space at night “just to make me feel like this is something different; a different- this is not a normal day” (Maymoona, Interview). The sensory elements of these corners were apparent not only through visual aspects of decoration but also in other ways. Figure 3 includes Sumayya’s “Quran player lamp” which plays Quran recitation out loud and lights up in different colours. Another participant, Sarah, set up a corner for herself and her young son (Figure 5). Sarah’s Ramadan space included Somali *bakhoor* (perfume) and Moroccan essential oil, the latter of which she applied to her prayer mat, explaining this act as follows:

“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 examples show the importance of material objects and the senses in creating the experience of Ramadan. Participants implied there was an affective and nostalgic element to the month brought about, in part, by these Ramadan spaces. I suggest that the need to evoke the *feeling* of Ramadan—an idea several participants discussed—was more pronounced in 2020. The lockdown meant some of the things that normally contributed to the Ramadan ‘vibe’—such as the mosque and the Muslim community—were diminished or missing, as will be discussed in the next section. This was clear in the Ramadan corner made by Ayah, who had been forced to spend Ramadan in student accommodation, away from the mosque, the wider Muslim community and her immediate family. Unlike other

participants, creating such a space was not a normal part of Ayah's Ramadan but she had done it in 2020 because of her circumstances resulting from the pandemic. Additionally, despite remarking on the hidden blessings of COVID-19, participants admitted there was an "abnormality" (Jennifer, Interview) to the month and that it felt "surreal" (Abdullah, Interview). This demonstrates there was something tangibly and affectively different about Ramadan in lockdown, and indeed, that period was unusual for the wider community also. While Ramadan corners were not a unique phenomenon of lockdown, I argue that they emphasise the importance of material and sensory expressions of religion in counteracting the negative impact of COVID-19 restrictions on religious communities. Ramadan corners—and their aesthetic emphasis—also highlight the embodied nature of religious practice, particularly during Ramadan.



Figure 2. Jennifer's Ramadan prayer space (Jennifer, Diary Image, Day 2).

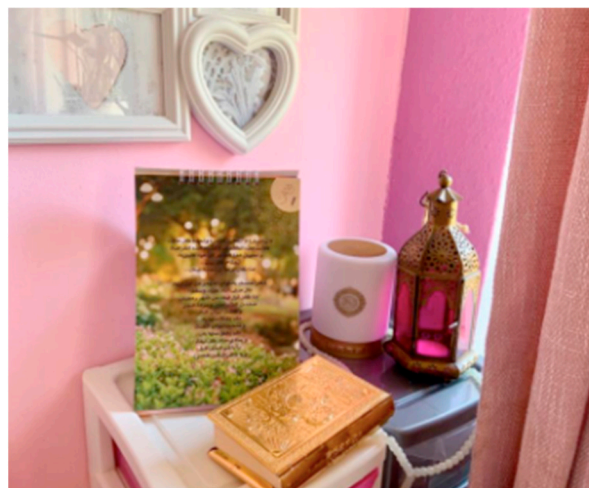


Figure 3. Sumayya's bedroom Ramadan corner (Sumayya, Diary Image, Entry 1).



Figure 4. Sumayya's living room Ramadan corner (Sumayya, Diary Image, Entry 2).



Figure 5. Sarah's Ramadan corner (Sarah, Diary Image, Entry 2).

3.3. Missing the Mosque and Community

While many participants commented on the positive impacts of being in isolation, the closure of mosques and the inability to interact with the wider Muslim community in-person were sorely felt. This loss of community affected some participants more than others, with Abdullah, the oldest participant who was retired and very active in his local mosque, reacting most negatively. He said that Ramadan 2020 was his worst Ramadan and “it was like having Ramadan in a prison” or “like being in a warzone under siege” (Abdullah, Interview). He noted that not being able to attend the mosque for *taraweeh*², the general lack of activities, and not being able to see other people were contributing factors to his negative experience. In a similar vein, Rayyan, who lived with her husband and young daughter, told me she had “a horrible Eid” at the end of the fasting month, especially since she was unable to visit others. She added disparagingly that “it was just Zoom calls all afternoon . . . because how else were you gonna do an Eid?” (Rayyan, Interview).

