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Ritual Embodiment: The Body Remembers Through Ritual

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Abstract

Ritual externalizes religious belief through physical embodiment and codified performance that allows it to be shared through a community. In a post 9/11 American society where Muslims are subject to increased scrutiny, ritual becomes a way to otherize a community based on shared practices. However, looking beyond the framework that the specific rules of ritual creates to the subtle information the body actually communicates through its performance reveals gestures that emerge from the accumulation of one’s experiences through what Merleau-Ponty refers to as “habitual body memory.” Gestures embedded within ritual reach back into a deeper self that the individual can understand and relate to through shared experiences constructed from a single spiritual source. My work deconstructs the ritual of prayer in order to locate gestures and habit memories that through intimacy connect beyond the specificity of ritual performance.

Ritual Prayer

Prayer, or salah, is the most heavily emphasized ritual in Islam, considered as the pillar of religion (“Inner Dimension” 19). Central to Muslim prayer is the body. Prayer consists of a series of bodily motions repeated five times a day on a daily basis. These motions are heavily regulated through an abundance of religious literature sourced from Prophetic texts. One such example is medieval theologian Al Ghazali’s book titled The Inner Dimensions of Islamic Worship.

Al Ghazali’s book describes in depth the proper etiquette of prayer according to hadith, or sayings attributed to Prophet Muhammad that form the basis for Islamic law. He describes the physical motions as only the “outer dimension” of prayer. The ultimate purpose of prayer is the remembrance of God, as cited in the Quran “and establish prayer for My remembrance” (Sahih International, Quran 20:14). Bodily movements, Al Ghazali claims, are meant to cultivate self-discipline that subjugates the “nafs,” or the lower self of desires, clearing distractions to remember
God. (“Inner Dimensions” 36). Through physical movement, ritual is meant to externalize remembrance.

As codified performance, ritual engenders repetition. This is seen in prayer, not only through the repetitive cycles of motions, but also through the frequency of performance: every dawn, noon, afternoon, evening, and night on a daily basis. As someone who has prayed five times a day for over half of my life, the movements of prayer becomes routine. Through frequency, repetitive motions recede out of deliberate action into routine, beginning to resemble what Talal Asad describes as “ritual rite” (Asad 79).

Asad questions the modernist view of ritual in anthropological discourse that rituals are empty gestures whose symbolic meaning has been forgotten or reduced through time. Instead of analyzing ritual as an object of a larger or unseen subject, Asad conceives of ritual as active embodiment (Asad 78). To fully comprehend ritual requires knowing the ritual itself, and the being it proscribes. This entails looking beyond ritual as a representation of something more encompassing, such as an ideology or an unseen being (Asad 77). Rather, fully understanding ritual means understanding that actions that comprise it. But when the apt performance of ritual becomes diluted through familiarity, understanding the actions of ritual require deconstructing and re-contextualizing its proscribed movements.

Contemporary artist Arwa Abuoun begins to re-contextualize prayer by photographing each stage of movement in her piece *Al Matar Rabma*. Instead of arranging the positions sequentially, she places the photos so that they collectively form a subtle arc that depicts each movement as part of a larger motion. Her use of color and composition establish another relationship that is emphasized by the work’s title – *Al Matar Rabma* means “the rain is mercy” (Abuoun). Each woman depicted is wearing a different color *khimar* to evoke a rainbow, juxtaposed above a photo of a sunlit sky. Through color, composition, and juxtaposition, Abuoun re-contextualizes prayer as impermanent
signs of mercy. By evoking a rainbow through bodies in prayer, she connects a physical state of being with an intangible light.

While Abouon’s piece connects the form of prayer to the intangible, my own work Mapping Prayer seeks to elicit a tangible depiction of impermeable movement. The bends performed while transitioning from standing to bowing to kneeling form the most active components of movement. Using my body to draw, Mapping Prayer depicts the essence of that movement. The drawing apparatus, a headband attached to a pastel, becomes the mediator that retrieves the lines of movements and translates them into paper.

**Habitual Body Memory**

While *Al Matar Rahma* and Mapping Prayer reorient the physicality of prayer, I still question the purpose of the movements. What exists in the body that requires such attention in prayer?

