(PREPRINT) Calling to Prayer in 'Pandemic Times': Muslim Women's Practices and Contested Public Spaces in Germany

SIMONE PFEIFER iD

Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany

ABSTRACT   This article explores how the regulations imposed during Germany's first coronavirus lockdown in 2020 impacted on gendered mosque spaces and the digital spheres relating to those spaces. Examining the call to prayer as a "sensational form" that establishes "aesthetic formations" (Meyer 2009), the article unpacks gender-specific Muslim perspectives on contested space within mosques and the contested position mosques occupy in German public space. Paying particular attention to the temporalities of the pandemic restrictions, the article reflects on women's (digital) practices and relates them to ongoing debates about the contested presence of sonic markers of Muslim religiosity in public space in Germany. It argues that the heterogeneous digital practices and discourses that emerged in 'pandemic times' should not be viewed as unique responses to an exceptional situation, but as foregrounding ongoing debates over gendered Muslim spaces and publicness in Germany.

KEYWORDS   Muslim religious practices, digital practices, digital ethnography, gendered and sonic spaces, COVID-19, anti-Muslim racism, Muslim women in Germany

IMPORTANT *This is a preprint article that has neither been reviewed nor copyedited yet. Once the reviews appear, they will be linked to this article. The revised and copyedited version will replace the preprint version if the article passes the peer review process. Otherwise, this article will be removed from the website.* [1]

Introduction

#goosebumps. I would never have thought it possible that the Azan could be allowed in Germany. Because of Corona & the ban on assemblies, supporters of AFD or Islam haters can't even demonstrate against it. SubhanAllah (post forwarded to author in a shared WhatsApp group on 25 March 2020) [2]

This brief quote was extracted from a longer post that was forwarded in a WhatsApp group I [3] had established as part of my ethnographic research on Muslim everyday life and social media practices. The woman who forwarded the post was a young mother of Turkish descent in her mid-thirties. The quote relates to the permit obtained by the central mosque of Duisburg, the Merkez Mosque of the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs (DITIB), to publicly call to sunset prayer (*adhan al-maghrib*, Turkish spelling in German *azan*). This permit was granted shortly after mosques in Germany had been obliged to close temporarily as part of the restrictions imposed in March 2020 during the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic. Muslim communities in Germany heralded this permit as a gain that would boost solidarity within their congregations as well as in relation to other religious communities.

More widely, permission to sound the *adhan* in the city must be seen as political devel- [4] opment within a longer history of controversies about the sonic presence of Islam in public places in Germany. The forwarded statement concisely evokes the multiple entangled issues implicated: of religious spirituality, contested sonic presence of Islam, anti-Muslim discrimination, and the lockdown regulations in Germany. The significance of the call to prayer and its affective potency for Muslim religious spirituality is emphasised by the hashtag "goosebumps." This also alludes to the role of mosques as a space for spirituality and prayer and for the communal experiences of believers in Germany. The comment "I would never have thought it possible" references the contestation of sonic presence in public space in Germany, which in turn impacts upon the degree to which Muslim populations feel a sense of inclusion and solidarity as part of Germany's urban centres. Contestations over such public presence involve anti-Muslim and racist groups in Germany that continually seek to promote 'othering' discourses and discrimination against Muslim sections of the German population. Lastly, the quote sets this positive news with a light touch of irony against the negative impacts—such as restrictions on assembly, protest, and social life—of Germany's lockdown regulations.

In this article, I reflect on these issues by focusing on the media practices of Muslim women [5] in Germany. I examine responses that express the impact of the first lockdown regulations imposed in Germany from March to May 2020 upon these women's everyday religious lives. Considering their statements in relation to wider ongoing debates about the presence of sonic and visual markers of Muslim religiosity in German public spaces and within semi-public mosque spaces allows me to highlight how their reactions are shaped by their pre-pandemic (digital) religious practices. To contextualise my ethnographic examples, I draw on anthropological literature that explores the significance of sound and listening in Muslim spiritual experiences and Muslim (public) space. The notion of "aesthetic formations" (Meyer 2009) helps me to understand the different contested gendered and sonic publics in Germany.

In the main part of this article, I will offer an overview of female Muslim religiosity in Ger- [6] many. In particular, I will take a closer look at female mosque spaces as spaces for sociality and spirituality. Against this backdrop, I then outline how women were affected by restrictions limiting their access to the mosques during the pandemic, and the digital practices that they established in response. I will then return to the opening quote in order to elaborate my discussion by focusing on judgements expressed about contested sonic spaces during the pandemic. I propose viewing religious practices during the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to the notion of 'epidemic times' (Jordheim et al. 2020): not only as an exceptional response to an extraordinary situation with "particular temporal dynamics" (Roth 2020, 13), but also as part of longer-term ongoing debates around gendered mosque spaces and Muslim publicness in Germany. This 'bifocal' lens allows me to explore how pandemic-specific issues became en-

tangled with pre-pandemic digital religious practices and debates, sometimes with continuity, sometimes sparking transformations.