The loss felt by being unable to attend the mosque had a strong social and communal element. Layla was another participant who discussed the mosque and *taraweeh* prayers throughout her interview describing how she found Ramadan very difficult without them. Layla lived with her mother and sister and typically spent most Ramadan nights at the mosque for prayers. Below, Layla uses the terms “mosque” and “community” interchangeably highlighting these as concepts that cannot be separated.

“The one thing that that wasn’t there was the mosque. You know, the community. That was my most impor- [pause] the thing that I love most about Ramadan was just gone. And so [laughs] it felt like a big slice was taken out.” (Layla, Interview)

Sumayya echoed this sentiment in her interview, retelling her visit to the mosque during Ramadan 2020 to deliver charity money, something she also included in a diary entry. She described feeling excited on her way to the mosque but then disappointed after being asked simply to drop the money in a box outside. She continued as follows:

“Sumayya: And when I was driving back home, that’s when I really felt ‘Wow, I haven’t even gone to the mosque’. Like, I made all that journey and—I mean, me being hopeful whilst I was going, and then coming back having not seen anyone, having not even been in or prayed or anything, I was like, this is strange. Like I really *really* miss the mosque now. Like I was missing it even not seeing it, but having made that journey and come back made me really feel [pause] that void. Does that make any sense?

Researcher: Yeah. So it didn’t help going to the mosque actually because it’s—it was about other things, about praying and, and seeing people there and those things you mentioned.

Sumayya: Yeah. Yeah.” (Sumayya, Interview)

It was not really the physical space of the mosque that Sumayya missed but the embodied activities and communal elements associated with it. Her rather disembodied experience of visiting in lockdown could not replace experiencing the mosque and its sociality as it would normally be felt.

Participants also held feelings of nostalgia towards the mosque, particularly when reflecting on its absence during Ramadan 2020. In her diary, Sumayya described feeling “nostalgic” when travelling to the mosque in the context of the incident above and included an image of the mosque’s floor tiles taken when the women’s section first opened (Sumayya, Diary, Entry 24). Similarly, Amin recounted fond memories of visiting the mosque in Ramadan in his diary. His quote below (accompanied by a photo of his mosque) emphasises his nostalgic feelings towards it:

“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)

This sense of nostalgia emphasises the emotional significance of the mosque for my participants and reiterates the sense of loss experienced when they did not have access to it in 2020. These findings highlight the strong emotional element of the experience of Ramadan, something that could not be obtained via the mosque in 2020. The next section explores other ways in which this sense of community, and the affective elements of it, were maintained in Ramadan under lockdown through involvement in online activities, praying as a family and sharing food.

4. Community

4.1. Online Activities

The periods of lockdown brought on by the pandemic saw a shift of many activities online, as has been highlighted for various religious groups (Gauxachs et al. 2021; Vekemans 2021). Ramadan was no exception and participants included images in their diaries of

digital events and activities they had taken part in. Especially prominent was the use of online methods for Islamic learning, including Islamic lectures, *tafseer*³ classes and *halaqas*⁴ which were accessed via YouTube, Facebook, Zoom and other platforms. Some were live sessions during which viewers could ask questions, and others were pre-recorded. Participants regarded such sessions as a form of *ibadah* along with devotional activities such as Quran recitation groups and *dhikr* circles which also happened online. Additionally, participants used apps to re-enact social elements of Ramadan such as group *iftars*⁵ with friends (Figure 6) and contacting relatives throughout the month and especially on Eid.