Edward Casey discusses philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of habitual body memory.
and its relationship to time. Habitual body memory is the actions, skills, and gestures that exist beneath the consciousness, ever ready to be evoked through particular triggers or contexts (Casey 40). They are unconsciously performed in varying contexts, adaptable to a variety of locations, conditions, and information (Casey 43). Through unconscious accommodation by a process Merleau-Ponty distinguishes as “habituation,” habitual body memory is different from cultural routines that occur in specific circumstances, in that the body can adapt to different conditions while still performing the same movement (Casey 43).

The prayer rug is a standard object routinely used in prayer. Though it is not required to correctly perform prayer, the rug is meant to act as a pure interface between the body and the ground. In Prostration, I precisely define this space by mapping the body as it touches the ground during prostration – the point of prayer where it is said the worshipper is closest to God. The process of identifying the area my body occupies reconfigures the familiar; the traditional rectangular prayer rug is reshaped to resemble a figure. However, this map identifies more than the interface between my body and the ground: by cutting away where the rug does not touch my body, it confines my body’s position. Yet when I pray on this rug, I concentrate better during the prayer itself; my mind wanders less because my body must focus on maintaining the correct movements and positions so that it aligns within the constraints of the rug.

By acting as a constraint, the rug becomes a tool of focus, forcing my body to adapt to the newly shaped rug. The constraint the rug provides alters the usual context of prayer, forcing the body to reorient itself while performing prayer. But does this act of reorienting configure to the adaptability of habit memory, thereby differentiating it from a cultural – or in this case, religious,
routine? The constraint of the rug forces the body to actively habituate itself to its new context; in the process of discerning active habituation, one becomes aware of what may have become clouded with familiarity; not quite unconscious gesture, but an internalized routine. Constraint forces one to actively consider how to accommodate the performance to the new rug.

The body seeks its own way to adapt to the culled rug, acting as a mediator between the known methods of prayer and the altered space of performance. In this way, the body has a sense of agency in and of itself, as though it remembered previous experiences to generate a new one.

Casey discusses Merleau-Ponty’s this act of bodily remembrance as opposed to recollection. Whereas recollection involves active retrieval of a representation of a previous event, habitual body memory manifests as gestures, motions, and skills that the body obtains through the sedimentation of past experience (Casey 40). The process of sedimentation results in the accumulation of one’s past remembered by the body. Unlike recollection, where the event cannot be fully replicated, habit memory is an absolute repetition of a previous action. Thus, through habitual actions, the body most authentically communicates past experiences that make up one’s being.
Artist and metalsmith Jennifer Crupi explores gesture and the role of body language in social communication. In her series *Guarded Gestures*, Crupi uses the medium of jewelry to investigate how the body compensates for its own insecurities through posture and gesture, noting that people tend to focus other people’s body language while forgetting our own (Youngblood). Each sterling silver jewelry piece captures a different gesture that slightly covers the body with the hands. Though these gestures are frequently unassuming positions that the body takes subconsciously in uncomfortable situations, they communicate personal insecurity or discomfort that the mind might not necessarily acknowledge. Instead, it is evinced through body language.

Fig. 5.1-5.2 Jennifer Crupi, Guarded Gesture 1, sterling silver, foam

Crupi’s jewelry functions as constraints that, in *Guarded Gestures*, force the hand and arms into positions of guardedness. The jewelry constraint makes the wearer aware of a gesture the body assumes unknowingly. In doing so, the jewelry essentially captures from the realm of the unconscious to the conscious. It retrieves what was already there into the obvious and perceivable, in a similar way the jewelry headband retrieved the lines of movement of the arcs in prayer.
In a similar effort of retrieval, I use jewelry objects to distill motions of prayer into the essential gestures. By constraining the hand in various ways, and removing the methodical steps of the ritual as well as associated recitations, the jewelry transforms context away from one that is distinctly Muslim, posing the question of how the body will respond.