This article is based on digital ethnographic fieldwork that has been conducted since September 2019 on Muslim everyday life and social media practices in Germany with heterogeneous groups of women whom I initially met in different German-Arabic and German-Turkish mosques.[1] As well as participant observation in three female mosque spaces in Germany, in-depth individual and focus group interviews served to gather insights into everyday media practices. After this initial 'offline' fieldwork, participant observation shifted to different social media and messenger services including Instagram and WhatsApp, with WhatsApp groups exclusively set up for the ethnographic study in order to digitally continue exchanges started during the focus group interactions. Setting up these dedicated groups and research profiles enabled me to obtain informed consent from individuals to use material shared in digital contexts. This digital ethnography structure proved unexpectedly fortuitous when pandemic-related restrictions on face-to-face meetings came into force in Germany on 16 March 2020. With physical meetings in mosques no longer possible, the research WhatsApp group and personal chat conversations and phone calls enabled me to stay in touch with participants and continue the fieldwork at a distance during Germany's first lockdown from mid-March until May 2020, and in the months that followed. For this article I focus on ethnographic material gathered between January and October 2020.

[7]

Aesthetic Formations and the Call to Prayer in Public Spaces

A growing body of anthropological works address the sonic dimensions of religion and how sounds relate to public spaces and religious and political belonging (e.g. Jouili and Moors 2014). Among these, the Islamic call to prayer (*adhan*) has received particular attention and has been seen as a way of sacralising space as well as of claiming religious space in heterogeneous urban settings. There have been heated debates over the public presence of the *adhan* in non-majority Muslim contexts, and also its recordings and radio broadcasts have been contested (Tamimi Arab 2015; Larkin 2014; Lee 1999).

[8]

The anthropologist Charles Hirschkind (2006) has identified the call to prayer as well as other quotidian sounds of religious sermons and qur'anic recitations as foundational to the self-styling and subjectivity that form the bases of a moral and political community for Muslims in Cairo. As scholars of Islam have done, he notes the importance of auditive learning, recitation, and speech as modes of transmitting authoritative religious knowledge (see also Schulz 2012, 24), while also highlighting the affective and intersubjective dimensions of listening. According to Hirschkind, listening to audio cassettes is not merely a cognitive activity but an embodied experience that incorporates multiple affective and emotional sensations. The voice and its technical processing serve as a principal mediator between speaker and listener, and in this process of mediation what is heard and experienced depends not only on what is said and who is listening, but also on the context and the publics the listener is set in. Hirschkind (2006, 117) argues that an "Islamic counterpublic" has emerged as a domain of discourse and practice disjunctive to the public sphere and the media of the (secular) nation state.

[9]

---

1   Ethnographic fieldwork was partially conducted in tandem with my co-researcher Larissa-Diana Fuhrmann, to whom I am indebted in more ways than I can express here. I am infinitely grateful for her insights, reflections, and conversations.

Hirschkind's analysis can be seen as a part of a broader shift in the anthropology of religion from the study of the doctrinal content of scriptures to public (and private) practice and especially the embodied, sensual, and affective dimensions of religion (Asad 2009). It also belongs to the growing body of literature on the anthropology of religion and media (e.g., Meyer and Moors 2005; Eisenlohr 2011; Schulz 2012), that focuses on either visual or sonic dimensions of religious everyday life. In this contribution, I would like to leave behind this separation of senses and media to expand on the aesthetic dimensions of multi-sensory perception as a means of knowing. [10]

To this end, Birgit Meyer's (2009) notion of "aesthetic formations" appears particularly pertinent. Meyer pays attention to the role played by things, media, and the body in processes of establishing social formations. This focus allows her to "grasp the particular modes through which the imaginations materialize through media and become manifest in public space" (Meyer 2009, 6). She describes the senses, experiences, and aesthetics as "sensational forms" that, in combination, shape the shared subjectivities that hold religious communities together. Building on Meyer's discussion, I argue that the call to prayer—like other bodily and visual sensations—can be approached as a "sensational form" that always stands in interdependent relationships with social relations, materialities, and configurations of power. Taking this into account when examining gender-specific Muslim practices and responses to the pandemic restrictions enables me to expand from a focus on the sonic dimensions of Islam to its aesthetic dimensions. [11]

When looking at these dynamics in relation to digital media, Hirschkind's notion of an independent "Islamic counterpublic" (2006, 117) sphere of discourse can be adapted to include publics established in different digital contexts. By focusing on the different (digital) contexts in which the making of publicness takes place in mosque spaces, WhatsApp groups, or on social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube, it is possible to distinguish different "scaled socialities" (Miller et al. 2016) and imaginaries of the social. Hence, I analyse the public presence of Islam in spaces like mosques or urban centres in Germany as "contested" and "graduated publics" (Zillinger 2017), which are partially structured around gender, and overlap in significant ways. With my contribution, I pay particular attention to how the discourses and practices do not only intersect but also interrelate in different kinds of public spaces. [12]

(Digital) Religious Practices and Sociality in Germany in 'Pandemic Times'

The abovementioned restrictions imposed during Germany's first lockdown in 2020 came into force shortly before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which lasted from 23 April until 23 May that year. The suspension of religious services in places of worship were lifted just in time for *Eid al-Fitr*, the festival of breaking the fast, and thereafter Friday prayers could be held and practised in mosque spaces as long as certain regulations were adhered to. Yet, many Muslims continued to stay at home and only slowly began meeting face-to-face. Most mosques in Germany could only allow a very limited number of persons to attend in order to uphold the stipulated 1.5 meters between each person praying. This also meant that prayers could not be carried out with the usual bodily proximity, whereby worshippers stand so close to one another that they (almost) touch, signifying the communal body of believers. Additionally, older people and others with health conditions that made them vulnerable to the virus were [13]

advised to stay at home, no youth or children were allowed in the mosque, worshippers had to bring their own prayer mats, and the use of disinfectant was obligatory. Most mosques began keeping records of visitors, with some even installing digital registration via smartphone and a bar code that had to be scanned upon entering. This served to limit the number of people but also to facilitate contact tracing in the event of a COVID-19 case among attendees. Even though it was also possible to register without online access, the surveillance implications were criticised by some visitors.