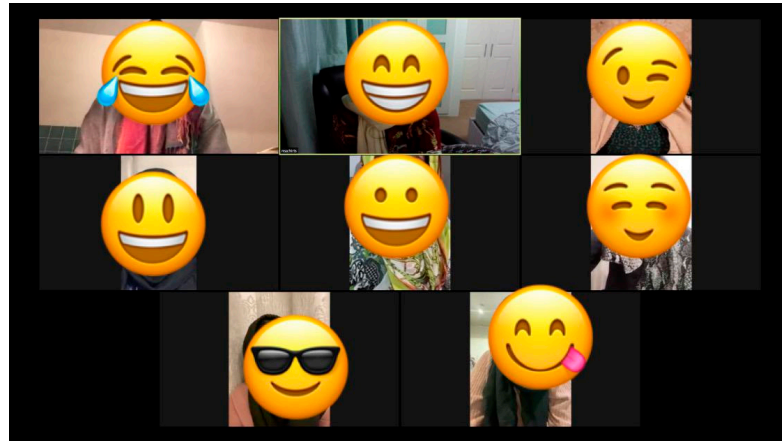


Figure 6. A “virtual iftar party” with friends (Mubeena, Diary Image, Entry 5—‘emojis’ added by participant).

Participants repeatedly told me of the benefits of online media in the context of a lockdown Ramadan. Echoing the positive outlook on the pandemic described in Section 3.1, Mubeena, who was in her twenties and lived with her parents, stated “social media has been a blessing during a time of social distancing” (Mubeena, Diary, Entry 5). Rayyan, who had recently moved, leaving her former religious community behind, told of the importance of the lockdown in enabling her to connect with others:

“I think without them [the online worship activities], I would have had less spirituality in my Ramadan. And it’s weird because I think a lot of Islamic worship is collective. I mean, you do your individual prayers as well but then we have a lot of collective worship as well and that’s what was missing. But I mean, it’s actually worked out to be a huge blessing for me personally, because if COVID hadn’t happened, my friends would have been meeting in Greenway like normal, and I would have still been here unable to meet them. And they would never have livestreamed it, or Zoom called it for one person . . . they try to keep it as local as possible, but because this year, *everybody* was in lockdown, they kind of had to put it up online. So I really, *really* benefited and was supremely grateful. I mean, I think I would have been quite lost”. (Rayyan, Interview)

Rayyan highlights here the importance of collectivity and sociality in Ramadan, and in Islam more broadly, and demonstrates how online interactions helped to fill the gap left by social distancing during her experience of the holy month.

Despite the benefits of being able to participate in activities remotely, participants felt it was not an adequate substitute for real-life interaction. This was suggested by Sumayya’s story of visiting the mosque above (Section 3.3) and is described more explicitly below:

“I did really miss going to the mosque . . . And just the experience of teaching Quran or youth *halaqa* in the masjid is really [pause] I really, really missed that. Like, everything was online, but um [pause] it’s not the same [laughs]” (Sumayya, Interview)

While I highlighted in Section 3.3 how the mosque was not deemed to be the same without the community and activities associated with it, Sumayya further implies here that the community is not complete without the physical interaction that happens in the mosque space. Another critique of digital elements of Ramadan came from Noor, a medical student living in the family home, who discussed “online fatigue”. She had thus decided to cut back on online activities and focus on offline goals like “trying to read a certain amount of Quran and to just spend time in reflection, spend time with my family, spend time studying, because at the end of the day, that is worship for me too, with the right intention” (Noor, Diary, Entry 8). Noor and Sumayyah suggest that physical embodiment was essential to their Ramadan experience, and could not be replaced by remote activities. Whilst online activities were important during Ramadan 2020, participants also connected in more physical ways even when sociality was limited. In the next section, I discuss one of these embodied acts, namely praying in congregation as a family, and how it became an important part of the lockdown Ramadan experience.

4.2. Praying as a Family

Aside from fasting, one of the distinct elements of Ramadan is the *taraweeh* prayers. These are communal night prayers that normally take place in mosques once the fast has been broken, though they can be done individually or communally at home. The closure of places of worship meant that *taraweeh* prayers could not happen in mosques in 2020. However, I observed an interesting phenomenon amongst participants of praying *taraweeh*—and often other congregational prayers—together, at home, as a family. This act was displayed by several participants in their diaries (Figure 7) and was regarded by many as one of the best parts of Ramadan in lockdown. Leena, a mother of three teenage children, reflects this sentiment below:

“My eldest one, we said to him, right, you’re going to be the imam, you’re going to be leading us throughout Ramadan. And we started sort of enjoying that *jamaah*⁶ 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)



Figure 7. Compilation of images sent by various participants showing or symbolising congregational family prayers.