In Ahad, the brass ring constrains the fingers of the right hand so that only the index finger is free. When wearing the piece, my fingers immediately become aware of the restriction of movement, and my index finger, free from the ring, proceeds to bounce up and down in an oscillating motion. The full finger rings of Dhikr divide four fingers into four segments, limiting their flexibility. When wearing the rings, my thumb proceeds to touch each brass segment in a gesture of counting.

The bouncing motion of my solitary index finger traditionally corresponds to the phrase “Ashadu an laa ilaha illa’llah,” or “I testify there is no deity except God,” the primary tenant of Islam and the first pillar of Islam. The gesture of one finger emphasizes the oneness of the Divine, and becomes the physical manifestation of the fundamental litany. Each touch in Dhikr emulates the counting motion associated with rosary prayers of remembrance. In both cases, the constraining jewelry evokes movements of prayer outside the context of prayer, suggesting that hours of performance that have been sedimented in my hands are evinced through such bodily movement.
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Qabid, references no movement particular to prayer. On the other hand, it is rough combination of a brass knuckle and a foam stress ball that connects the four fingers and places an object into the hand. When wearing this piece, my hand immediately begins a cycle of squeezing the foam portion of the ring for a few moments, and then releasing the squeeze and fully opening my hand. The object, motion, and position of the hand evoke the heart, a rhythmic cycle of constriction and release the size of a fist. The heart represents both the life force of the physical body and the center of the emotional and spiritual body. By evoking the heart, Qabid presents a space in which the physical body and spiritual soul intersect.
In his book *The Alchemy of Happiness*, Al Ghazali writes that “the heart is a traveler from the invisible world,” containing truths that are obscured by the lower self (nafs) (“Alchemy” 21). Under this logic, the heart is not only the lifeblood of the physical body, but it can be said to contain a “memory” from a world unseen. A “past” beyond the uniquely personal is present within the physical body and is somehow evinced through habitual body memory. Locating the center of the heart reveals what is known in Sufi theology as the *sirr*, or “secret” – the point where the innermost self is in contact with the Divine (Kugle 49). Externalizing this interior through habit then creates a deeper connection bound to the heart. The body is encoded with knowledge of the Divine that ritual draws out.

Yet comprehending the significance of these gestures required removing them from the outside. *Abad, Dhikr, and Qabid*, these moments of gesture are depicted through a disembodied hand, divorced from an explicit context of Muslim prayer. These gestures are only moments embedded within the performance of prayer, not the full ritual itself. The hands produce a sense of intimacy that the viewer can immediately connect to. The hand is a universal tool that transcends the specificity of Muslim prayer and thus becomes an access point through which the viewer can understand the essence of prayer.

The bodily habitus from the intimate moments of the hand represent the “inner dimension” of prayer, the unstructured response that emerges from a place deeper inside the body that remembers. The specificity of the motions of prayer, however, locates itself within a uniquely Muslim context. As such, the guidelines that create a framework to which the mechanics of prayer conform to also create a category to which Muslims may be identified. Ritual externalizes Muslim identity, not only individually, but also communally.

The codified instructions of prayer allow it to be performed by many individuals. In fact, prayer in congregation is encouraged according to prophetic sources. Through shared performance,
the ritual prayer becomes a tool of forming collective identity among members of a shared tradition. As such, the ritual in its entirety is located within Muslim practice. The guidelines that create a framework to which the mechanics of prayer conform to also create a category to which Muslims may be identified.

In the United States, where Muslim communities have been under increased scrutiny since 9/11, ritual practices have become a tool to identify Muslims in the public sphere (Islamophobia). For example, in 2013, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) issued a statement regarding the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar where Muslims fast from dawn to sundown every day for the duration of the month (Traveling During Ramadan). This statement describes how the TSA “understands that this is a significant religious event for the Muslim community,” and then proceeds to describe ways to identify Muslims observing Ramadan (Traveling During Ramadan). Islamic ritual is reduced to a representation of Muslimness that symbolizes the otherness of Muslims.