These different phases, from closing mosques completely to reopening with limited opportunities for communal prayer and none for social gatherings or learning circles sparked a diverse range of initiatives to take communal spiritual experiences online. Some mosque organisations expanded their existing social media engagements to include the use of Telegram, YouTube, and Instagram, making their Friday sermons available in written form, as audio podcasts or videos, and even offering learning circles online. Yet, these efforts could only partially replace the social support networks that mosques usually offer. For certain groups of women in particular, limited access to mosque spaces starkly reduced their opportunities to interact with other women socially and for communal religious experiences.   [14]

To explore in more detail the specific ways that different groups of believers and particularly women were affected by the restrictions on mosques during the pandemic, I will first outline how a mosque as a gendered physical space offers a setting for communal spirituality as well as for sociality. This will enable me to demonstrate how the partial closing of religious spaces impacted Muslims in Germany in gendered ways. In the final subsection, I will expand upon my introductory example of the permitting of the public call to prayer and relate it to responses articulated by different groups and publics associated with two different mosques. Here, I relate the situation in Germany to Diane Riskedahl's (2020) description of "Canada's pandemic soundscape", through which she highlights the links between "auditory sensory perception and our physical and social environment."   [15]

Gendered Mosque Spaces in Germany

At one of the German-Arabic mosques where I usually met for Friday prayers with a heterogeneous group of women with family links to Turkey and different north African countries, the entrance to the women's space was at the back of the mosque, accessible from a backyard that also served as a car park. About 30 to 40 women of different ages, some with small children, came regularly for Friday prayers. Upon arrival, each woman usually prayed two cycles of prayers (*rak'ah*) in solitude, after which she would walk around, greet everyone, and sit down with her friends to chat while waiting for the call to communal prayer.   [16]

On one of those Fridays, shortly before the lockdown was imposed, a woman in her 50s came in brandishing two packs of toilet paper like a trophy and announced, laughing: "Look what I managed to get today—the last two in the whole supermarket!" Everyone around laughed in response, some even playfully tried to grab the scarce goods. Jokingly, the women commented on hoarding and panic buying; toilet paper was indeed hard to obtain in Germany at the time. Soon after, the call to prayer was announced via the loudspeakers in one corner of the ceiling. The unmistakeable form and text of the call to prayer, always recited in Arabic, usually with four repetitions of Allahu Akbar (*takbīr*) followed by the Islamic creed (*shahada*), was called out by a trained and accomplished prayer caller. Some of the women had previously remarked on his beautiful voice. But the loudspeaker in the women's space was often distorted by a hollow echo and sometimes, as on this day, the volume was set so low that the voice failed   [17]

to catch the women's attention immediately; their conversations continued. Some of the older women in the room asked the others to be quiet and soon everyone was solemnly listening to the sermon, which lasted about twenty minutes and was delivered in Arabic; a language that many of the women did not understand. The sermon was immediately followed by the communal prayer, for which most of the women got up from the floor to gather in the rows marked by the carpet. They carefully arranged their bodies so that the feet of those standing next to each other in a row were almost touching. Some of the more authoritative women regularly oversaw and instructed the others on how to perform the gestures and postures correctly, and made sure that no one was ever alone in a row. As soon as the recitations started, all the women synchronised their bodies in time to the recitations and to each other, performing the movements of two prayer cycles: standing, bowing, prostrating. After the communal prayer, participants could stay sitting in the rows for as long as they liked. Some left straight away, but most, like the group I became best acquainted with during my fieldwork, stayed longer. They could then listen to the German translation of the sermon and later chat together, drinking tea and sharing food.

This ethnographic vignette captures the importance of female mosque spaces for women's spiritual practice as well as for sociality and community. While it is not obligatory for women to take part in communal prayer, doing so allows them to enact and experience their relationship with God, not least in its embodied and affective dimensions (Pontzen 2020, 192). The call to prayer and the communal praying in this semi-public space serve in Meyer's (2009) sense as "sensational forms", mediating between the women and the realm of God while at the same time forging a particular kind of community among very different groups of women who all attend this particular mosque for Friday prayers.   [18]

It also emerges in the description above that the women do not always agree about the correct way to perform the prayer and listen to the *adhan* and the sermons; the women did not necessarily carry out all the gestures of the prayer in exactly the same manner.[2] Yet, nonetheless, performing their practices together within a shared space served to attune their bodies and routines to the others present. The distinctive voice, amplified by the loudspeaker, the synchronised bodily movements, and not least the scent of tea and the sharing of food are key to the multi-sensorial experiential realm within which the female community is established.   [19]