As implied by Leena, this seemed to be a practice that would not take place (or at least to a lesser extent) during a more typical Ramadan. It is interesting that the lockdown seemed to stimulate the development of this new religious practice, although it was possible within an Islamic framework outside of lockdown. Leena also suggests that the difficult circumstances had a positive impact in inspiring a tradition that could continue beyond the pandemic. Female participants seemed to particularly value praying with family, something perhaps linked to the gendered experience of the month. Mothers in my sample described how they would often stay at home to look after children while their husbands attended the mosque to pray. As Hasina notes, “if it’s not lockdown, my husband and my son would sometimes go to the mosque right? For *taraweeh*, for *maghrib*⁷, but in this Ramadan, we have to do it together” (Hasina, Interview). Thus the lockdown, for many, had the unexpected benefit of bringing families closer together through worship.

Like other practices described in this paper, congregational prayers with family also helped evoke a ‘feeling’ of Ramadan within homes during the lockdown. Suleiman describes this below:

“So our house actually felt like a *masjid*⁸, alright? Especially when we were doing the congregation prayers. Um, so it actually did feel like we were at a mosque ... 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 outlines here how the act of praying together made his house feel like a mosque, made it feel like a “Muslim” space, and made it feel like Ramadan. The embodied communal practice of prayer had an affective impact on the space that seems to have helped fill the gap left by the absence of the mosque in 2020. As argued in the case of Ramadan corners (Section 3.2), congregational family prayers were a way in which the affective and emotive elements of Ramadan were evoked when some of the more typical elements of the month were lacking. While Ramadan corners largely helped maintain an individual sense of Ramadan, family prayers were important in reviving the “community spirit” of the month that several participants described. Next, I look at the act of sharing food, another practice through which this sense of community was maintained in lockdown.

4.3. Sharing Food

Another key communal element of Ramadan is involvement in charitable acts, especially giving and sharing food. Participants described charitable acts as emulating the practice of Prophet Muhammad, following the spirit of generosity associated with the month. One participant, George, who lived with his wife and baby son, told me he would seek out opportunities for charitable work every Ramadan. In this context, he mentioned that it was important “to help other people” (George, Interview) and highlighted how food plays a role in this:

“I think it’s really important to make sure you think of all the charitable things that you could potentially do, just because one of the things about fasting is thinking about people who don’t have access to food easily. And 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 [audio])

Sharing food with others was an important part of participants’ Ramadan experience, and 2020 was no exception. Several participants, like Zahra (Figure 8), exchanged home-cooked food with neighbours or extended family. Alternatively, participants like Khadijah and George contributed to more organised charitable campaigns delivering food packs to the needy (Figures 9 and 10), many of which were set up in response to COVID-19.



Figure 8. Food platter given out to neighbours (Zahra, Diary Image, Entry 1).



Figure 9. Khadijah's shopping for charitable "care packs" (Khadijah, Diary Image, Entry 4).



Figure 10. George's packages of cakes to deliver to the elderly on VE day (George, Diary Image 14).

Due to the restrictions in place, it was not possible for participants to gather to break the fast in mosques or homes, except with their immediate families. However, it seemed that sharing food with others—family, neighbours, or the wider community—helped take the place of the usual communal *iftars* during the month. Zahra, a student living with her parents and sisters, hints at this below:

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

Zahra highlights the communal role of food in Ramadan 2020, despite the fact that she could not physically sit down and eat with others. Figure 8 depicts food packs that Zahra sent out to her neighbours—a Ramadan tradition in her family—and in her accompanying diary entry, she reflected on maintaining a sense of community in lockdown. Zahra’s comments reflect the relationship between food and sociality both in Ramadan 2020 and more broadly.

Despite the barriers to interaction during Ramadan 2020, and general anxieties around social contact because of the pandemic, the act of sharing food was something participants continued. Giving food was so significant to the community spirit of the month that Muslims found ways to adapt the practice to suit the pandemic. Once again, it seemed that the embodied and sensory elements of food, and sharing it with others, helped evoke the feeling of Ramadan during an unusual period. I argue then, that the practices outlined in this section – online activities, praying with family and sharing food—helped maintain communal elements of the month when wider physical gatherings were not possible. In particular, these acts seemed to revive the affective elements and “community spirit” of Ramadan that several participants described. As Zahra noted when recounting delivering food packages to her neighbours, “you can really feel the sense of community that Ramadan is all about” (Zahra, Diary, Entry 1).

