

# TRAVERSING FIELDS

## Affective Continuities across Muslim and Christian Settings in Berlin

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*Omar Kasmani and Dominik Mattes*

**Abstract:** This article, a reflection on collaborative fieldwork involving a Sufi Muslim and a Pentecostal Christian setting in Berlin, examines whether distinct and diverse religious groups can be brought into a meaningful relation with one another. It considers the methodological possibilities that might become possible or foreclose when two researchers, working in different prayer settings in the same city, use affect as a common frame of reference while seeking to establish shared affective relations and terrains that would otherwise be implausible. With two separately observed accounts of prayer gatherings in a shared urban context, we describe locally specific workings of affect and sensation. We argue that sense-aesthetic forms and patterns in our field sites are supra-local affective forms that help constitute an analytic relationality between the two religious settings.

**Keywords:** affect, cross-religious study, fieldwork, Pentecostals, sensation, Sufis, urban context

How can diverse religious groups, otherwise distinct, be brought into a meaningful relation with each another? What methodological possibilities emerge or foreclose when two researchers work with affect as a common framework in different prayer settings in the same city? Or how, for that matter, through such joint labors, might we establish shared affective terrains and relations that would otherwise be implausible? With such questions at hand, we reflect on carrying out collaborative fieldwork and studying religion in a shared urban context. This discussion is based on our joint research project, which focuses on two transnational religious congregations in Berlin that, despite having no direct contact with each other, deal with common urban conditions. One is a



Turkish-speaking Sufi community in Neukölln, with an organizational center in Istanbul. The other is a Pentecostal church in Reinickendorf, which attracts mainly West African migrants.

We offer separately observed accounts of weekly prayer gatherings in these two religious settings as a way to capture locally specific workings of affect and sensation. At the same time, we wish to evoke affect's potential for traversing fields. Even though we have individually conducted fieldwork in the mosque (Kasmani) and the church (Mattes), we argue that by working these accounts into a single text, which can be read as an ethnographic diptych, it becomes possible to trace affective continuities across the two settings.

## Circles of Sensation

A circle of *zikr* was drawing to a close. A final round of melodic prayers and recitations had just taken off, now in timbres weaker than before. Even in this palpable weariness of the circle, a haptic unity could be traced. A handshake initiated by the *hoca*—the Turkish title for a spiritual guide—now traveled anti-clockwise, flowing through the palms of each of the men before returning full circle to him.

In a mosque in Berlin-Neukölln, some 30 to 40 men gather every week around an elderly *hoca*. They spend the first part of the evening in *sohbet*, which in classical Sufi terms is an occasion of learning through deep and careful listening. With a didactic conversation, the *hoca* tends to his disciples' moral, ethical, and spiritual well-being. This is followed by *zikr*, the Sufi performance of a mindful remembrance of Allah. *Zikr* involves recitations; it invokes revered saints. What opens with quiet reflection—eyes shut, heads lowered, and arms wrapped around torsos—almost always gives way to an atmospheric chanting of the names of Allah. The still circle gradually begins to swivel. And when the congregation finally rises, the arms of men swing back and forth, the to and fro of bodies incrementally gains fervor, and so does the intensity of the voices: heavy breathing, odd screams, and intermittent howls rise over the order of the rhythmic chant as much as fervent bodies stand out from calmer ones in the circle. Floating above this concert of bodily rhythms and visceral intensities is the *hoca's* voice, moving listeners as if his singing praises of holy figures were “a kind of sonorous touching” (Csordas 2008: 118). At the peak of it all, participants lock their forearms with one another. Affect in the room impinges all the more; sensations flow from one body to another. That men are required to keep their eyes shut throughout the performance only heightens other senses. Breathing acquires shape and volume, screaming becomes corporeal excess, and sonic waves are inseparable from the circular ways in which bodies move in the room.