It is not new that mosques, especially in places with stricter interpretations of Islam, are usually segregated according to gender, with women carving out their own spheres of authority, religious knowledge, and interpretations of religious sources in dedicated female spaces (Jouili 2015; see also Mahmood 2005). It is only relatively recently, however—at least in the German-speaking context—that attention has been focused upon the participation of women in regular prayers in mosques and their claiming of female prayer spaces within those mosques. In her ethnography of mosque life in Germany, Islamic scholar Ayşe Almıla Akca (2020, 198) observes that female prayer areas have only recently become common in German mosques, and that the predominant focus on female imams or leaders of prayer in public debates fails to recognise the significance of the non-leading women's participation in communal prayers and the daily activities of mosques.   [20]

As described above, most mosques with female praying spaces have a separate female entrance, which is often at the side or back of the building and not clearly signposted. Sometimes,   [21]

---

2   These forms of learning bodily comportment during and after the prayer are closely tied in with other modalities like bodily comportment and dress that are part of the "pious subject" Saba Mahmood (2005) describes in her groundbreaking work.

older or more knowledgeable women use the prayer space to host learning circles and offer guidance to other women on a volunteer basis. In addition, the women are also responsible for cleaning and providing necessities for the female area like the toilet paper mentioned in the narrative above. Often, women are not permitted to decide amongst themselves how to arrange and decorate the prayer room but must do so in consultation with the board and/or the imam of the mosque. These observations support Akca's (2020, 198) argument that the practices in these spaces are shaped not only by the capacities and resources of the built environment but also by the activism and authoritative knowledge of the women who participate in day-to-day mosque life. The significance of such participation became strikingly evident when the lockdown was imposed in Germany, and women suddenly lost their access to the embodied communal and social experiences described above; a loss that could only be partially compensated for by gatherings in digital environments.

Constraining and Expanding Religious Space in 'Pandemic Times'

On 12 March 2020, at about half past eight in the evening, a post was forwarded to our shared research WhatsApp group by one of the young women who was taking part in my research. It was a post that had been issued via Telegram by the Arabic-German mosque where we regularly met: The mosque requested all parents to refrain from coming to evening prayer that day and also to the Friday prayer the next day. Men and women without children were still allowed to come. In addition, adults with cold or flu symptoms and elderly people were asked to stay home because of the coronavirus. After a short exchange of comments within the WhatsApp group, yet another message from the mosque was forwarded. It referred to an unidentified "committee of great scholars" having made a statement regarding the coronavirus and daily prayers. The statement forbade infected persons or those quarantining to enter mosques, and basically exempted anyone who feared infection from their obligation of regular communal prayer. Two days later, the mosque followed federal state and council regulations, announcing that there would be no communal prayers in the mosque until at least 10 April, hence everyone should pray in solitude or only with household members at home. The women in our research WhatsApp group reacted with shock and sheer disbelief. Missing out on their regular meetings in the women's space of their local mosque would not only deprive them of their communal religious experience but also of the sociality and support of other women. During the weeks that followed, WhatsApp became an increasingly important means of connection for the women to communicate with one another, and evolved into a channel for mutual support and reflection on the effects of the pandemic on their religious community.

[22]

With the fasting month of Ramadan, the situation changed again. For many women participating in my research, Ramadan is a month of collective praying, reflection, and experiencing of religious community. They particularly missed the shared *Iftar*, the nightly communal feast that breaks each day's fast, and is usually enjoyed in the mosque or with extended family and friends. Unable to come together for communal prayers and festivities, for most women that I encountered, this first Ramadan during the pandemic was marked by solitude and retreat to just their closest family circle. Many reported that the worst experience of the lockdown was being unable to come together in the mosque as a religious community. Besides meeting with a few close family members, they did find ways to socialise during Ramadan 2020: by connecting via WhatsApp and other digital applications. Not only did they break the fast together via video calls, some women also called each other while preparing the evening's food. Some

[23]

even listened together to the same digital recordings of a call to prayer that they had found online, evoking the familiar soundscape of their daily prayers, and sharing that experience in real time. They thus found ways to digitally synchronise their spiritual and more mundane activities, regaining a sense of sociality and community despite physical separation.

At the end of Ramadan 2020, when German federal states began to slowly ease restrictions, [24] gatherings for religious services became permissible, albeit under strict physical distancing regulations. Some of the younger women that took part in my research were overjoyed to be able to end Ramadan with their prayers in the mosque—despite the lack of bodily contact and the obligation to wear masks throughout the whole prayer cycle. Subsequently, they commented in our WhatsApp group that "it was still not the same" and that they "wanted to touch each other": they missed the intercorporeal experience and the communal and social activities associated with the prayers and *eid-al fitr*, the feast held at the end of Ramadan. Women with small children or who were vulnerable to COVID-19 due to underlying health conditions were still not permitted to enter the mosque.

As restrictions were eased further over the course of summer 2020, mosques were still not [25] allowed to accommodate as many people as before. In some instances, this led to women's mosque spaces being partially opened to men. One woman reported during one of our regular calls and exchanges of voice messages that she felt uncomfortable there now that men were praying in the same room as women. Although there were curtains visually separating men from women, the woman said she felt the presence of men as an intrusion into the female space. The visual markers of separation were insufficient: she knew and felt that men were present, and the sound of their prayers disturbed the spiritual experiences of many women. Another research participant remarked that she had decided to attend prayers in a larger mosque that still maintained gender segregation. She was a German woman with Turkish heritage who had been regularly praying in an Arabic-German mosque where her Arabic-speaking husband prayed; now she was choosing to return to one of the bigger German-Turkish mosques she had attended before marriage. Women's decisions regarding which mosques to pray in are often influenced by friends and family members as well as by the amount of space and the opportunities offered for active participation, such as learning groups.

