

Expressions of Sacred Cultural Capital : A Spatial Temporal Ex- ploration of Bengali Islam

Reflective Pieces

ABSTRACT

This short photo essay presents an aspect of work in progress. First hand observational notes and photo recordings were taken around the socially structured field habitus of the East London Borough of Tower Hamlets, its religious spheres of sacred cultural capital dispensation i.e. religious ritual ceremonies, social meetings and Mosques during 2012- 2015 and 2016 -19. The photo essay aimed to capture an important perspective in the adoption and reproduction of religiously coloured expressions of sacred cultural capital the significance and social order of faith and how this has shaped and marshalled the social actors in the space they occupy.

keywords: bangladeshi, bourdieu, british, islam, immigration, habitus

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This photo essay, recruiting Bourdieu's 'thinking tools', explores the remnants of the cultural capital legacy, the sacred capital consecrated by successions of migrant middle eastern agents of social change in shaping the Bengali sub-proletariats workers of Sylhet into primed successive generations of petite bourgeoisie British Muslim Bengali workers. Whilst the original social conditions, the synthesized orthodox values, and the beliefs that fashioned the agency and practices and shaped worship for the ancestors of the current retroactive practices of the Bengali Muslims may have long vanished, those practices seeded by their forbears have not vanished with them.

Instead, deliberate organizing action cultivated a tangible and intangible cultural capital legacy and conserved practices that still live on. These are faithfully authored by the current embodying Bengali social actors residing in Tower Hamlets, found in their actions, their shared history, their language and sacred literature of legitimacy. The orthodox core set of practices has elicited

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Shadwell Mosque: Salat, ritual Islamic prayer, prescribed five times



Ford Square Mosque: a new building project for worship & Islamic Study

a complete jurisdiction concerned with the teleological whole of life where every social actor prescribing to its doxa has derived their Islamic identity and social function from the same Islamic source code (Bourdieu, 1991).

Sub Islamic Field of Tower Hamlets

Today, Tower Hamlets remains an emblem of multiculturalism transformed by generations of immigrants who have permanently imprinted their philosopheme in passing through its unfixed transformational sphere. The collective power of the 'institutional entrepreneurs'

i.e. the pioneer and first generation Bangladeshi proletariats to position themselves as key forerunners shifting the social plates for the proceeding generation, have over the decades altered the public field, transforming the sphere into a sub-Islamic field marshalled by a new social community with an interpretation of an Islamic doxa (Bourdieu, 1985).

By retracing the spiritual journey of their forbearers and mirroring the received pattern of spiritual practice, accepting those dispositions as the given norm, they have ultimately reproduced their faith. Their behaviours, utterances, and obedience to a sacred Islamic capital framework has allowed transnational Bangladeshi



The East London Mosque & London Muslim Centre



Former Synagogue - now used as an ancillary building to Brick Lane Mosque



Muslims to embody their history in their present circumstances and create a spatial connection, a direct path in unison to their past as Bengali Muslims (Bourdieu, 1977).

Those who practised their faith infrequently only experienced their spiritual pattern dimly. Those who practised regularly reinforced that pattern of memory by engraining these patterns in-between their generation and generations after them in their cultural capital value exchange that has become second nature. Their cross-generational determination to preserve the core corpus of

Islam's tenets seeded in their Bangladeshi homeland stands as a testament to the enduring appeal of one the world's most potent and powerful sources of faith (Bourdieu, 1991).

Collapsing cultural codes of Bengali representation and Arabic re - representation

The dominant signs and symbols which appropriate meaning in the religious supervision and social administration of the sub-Islamic field of Tower Hamlets retains its ancestral precepts as



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a patriarchal production through the convention-engrained *modus vivendi*. The trope of transformation – first generation men abandoning Bengali or western attire for Arab / middle eastern robes and sporting beards, first generation women no longer wearing sarees and kurtas but hijabs and Abaya – is subverted.

The visual change in hybridity and the appealing mix of cultures in dress identity remains zeitgeist in its production, distribution and consumption, most strikingly evident during the twice-yearly Islamic celebrations of Eid Al-Adha, Eid Al-Fitr as well as weekly Friday prayers. This pseudo-modernistic relation has

pressed into silent serviceable operation for decades the sense that Arab cultural capital has a circulatory religious charge of its own and, furthermore, that anything rich in Arab culture could not possibly be un-Islamic.

Bengali neo-traditionalists rejecting western fashion have adopted the dress of the Bedouin with a missionary zeal. The social meaning of their choice of apparel has migrated and ascribed a different reading by the Bengali populace to demonstrate their religious authenticity in aligning with the dominant Saudi interpretation of a homogeneous Islamic culture and identity (Bourdieu, 1985).



Symbolic systems & Methodological Practises

Through inner purification, British-born Sylheti Muslims became a part of an enlarged world of Islamic sociolinguistic understanding, padded with Arabic lingua franca and global communitarian belief that would unite their Bengali Muslim consciousness, piety, ritual and social reality in a new Islamic symbolic system. A sacred religious cultural capital with a whole corpus of dispositions and methodological practices has unified their heterogeneous mode of production and connected their everyday customs, linguistic habitus and religious practices with the dialogical values of the global social Islamic field and beliefs of millions of Muslims across the world.

Conclusion

Discerning the presence of Bourdieu both in the background and foreground of these scenes, I have argued that spiritual thought and bodily work has been an integral part of the Islamic faith. For the British Sylheti speaking Bangladeshis Islam has historically been, and continues to be, a religion of peace and prosperity. The patterns of existence prescribed around 1400 years ago by Islam are a way of life for the Bangladeshis that has provided the moral architecture, the cultural transmitter and the *raison d'être* for the British Bangladeshi Muslims.

For the Sylheti speaking British Bangladeshis, the deployment of a specific set of practices that were distinctly Islamic, characterised by mind and manpower in the course of preoccupation of prayer and worldly work, would be manufactured in the image of the ethno-reli-

gious group to create a new Islamic space and place (Bourdieu, 1971). Today this basic core framework has been successfully reproduced intergenerationally, through the reproductions of close kin networks and the operation of a specific set of social practices and social action. Both of these are suffused with Islamic representations replicated through migration by the early Sylheti settlers within the predominance of the family. Successions of settlers have transformed the urban space of Tower Hamlets' previously secular domain with into a sub-Islamic field with religious citizens. Religious agency and identities culminate into a rich and vibrant ethno-religious multicultural Tower Hamlets.

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