5. Socially Dependent Spirituality

In this section, I touch upon the conflicting ideas my participants conveyed about the extent to which their spirituality and sense of Ramadan were dependent on other people. Participants apply a similar framing that I have applied to the previous sections of the paper, namely the distinction between the individual and the communal. While this provides a useful framework for this paper, it was reflective of participants own discussions which were seemed influenced by their unusual social circumstances under lockdown. The idea of socially dependent spirituality that emerged in our conversations, and conflicting ideas about this, will be discussed below.

Spirituality, according to many participants, was one of the most important aspects of Ramadan. Spirituality was often achieved through *ibadah*, or acts of worship, such as prayer, fasting and reading Quran. Some respondents explained that being around other worshippers was integral to their spiritual experience of Ramadan. Amin, who moved from his hometown with his wife a few years ago, discussed how, outside of the pandemic, he would return there for the last ten days of the month:

“Normally, I come back to Redbrook and I’ll go to the mosque whether it might be *itikaf* or whatever it is. And that’s where I find that real, like, deep level of spirituality. And I think that’s what I mentioned my diaries that I found it difficult to attain that at times because I didn’t have that community aspect”. (Amin, Interview)

Amin highlights the importance of communality for his sense of spirituality, especially in Ramadan. Similarly, as mentioned in Section 3.3, Layla “felt like a big slice was taken out” (Interview) without access to the mosque and community. Rayyan further emphasises the spiritual element of gathering with others in her comments:

“For me, it’s the spirituality definitely [that is the most important part of Ramadan]. 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)

For Rayyan, congregating with fellow Muslims in Ramadan was not a worldly form of socialising but something intrinsically linked with her spirituality. The comments described here highlight how the lack of communality in 2020 had an emotive and spiritual impact on participants’ experiences of the month.

Conversely, other participants questioned the idea that one’s sense of Ramadan should rely on others. This is suggested by Noor below:

“Obviously we couldn’t really go to the mosque for *taraweeh* or anything [in 2020] but I feel like, if your sense of religious identity is shaped by social things or 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. Similarly, Sarah felt 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” affirming that “solitude is better” (Sarah, Interview). Contradicting this, Sarah noted that she depended on others for her sense of “*iman*”⁹ and said, “I’m really a person that needs to experience my religion with other people”. It seemed, however, that she saw this more as a personal weakness rather than recognising the role of community in fostering spirituality, though her ideas were perhaps conflicted. Others like Maymoona resolved this conflict by affirming that isolation *and* community were important in her conception of Islam, concluding that, “I think as much as community is really important and amazing, but I think Islam caters for you to also reflect by yourself” (Maymoona, Interview).

It seemed the events of lockdown had inspired participants to reflect on the place of isolation and collectiveness within Islam. Their discussion of spirituality in relation to sociality and gathering with others implies there is a communal element of spirituality linking to McGuire’s idea that “collective embodied practices . . . can produce an experiential sense of community and connectedness” and that such practices “link our materiality as humans and our spirituality” (McGuire 2003, p. 15). The findings here highlight the embodied, communal and material elements of spirituality in contrast to common perceptions that “view spirituality and materiality as dichotomous, in tidy binary opposition” (McGuire 2003, p. 1).

6. Discussion and Conclusions

In this article focusing on Ramadan 2020, I have highlighted here the important impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious practice and thinking, which goes beyond the more well-studied lens of the virus in relation to medicine and health. I also focus on the day-to-day, lived experience of religious adherents rather than religious organisations and authorities, something lacking from research on religion and COVID-19, particularly in reference to Ramadan. Based on my fieldwork, I have framed my findings here around two main themes: elements of isolation (Section 3) and elements of community (Section 4) during Ramadan 2020. Furthermore, I have discussed the ways in which participants reflected on their spirituality and its dependence (or not) on other people (Section 5), a conversation which seemed to be situated in their unusual circumstances given the pandemic.