Even before the restrictions, especially for younger women, social media like Instagram [26] and YouTube had been important sources of spirituality, religious knowledge, and advice on how to live a pious life as a Muslim female in Germany. Many women who met during Friday prayers in the female areas of mosques also joined women's groups on WhatsApp for spiritual guidance, took part in online learning circles, or just kept in touch through phone and video calls, voice messages, and texting. Along with the increasing digitalisation of most aspects of daily life, in recent years, many mosques have been developing ways to engage with their communities online via social media. They have publicised prayer and teaching schedules on their Facebook and Instagram pages or Telegram channels, and some have reached out to the wider community by making audio recordings and videos of their Friday sermons available online. Mosques that had previously engaged in these kinds of social media activities were the quickest to adapt to the closing of communal spaces under lockdown by expanding their programmes to include live-streaming of prayer sessions on YouTube, online teaching formats like webinars, or podcast streaming on SoundCloud. Some even took measures to enable personalised responses to direct questions; answering and fostering interaction within their communities, in order to reach older people in particular. This also meant that women could now participate and listen to learning sessions that had previously been largely only accessible to

men. The chance to ask questions via different kinds of comment functions enabled women to directly engage with the imam or teachers. In most gender-segregated mosque spaces this had previously been much more difficult, if not impossible, with the preaching usually transmitted unidirectionally to the women's spaces without any possibility for interaction. The opportunities opened up by digital infrastructures enabled some of the younger women to even start participating in more formalised religious study groups, learning how to read and recite the Quran in weekly digital sessions and engaging more closely with the imam and teachings of their particular mosque.

The observations presented above can be seen as evidencing different moments of rupture [27] that transpired with different phases of the pandemic restrictions, reshaping the everyday religious practices of the women who took part in my research. While rupture has been defined as a "radical, sometimes violent and even brutal form of discontinuity" (2019, 2), I do not mean to imply a necessarily negative outcome. Rather, I choose the term to reflect on the lockdown restrictions as a constitutive element of the women's social realities and experiences, which intersected with their individual biographical situations, as in the example of the woman who returned to the German-Turkish mosque. The physical space available for practising communal sensational forms, not only in order to relate to the divine but also to experience being part of the community, was severely curtailed by the restrictions, yet that impacted upon the heterogeneous group of women who took part in my research in different ways. Some synchronised their religious practices by digital means, such as by listening simultaneously to the same *adhan* or participating in shared religious learning experiences; such adaptions sustained the sensational forms by transforming them to flourish in the new context. Others felt expelled from their communal female religious spaces but were unable to find compensation in the digital realm. My interlocutors' different strategies and reported experiences suggest that it would be too simple to see the rupture of the pandemic as radical discontinuity; instead showing how the transformations are shaped by ongoing contestations of gendered spaces within the mosque and digitally.

Contested Sonic Public Spaces

As emerged above, the semi-public spaces within mosques and the digital spheres that re- [28] late to those spaces are structured in gendered ways that are not fixed but are constantly re-negotiated. Broadening the focus, the public spaces surrounding mosques in Germany are also contested in particular ways that relate not only to the mosques' physical buildings but also to the wider sonic urban space. This brings me back to my introductory example of the call to prayer in Duisburg. The post cited was part of an exchange of other spiritually sensational news, such as dramatic videos of the deserted Kaaba in Mecca. The message referred to the permission granted for public sounding of the *adhan* of this mosque as well as for the ringing of neighbouring church bells at seven o'clock each evening in Duisburg, in order to create a shared religious city soundscape. The women in the WhatsApp group responded to the post emotionally with a range of affirmative expressions and emoticons with red hearts; one woman was so touched that she expressed her excitement in a direct message to me, mentioning that she had almost been moved to tears.

Duisburg was one of many cities in Germany where (often for the first time in their history) [29] the call to prayer was allowed to be sounded publicly during the first lockdown in Germany. In most cases, both the *adhan* and the Christian call to prayer, the ringing of church bells (see Weiner 2014), were permitted. Before the pandemic, municipalities had often prohibited

the Muslim public call to prayer, referencing local noise regulations or arguing that unlike Christian church bells, the *adhan* proclaimed a theological message. Yet, German federal laws pertaining to freedom of religion explicitly allow public calls to prayer, as long as certain regulations are adhered to regarding, for example, the volume and frequency of the call.

During the lockdown, mosques were able to apply at the municipal level for permission   [30] to broadcast the public call to prayer. It was generally the larger, well-organised German-Turkish mosques that did so. In their applications, most imams and spokespersons argued that the public call to prayer would raise morale within their own communities and would also serve as a sign of interfaith solidarity and dialogue.[3] It is rather paradoxical and perhaps ironic that where permission was granted and the call to prayer was publicly broadcast, the amplified voice called to communal prayer at a time when praying inside the mosque was not allowed.