A *zīkr* like the one described here proceeds from moral and spiritual virtues embodied through deep listening. As much as it requires a skillful dependence on one's sense-aesthetic and intercorporeal faculties, it arises out of an arrangement of variables whose relationality elicits different yet repeatable affective exchanges, while enabling resonances between and across bodies (cf. Slaby et al. 2019). Without eliminating the variability of sense and the malleability of affect, *zīkr* reveals a "mechanism of repetition and seriality" (Dadi 2009: 179). When first heard, *zīkr* is song and chant: repetitive, structured, formulaic, and melodic. But crackling alongside is a superfluity of affect: unforeseen yet yielding, fleeting yet manifest. Indeed, extraordinary instances of intense outbursts, painful seizures, roars of pleasure, and bawling cries are in fact routine. Together, these build an audible atmosphere where the sound of the body is increasingly in concert with the body of sound, a sensational bridge of sorts where angels, spirits, legendary saints, and present-day Sufis seem to cross paths in the city.

## **Tasting the Spirit**

When the congregation begins to pray during their Sunday service in what had once been the community hall of a German Lutheran church, it does not take long for the moderately decorated room to be transformed into a vibrant, affect-laden space where believers seek to sensorially connect to the divine. Inspired, 80 to 100 congregants in this Pentecostal church in Reinickendorf are driven into motion, led by an intense, continuous acoustic irradiation layered by the pastor's fervent prayer and the amplified echoes of its simultaneous translation into French and German. Gently moving at first, swaying back and forth, or slightly pacing from left to right, the movements gradually increase in scope and frequency. Some congregants beat their fists into open palms; others snap their fingers to strongly enunciated consonants of the prayers. The rate of breathing speeds up, and torsos swing back and forth ever more briskly. Finally, upon the pastor's command, dozens of hands stretch out toward the ceiling, craving to receive heavenly signals. "The spirit is here!" the pastor shouts into the microphone, "Feel it! Taste it!" "Jesus!" people start screaming, and a woman breaks into tears just before the pastor protractedly exclaims, "In Jeesus' naaame we praaay!" This causes an immediate recession of sound and movement only to be recast as a new wave of aural-kinesthetic intensity. One wave follows the next. When the last one culminates, the numerous bodies, until then a pulsating mass of individuals, each moving and sounding differently, coalesce. Together, they confirm the pastor's final pleas to God to make this a special and successful week for everyone with an exalted, unisono "Amen!"

In another instance, a video is projected on a large screen in front of the congregation. The Nigerian general superintendent and founder of the church

is seen delivering a sermon to several thousand people gathered at the mother church in Lagos. A palpable sense of unity manifests itself when believers in Berlin respond to their church leader's invocations as passionately as their counterparts do in Lagos. As if conjoined by a transcontinental bridge of affect, the worshipping audiences in both cities converge into a single ecstatically praying body.

These brief scenes of the church's routine religious practice illustrate how affect, particularly arranged, contributes to realizing "collective effervescence, togetherness, a single trajectory among many bodies" (Brahinsky 2012: 215), and, ultimately, to instilling a sense of (trans)local belonging (Mattes et al. 2019a). More than that, they point to the ways in which the believers' bodies and their carefully nurtured "religiously inflected sensory aptitudes" (Brahinsky 2012: 217) are directed and brought into relation with other human bodies and with particular material and sensory-affective environments. These arrangements, realized by leaders and congregants, constitute repeatable ways of making "the transcendental sense-able" (Meyer 2006: 9), of opening up the possibility of feeling, tasting, and receiving the divine.

## Sensation as Shared Affective Ground

What makes these settings distinctly Christian or Muslim is not of primary concern to our cross-religious study. We are rather interested in how disparate and at times diametrically opposed religious groups—in this case, Sufis and Pentecostals in Berlin—"overlap strikingly in the procedures by which they have come to prominence, the practices on which they depend, and the social processes they set in motion" (Larkin and Meyer 2006: 286). Seeking a common ground of analysis brings us closer to appreciating the material and immaterial ways in which religious communities that share socio-political and urban conditions converge in their aspirations and ideations, no matter how disparate they are in their spiritual orientations (cf. Burchardt and Westendorp 2018).

Our ethnographic accounts describe how sense-aesthetic forms and patterns are abundant in our field sites, what in Birgit Meyer's (2006: 18) terms would be "sensational forms" that serve to organize relational possibilities "between experiencing subjects and the transcendental." The affective forms that we identify in our field sites bear a transcendence that is supra-local, engaging believers with the divine as much as they constitute an analytic relationality between two religious settings in the city.