Regarding the isolation experienced during Ramadan—which was pronounced because of the social restrictions in place—first, participants conveyed that being disconnected from the wider world encouraged reflection and enhanced their ability to connect with God. These were important aspects of Ramadan normally but were intensified in lockdown.

Secondly, I have demonstrated how participants created decorated spaces in their homes—or “Ramadan corners”—which were set aside for individual worship (*ibadah*). *Ibadah* was another key element of Ramadan but these spaces, particularly their aesthetic and material elements, seemed to recreate a feeling of Ramadan at a time when other aspects of the occasion were missing. Thirdly, I have highlighted one of the disadvantages of social isolation being the loss of the mosque and community to which my participants conveyed negative emotional responses.

Regarding communal elements of Ramadan, I first discussed how activities associated with the month—educational, devotional and social—moved online due to the restrictions in place. While some appreciated how this shift helped maintain communal elements of Ramadan, others noted that digital events were not an adequate replacement for in-person activities. Secondly, I have described the phenomenon of congregational prayers in homes during Ramadan 2020 that seemed largely inspired by the lockdown conditions. This communally embodied practice helped fill the gap left by the loss of mosques in 2020. Thirdly, I discussed the practice of sharing food with others, an important Ramadan tradition that was maintained in lockdown. This practice, while not unique to Ramadan 2020, seemed to replace the sense of communality normally associated with *iftar* gatherings. The three categories of communal practices described upheld the ‘community spirit’ associated with Ramadan and maintained affective elements of the month.

Regarding spirituality, I summarised the contrasting ways participants reflected on ideas of socially dependent spirituality in the context of the pandemic. While some recognised their sense of faith and experience of Ramadan as depending on the presence of fellow worshippers, others asserted that one should be able to maintain spirituality in the absence of a community. Participants were divided in their opinions, but overall there was a sense that communality was important for participants’ conceptions of spirituality. My findings demonstrate the heterogeneity of Muslim thought on spirituality, reflecting the elusive nature of the concept more broadly. As Ammerman (2020, p. 31) argues, “the spiritual qualities of religious practice are both seemingly obvious and difficult to define”. The collective, embodied concepts of spirituality expressed by my participants also suggest, following McGuire (2003), that “spirituality fully involves people’s material bodies, not just their minds or spirits” (p. 1).

More broadly still, I argue that the diverse activities conveyed in this article—including Ramadan corners, congregational family prayers and sharing food—highlight how material, embodied, aesthetic and emotive elements of Ramadan were emphasised during the pandemic. These elements helped counteract the palpable loss felt by the closure of mosques and limits on physical sociality. The practices conveyed in this article thus helped to recreate the ‘feeling’ of Ramadan which had been hampered by pandemic regulations. My findings support Ammerman’s assertion that religious practice “should be analyzed as a . . . set of actions that are embodied, material, emotional, aesthetic, moral, and narrative, as well as spiritual” as she advocates for “a more explicit multidimensional approach to practice” when it comes to researching religion (Ammerman 2020, p. 33). Following Ammerman, I concur that further research on religion should similarly consider the broad facets of religion that are relevant to people’s everyday lives. This also relates to McGuire’s (2003) argument that spirituality and materiality should not be separated in studies of religion but should be understood as concepts that are intimately linked.

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Notes

- ¹ *Dunya* is an Islamic, Arabic term meaning ‘worldly’ or referring to the material world.
- ² *Taraweeh* prayers are congregational night prayers that take place only in Ramadan. They are often conducted in mosques but can be done at home, communally or individually.
- ³ *Tafseer* is the term applied to the study of the meaning of the Quran.
- ⁴ A *halaqa* is the name for Islamic study circles.
- ⁵ *Iftar* refers to the meal with which the fast is broken.
- ⁶ *Jamah* refers to a congregation or congregational prayer.
- ⁷ *Maghrib* is one of the five daily prayers that takes place after sunset.
- ⁸ *Masjid* is the Arabic term for a mosque.
- ⁹ *Iman* refers to a sense of faith or belief.

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