Nonetheless, many mosques that broadcast the *adhan* publicly were visited by people, who   [31] gathered in front of them. They listened attentively to the voice and recorded videos on their mobile phones to document the unprecedented public event and send it to family members and friends. Some of these videos were also shared with me in the research group on Whats-App, for example, a mobile phone video showing a prayer-caller (Turkish muezzin; Arabic: *muʾaddin*) of the famous Cologne Central Mosque, run by the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affaires (DITIB). He was calling for prayer, standing all by himself outside the mosque, with a microphone in his hands and cables leading to big speakers behind him. The young mother who had forwarded this record of the exceptional event had been unable to be present herself. Yet, even just knowing that it was taking place close by had been a moving experience, she told me, in the light of the disputes over the "silent minarets" that had taken place during the building phase of the mosque. It had made her particularly happy to see and hear this familiar voice calling out in public as she was preparing for the first Ramadan under lockdown. The technical set-up meant that the man's voice was overpowered by its amplification emitted by the loudspeaker; the recording process distorted the audio quality further before the listener could replay it in a different time and place. The original intercorporeal experience and signification of calling a community to pray together in a shared physical space had been transformed. This mediated call to prayer, disseminated via WhatsApp, was imbued with further significations as the group's members reacted and discussed it in relation to past and ongoing debates about religious public presence in German urban spaces.

In some places, such as one Berlin mosque, the public call to prayer was broadcast during   [32] the day (*ṣalāt aẓ-ẓuhr*) and was intended to be heard by the local neighbourhood as well as livestreamed on Facebook. The mosque announced on its website that the public call to prayer was a sign of support and consolation to help people feel spirituality and cohesion in times of crisis. Many people gathered on the street in front of the mosque to hear the exceptional sonic event, some curious passers-by, others who had read the online announcement—even though it had not been meant as an invitation to congregate. Up to 300 persons came to the street in front of the mosque, as police reported, in spite of lockdown regulations and physical distancing rules. People listened to the *adhan* in respect, awe, and fascination; some with curiosity and some who could hardly believe that the public call to prayer had been

---

3   See, for example, the statements in these international online journalistic outlets (last accessed July 28, 2021): https://www.ruptly.tv/en/videos/20200403-039 (Imam Mehmet Taha Sabri); https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/diaspora/mosque-in-germany-joins-call-to-prayer-to-raise-morale-amid-virus-lockdown, https://www.islamiq.de/2020/03/21/erster-gebetsruf-als-zeichen-der-solidaritaet/ (Spokesperson Hülya Ceylan).

allowed to resound in that urban space. Most who came held their mobile phones in their hands, ready to record the extraordinary event.

As Diane Riskedahl (2020, 5) has argued in relation to the Canadian context, where the call   [33]
to prayer was allowed during Ramadan 2020, "there is, through listening, an alignment of self with God and self with community"; she sees this as a soundmark that "sonically remakes public space." Likewise, the people in front of the Berlin mosque participated physically in a multi-sensorial event to create a sense of belonging to a community and maybe also but to a lesser degree to align themselves with God as no one was preparing for the prayer in public and communal praying was forbidden. The meaning and experiences of the call to prayer therefore shifted from communal experiences of alignment with God to emphasize solidarity at a time of physical distancing that for many was associated with sensory deprivation and social separation.

At the same time, many were also participating in different kinds of highly contested dis-   [34]
courses about the sonic (and visual) presence of Islam in public space. The *adhan* became a particularly intense public presence in the city during the lockdown regulations. According to my interlocutors, the sound of the *adhan* was all the more prominent due to the relative quietness and emptiness of the streets. As Meyer (2009, 18) has noted, the public presence of religion always has to be analysed in relation to state and other institutions' regulation of the role of religion in society. What I must add here are the unique circumstances of the 'pandemic times.' In Berlin's particular socio-cultural and historical context (and that of Germany more generally), a "turn to Islam" has been observed in recent years, asserting the presence of Muslims in the city (Bendixsen 2013). Most strikingly, the construction of mosques with minarets serves as a symbolic reference to Muslim life in the city, increasing the visibility of Muslim communities. This has led to controversial debates and polarisation, provoking intervention from municipalities, city administrations, various civil society organisations, and ordinary citizens (Akca 2020; see also Spielhaus and Färber 2006). The sound of the *adhan* in Berlin in 2020 thus resonated with longer-standing ongoing debates and reinvigorated them in the charged pandemic situation.

As the crowd in front of the Berlin mosque grew ever larger on that day, with many people   [35]
not heeding distancing measures or wearing masks, the mosque's security guards and police collaborated with the local imam, who ended the prayer early, before they intervened to disperse the gathering. Consequently, the mosque's permission to broadcast the call to prayer publicly was withdrawn by the municipality; health councillor Falko Liecke announced the decision on Twitter[4] that very day. In his tweet, as in most press coverage of the event, the "extensive violations of measures to impede the corona pandemic" were cited as justification for the prohibition. Before even reaching that statement, however, the first sentence of the tweet pointedly mentioned that the mosque was under observation by authorities for the defence of the constitution (*Verfassungsschutz*). This single tweet thus discursively intertwined the *adhan* and violations of pandemic regulations with federal security issues; offering fertile ground for anti-Muslim sentiments and conspiracy theories associating the corona pandemic with Muslims (see e. g. for the Indian context Rahman 2020, 135).