While a Sufi ritual such as *zikr* hones mystical interiorities by securing one's contact with the saintly, it does so in order to address and remedy the risks and contaminations attendant with living in what interlocutors describe as a sinfully impinging city. This corroborates with followers' understanding of

*zīkr* as iterations of moral-affective cleansing, which serve to reimagine their environment in Islamic terms. In the case of the Pentecostal church, believers' dealing with the city's moral depravity takes both interior and exterior forms: on the one hand, prayers inside the church invite God's compassion for Berlin and seek a moral and spiritual reawakening of its inhabitants; on the other, church members regularly organize evangelizing days in public space. Beyond an exclusive orientation toward the divine, affective labors in prayer gatherings of both religious groups aim at a moral transformation, however differently conceived, of a common immediate environment. However, the shared affective ground we refer to is not simply a factor of their cohabitation in the urban. Instead, we argue that it emerges more so in the comparatively distinct ways in which believers articulate an affective relation to the city. While religion is the relational logic between our field sites, so is affect. In other words, we read religious performance in terms of mediating labors of belonging, which is to say that in the face of experiences of urban mobility and migration, the two groups are commensurable despite their distinctiveness.

In a comparative discussion of religious place-making in Berlin, we have argued that "inasmuch as affect arises from the specific, its visceral and atmospheric registers mean that it transcends the demographic singularities of particular groups, [and] overcomes boundedness of place" (Dilger et al. 2018: 107), pointing to the city not simply as shared terrain but as agitative. If affect is that thing that traverses, it also demands of us that we acknowledge in methodological terms that our task as researchers is not only to gather data internal to the setting in which we conduct fieldwork, but also to attend to permeations and dilations of these settings into the urban. In our case, this has led us to establish and maintain conceptual exchange with one another, thereby enabling a shared affective ground despite our individual participation in different research settings. Such sharing in our project does not extend to visiting each other's field sites for the very concern that a one-off visit or sporadic attendance by one would potentially disturb the other's carefully established relations in the field. This is particularly relevant given the intimate, sensitive, and emotionally charged character of these prayer gatherings. Instead, we have made consistent efforts to remain informed about the development of each other's fieldwork and to convey as much as possible our field sites' affective character. We share audio and video material, discuss religious concepts and recurring terminologies, and compare bodily gestures and movements, as well as our own affective experiences, including instances of being drawn to, and repelled by, particular aesthetic repertoires and moral dispositions (Mattes et al. 2019b).

It is through such collaborative efforts that we are able to articulate, among other things, a continuity in the affective character of prayer gatherings. This involves a framework that exceeds but also connects what takes place at the mosque and the church, not least via the mediating role of the researchers. Our

involvement as co-contributing elements in the mosque's and church's affective arrangements and our apprehension of its sensational registers opens up the possibility but also poses the challenge to explore the manifold shapes and forms in which affect—captured somewhere between what we sense and what we know (Gordon [1997] 2008)—might traverse local layouts, bringing our fields closer on shared grounds of knowledge.

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**Omar Kasmani** is a Postdoctoral Research Associate in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Collaborative Research Center “Affective Societies” at Freie Universität Berlin. His research pursues ideas of post-migrant be/longing, queer futurities, and public intimacy—a research practice that is best read across the study of religion and queer and affect theory. Relevant publications include “Thin Attachments: Writing Berlin in Scenes of Daily Loves” (*Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry*, 2019) and a forthcoming monograph on saintly intimacy and unstraight futures in Pakistan. E-mail: kasmanio@gmail.com

**Dominik Mattes** is a Postdoctoral Research Associate in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Collaborative Research Center “Affective Societies” at Freie Universität Berlin. His research interests include religion in migratory contexts and medical anthropology. He recently published “‘All Eyes Closed’: Dis/Sensing in Comparative Fieldwork on Affective-Religious Experiences” (with Omar Kasmani and Hansjörg Dilger) in *Analyzing Affective Societies: Methods and Methodologies* (2019) and a monograph entitled *Fierce Medicines, Fragile Societies: Grounding Global HIV Treatment in Tanzania* (2019). E-mail: dominik.mattes@fu-berlin.de

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