This is also seen in the increased scrutiny against Muslim houses of worship over the last several years. If ritual is understood to be a representation of Muslimness, then the mosque represents the existence of a Muslim community within a place. According to the Pew Research Center and Forum on Religion & Public life, over 53 mosques in the US experienced some form of opposition between 2010 and 2012 alone (Pew). Among petitions and litigations enacted against many of these mosques were fears of these centers becoming “a breeding ground for terrorism,” (Green). Yet to what extent do these allegations take into account prayer itself?

In Shoulder to Shoulder I expand my exploration of habitual body memory within prayer beyond the individual to the communal. Prophetic etiquette when praying in congregation calls for individuals to “set the rows in order, stand shoulder to shoulder, close the gaps, be pliant in the hands of your brethren, and do not leave openings for the devil,” (Partial Translation of Sunan Abu-
Dawud). According to this hadith, standing “shoulder to shoulder” strengthens worshippers by preventing the devil from whispering distractions from the gaps between. The physical constraint of another body is here seen as a metaphoric method to maintain focus during prayer.

This understood rule of congregational prayer left me with bad experiences at the mosque while growing up; it seemed inevitable that at some point, someone would yank my arm mid-prayer until we literally squeezed shoulder to shoulder. Instead of trying to focus on the prayer, I would usually be consumed with annoyance and discomfort. Why did the enactment of this constraint detract me from the remembrance prayer is supposed to create?

The brass shoulder piece literally connects two worshippers, forcing them to stand shoulder to shoulder. In the video, during the first cycle of movements of prayer, the shoulder piece is clearly a distraction. The two women struggle to balance the piece before it falls down because of their uncoordinated movements, disrupting the flow of movement. In this case, it seems that the constraint imposed by the shoulder piece inhibits concentration. Their bodies struggle to adjust to this new constraint.
Fig. Ayesha Mohyuddin, *Shoulder to Shoulder* installation view, 2015, digital projection, steel, brass

Yet again, understanding the significance of this constraint requires a deeper evaluation of the ritual itself. After multiple rounds of prayer, the worshippers become more attuned to each other’s body language, trying to coordinate movements so as not to let the shoulder piece fall down. Though perhaps this focus is directed towards synchronization rather than an increased awareness of the divine, each worshipper incorporated the other’s body into their sphere of habitus. Their bodies were communicating through the shared practice, becoming attuned to each other’s movements, accommodating each other to balance the shoulder piece. Their bodies communicate in spite of the discomfort of posing so closely.

Though ritual may indeed place constraint upon one’s physical comfort – balancing the shoulder piece requires one to stand pressed against the person on the side – the body
accommodates itself by incorporating the movements of the other, thereby expanding one’s bodily consciousness beyond the individual. However, one body’s activation of another body’s habitual body memories is not an immediate process. Instead, it was one that required cultivation that included discomfort. But the uncomfortable constraint was necessary to connect to another through the body. The body builds habits that connect the body beyond the individual, activating a similar reaction to the adjacent body. Congregational ritual creates a space to foster a physical connection to a community through habit.

Similar to Abad and Dhikr, Shoulder to Shoulder focuses on how an empathetic connection created by the constraint of the “shoulder to shoulder” position highlight moments in prayer that may be otherwise obscured by the representational associations congregational prayer may hold in its entirety, whether that be the memories of being yanked in the mosque, or even the negative associations a Muslim prayer space may espouse in light of Muslim extremist groups abroad. Though the shoulder piece was at first an uncomfortable constraint, sustained use revealed the body’s willingness to accommodate another body. Perhaps this ultimately reveals that the body yearns to live outside of its individual interior. But how would one know without looking deeper into one’s own bodily practice, be it ritual or otherwise?
Works Cited


Image Sources

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Figure 5.1: Jennifer Crupi <http://jennifercrupi.com/work-guard1a.html>

Figure 5.2: Jennifer Crupi <http://jennifercrupi.com/work-guard1b.html>

Figure 6.1: Ayesha Mohyuddin

Figure 6.2: Ayesha Mohyuddin

Figure 7.1: Ayesha Mohyuddin

Figure 7.2: Ayesha Mohyuddin

Figure 8.1: Ayesha Mohyuddin

Figure 8.2: Ayesha Mohyuddin

Figure 9: Ayesha Mohyuddin