This relates the public call to prayer to yet another dimension that was sarcastically alluded   [36]
to in the WhatsApp post cited in my introduction: "Because of Corona & the ban on assemblies, supporters of AFD or Islam haters can't even demonstrate against it." Political parties like

---

4   The post is accessible in this tweet (last accessed July 28, 2021): https://twitter.com/falkone1/status/12 47166248577691656, translation by author.

the right-wing *Alternative für Deutschland* (AFD, Alternative for Germany) and other groups spreading Islamophobic messages, have long been (re)signifying the call to prayer as a threat to society. These groups portray the call to prayer as a sonic demarcation of Muslim presence in a soundscape that should supposedly be free from religious expression—or should only resonate with Christian church bells. Indeed, from their perspective, the sonic marker is an attempt to assert power over other religious groups; they reject the idea that it can foster interfaith solidarity and dialogue. Awareness of these and similar sentiments was enough to discourage many mosques from submitting requests to be allowed to publicly call to prayer during the lockdown. Some were so demoralised by hateful comments on social media that they even revoked requests that were in process.

These complex dynamics testify to the significance of sound and auditory spaces in orienting belief: firmly-held notions of difference between self and other become explicit when people take a stance on the controversial presence of sonic (and visual) forms of Muslim religiosity in public spaces in Germany. As a sensational form, the call to prayer thus becomes a viscerally experienced focal point for these different kinds of debates. For German Muslims, listening to the call to prayer is not only part of their pious practices of religious community but it controversially permeates urban places as well as digital spheres and through that takes on new social and political significance. [37]

Concluding Remarks: Calling to Prayer in 'Pandemic Times'

The regulations imposed in Germany during its first corona lockdown from March to June 2020 severely impacted upon the everyday lives and religious practices of Muslims, especially during and after the holy month of Ramadan in 2020. As I have shown in this contribution, access to female mosque spaces and forms of community was drastically restricted by the regulations, which prevented Muslim women from experiencing important sensational forms and communal practices as they were accustomed to. The different phases of the changing restrictions as the pandemic developed were felt by my interlocutors as a series of ruptures that intersected with their own biographies. The heterogeneous group of women who took part in my research was affected by the restrictions in different ways. For most, increasing the degree to which social media and messenger services were incorporated into their daily routines enabled them to maintain a sense of shared community and thereby also sustain a sense of religious self. Listening to the *adhan* and synchronising their everyday religious activities via digital infrastructures were key strategies that activated familiar sensational forms digitally. Some women expanded their practices to even participate in debates and learning sessions that, in physical settings, had been largely accessible only to men. Others, particularly women with children, felt excluded from the religious practices and had difficulty finding compensatory experiences in the digital realm. In one case this even led to personal crisis and reorientation to a different mosque. All my interlocutors' statements implied that the ruptures of the pandemic restrictions were experienced not so much as exceptional events but rather as a part of the ongoing contestations around gendered spaces within the mosque and in the digital realm. Women continually carved out their own 'safe spaces' and spheres of authority in female prayer areas and thereby also developed their own religious knowledge and interpretations of religious sources. [38]

I proposed conceptualising the call to prayer in the semi-public in and public spaces outside of the mosque as a sensational form that not only mediates between women and the [39]

spiritual realm but is also experienced as a shared reference point among a particular kind of community that brings together very different groups of women. In addition to the technically amplified voice that performatively brings forth the call on each occasion anew, the synchronised movements of the bodies praying together can also be seen as a sensational form, exemplifying how auditive perception is always about more than just hearing: sound pervades spaces and bodies, choreographing movement and mobilising affect. This kind of sensational form can only partially be transferred to the digital realm: while some women found ways to synchronise their everyday routines and prayer practices with other women in tune with the digitalised call to prayer, such practices were generally limited to the intimate sphere of selected close relationships and could not hold together a larger community of a more heterogeneous group of women. Even before the pandemic, a trend had already been observed towards the individualisation of religious life, with more personalised practices performed in the privacy of homes augmented by smartphones (Slama and Barendregt 2018, 6). Nonetheless, this apparent withdrawal to more private spaces is accompanied by digital practices that enable people to encounter and engage with religious material and communities that might be otherwise inaccessible. This is what Miller et al. (2016) address as the "scaling of socialities" in the digital realm. In my case, it also permeates physical locations: social formations are structured and fragmented by institutions and spaces located physically such as the mosque or public areas of a city, as well as by digitally infrastructured media like WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube. In the examples presented above, the publics appear predominantly structured and fragmented around gender and age, but other social hierarchies and relations intersect in significant ways.

Once the call to prayer enters the urban public space and makes Muslim religiosity sonically present, it becomes embroiled in moral debates and municipal regulation of the place of religion, or more precisely, Islam in German society. During the pandemic, it was argued that the Muslim sounds would contribute to solidarity and interfaith dialogue, raising the morale of believers. Others, however, saw the public broadcast of the *adhan* as a threatening sonic demarcation of Muslim space and an attempt to assert dominance. Such perspectives were put forward in statements that discursively related the *adhan* to violations of measures to reduce infection as well as to the securitisation of Islam in Germany. Many of my interlocutors welcomed the opportunity that the pandemic brought for the sonic presence of Islam in German public spaces to be asserted, cherishing the call for its religious significance and as a form of solidarity. However, the unabating wider debates indicate that the public call to prayer continues to mobilise emotionally felt principles and beliefs that shape secular and religious publics, which was also reflected in the post forwarded among the WhatsApp group. [40]

Drawing upon the material presented, I argue that everyday religious practices during 'pandemic times' should not be viewed as an exceptional response or radical discontinuity, but as responses to a specific situation that bring to the fore core ongoing debates over gendered Muslim presence in mosque spaces and Muslim publicness in German-speaking discourse on sonic presence. This perspective allowed me to explore how the pandemic-related restrictions inflected with previous religious practices and discourses, sometimes in ways that reflected and maintained ongoing gendered contestations, or discourses about the criminalisation and securitisation of Islam, or, in other cases, inspiring innovative strategies for synchronising and engaging solidarity among Muslim women digitally. [41]

Acknowledgements

[42]

References

Akca, Ayşe Almıla. 2020. *Moscheeleben in Deutschland: Eine Ethnographie zu Islamischem Wissen, Tradition und religiöser Autorität*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.

Asad, Talal. 2009. "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam." *Qui Parle* 17 (2): 1–30.

Bendixsen, Synnøve. 2013. *The Religious Identity of Young Muslim Women in Berlin: An Ethnographic Study*. Leiden: Brill.

Eisenlohr, Patrick. 2011. "The Anthropology of Media and the Question of Ethnic and Religious Pluralism." *Social Anthropology* 19 (1): 40–55. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8676.2010.00136.x.

Hirschkind, Charles. 2006. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. Columbia: Columbia University Press.

Holbraad, Martin, Bruce Kapferer, and Julia F. Sauma. 2019. "Introduction: Critical Ruptures." In *Ruptures: Anthropologies of Discontinuity in Times of Turmoil*, edited by Martin Holbraad, Bruce Kapferer, and Julia F. Sauma, 1–26. London: UCL Press. http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/10076047/1/Ruptures.pdf.

Jordheim, Helge, Anne Kveim Lie, Erik Ljungberg, and Einar Wigen. 2020. "Epidemic Times." *Somatosphere* (blog). April 3, 2020. http://somatosphere.net/2020/epidemic-times.html/.

Jouili, Jeanette S. 2015. *Pious Practice and Secular Constraints: Women in the Islamic Revival in Europe*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Jouili, Jeanette S., and Annelies Moors. 2014. "Introduction: Islamic Sounds and the Politics of Listening." *Anthropological Quarterly* 87 (4): 977–88. https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2014.0064.

Larkin, Brian. 2014. "Techniques of Inattention: The Mediality of Loudspeakers in Nigeria." *Anthropological Quarterly* 87 (4): 989–1015. https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2014.0067.

Lee, Tong Soon. 1999. "Technology and the Production of Islamic Space: The Call to Prayer in Singapore." *Ethnomusicology* 43 (1): 86–100. https://doi.org/10.2307/852695.

Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Meyer, Birgit. 2009. "Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediations, Sensational Forms, and Styles of Binding." In *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses*, edited by Birgit Meyer, 1–28. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Meyer, Birgit, and Annelies Moors, eds. 2005. *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Miller, Daniel, Elisabetta Costa, Nell Haynes, Tom McDonald, Jolynna Sinanan, Juliano Speyer, and Xinyuan Wang. 2016. *How the World Changed Social Media*. London: UCL Press. http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1474805/.

Pontzen, Benedict. 2020. " 'Those Who Pray Together': Religious Practice, Affect, and Dissent Among Muslim in Asante (Ghana)." In *Affective Trajectories: Religion and Emotion in African Cityscapes*, edited by Hansjörg Dilger, Astrid Bochow, Marian Burchardt, and Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon, 185–201. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Rahman, Sabina Yasmin. 2020. " 'Social Distancing' During COVID-19: The Metaphors and Politics of Pandemic Response in India." *Health Sociology Review* 29 (2): 131–39. https://doi.org/10.1080/14461242.2020.1790404.

Riskedahl, Diane. 2020. "The Muslim Call to Prayer in Canada's Pandemic Soundscape." *City & Society* 32 (2). https://doi.org/10.1111/ciso.12304.

Roth, Emmanuelle. 2020. "Epidemic Temporalities: A Concise Literature Review." *Anthropology Today* 36 (4): 13–16. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12590.

Schulz, Dorothea E. 2012. "Dis/Embodying Authority: Female Radio 'Preachers' and the Ambivalences of Mass-Mediated Speech in Mali." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44 (1): 23–43. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743811001231.

Slama, Martin, and Bart Barendregt. 2018. "Online Publics in Muslim Southeast Asia: In Between Religious Politics and Popular Pious Practices." *Asiascape: Digital Asia* 5 (1-2): 3–31. https://doi.org/10.1163/22142312-12340090.

Spielhaus, Riem, and Alexa Färber, eds. 2006. *Islamisches Gemeindeleben in Berlin*. Berlin: Der Beauftragte des Senats von Berlin für Integration und Migration.

Tamimi Arab, Pooyan. 2015. " 'A Minaret of Light': Transducing the Islamic Call to Prayer?" *Material Religion* 11 (2): 136–63. https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2015.1059126.

Weiner, Isaac, ed. 2014. "Calling Muslims – and Christians – to Pray." In *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space, and American Pluralism*, 158–94. New York: NYU Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qfn1c.

Zillinger, Martin. 2017. "Graduated Publics: Mediating Trance in the Age of Technical Reproduction." *Current Anthropology* 58 (S15): 41–55. https://doi.org/10.1086/689740.