

# Critical Muslim Studies (Part IV)

May 7, 2021

00:09 Maura Cunningham

Okay, I think we will get started. Thank you very much for joining this AAS Digital Dialogue session on Critical Muslim Studies. This is the fourth session in this mini series. And as I see the list of attendees flowing in, there are some familiar names people have joined in the audience for the first few sessions. So I hope you've been enjoying this mini series. I want to thank Stan Thangaraj for organizing the Critical Muslim series. It's been a really wonderful, wonderful offering throughout the spring, and we're looking forward to continuing, there will be a break over the summer, in the Critical Muslim Studies series. But we will continue, I believe the next one will be in August and then we'll have another in the fall. So my name is Maura Cunningham. I'm the Digital Media Manager at the Association for Asian Studies. And it's my pleasure to welcome you all to our AAS Digital Dialogues. This is a mini-series or an online webinar series that we started last June as the pandemic got underway, and we were all tuning in from home. And it's been a wonderful offering for our membership and for the broader Asian Studies audience. So I really appreciate everyone who has joined us today. I thank the Henry Luce Foundation for its support of the AAS Digital Dialogue series. And with that, I'm going to turn things over to our moderator, Dr. Neda Maghbouleh. And she will introduce our panelists today. Thank you so much.

01:40 Neda Maghbouleh

Thank you so much Maura, *Ramadan Kareem!* I hope this has been a beautiful month of reflection and learning for you all, no matter where you're zooming in from. One of the attendees has already typed into the Q&A that they're joining us from Tokyo, where it's 4am right now. And so I want to thank all of you, but especially our friend in Tokyo, because that is a very difficult time to be awake and on zoom. So your presence is really appreciated. I also hope and pray that all of you, you and yours are safe and are able to stay strong during this pandemic because I think although the worst may be behind for some of us who might be in North America right now, the pandemic continues to devastate international communities in which we're members and lands to which we belong around the globe. So if you or your loved ones are struggling right now, we stand beside you in grief and pain, and in the hopes of an easier and less painful future to come.

02:38

I'm so grateful to be part of today's important conversation with rising scholars in the field of critical Muslim studies of these Digital Dialogues have been initiated in the hope that we can engage intellectually and create community that crosses over disciplinary boundaries and to take pleasure in one another's company during these difficult socially distanced times. These dialogues, as you all know, are products of conversations with the Association for Asian Studies, that Association for Asian American Studies and the Arab American Studies Association. I know that I speak personally for hundreds, if not thousands of us when I say *mashallah*, and *merci shakeram mamnoon* to Stan Thangaraj for being the intellectual path breaker and generous

soul who is initiated and organized the series. Also for their incredible leadership, vision and brilliance. We also think Jennifer Ho, Christine Yano and Amira Jarmakani. Thank you especially to the Association for Asian Studies for giving us the digital space to have this conversation. Hilary, Maura, and Molly have been wonderful in managing all the logistics that make this conversation possible. This is a space of respect, learning, and knowledge production. Please continue all of you to invest your energy and brilliance in this space as we need to cultivate now more than ever supportive communities for all of us. So this is the fourth Digital Dialogue in the series. And it features, right now two incredible up and coming early career scholars because our third panelist, we're not sure where she is. We hope she's doing well and we would be very happy if she pops in at any point and we'll pivot but for now we have two fantastic incredible up and coming early scholars.

04:26

Ahmed Afzal and Mujahid Osman, a few keywords that animate the shared research interests among the panelists today, are power, sexuality, theology, coloniality, transnationality, and belonging. I'm going to now share the bios for the two presenters we have here and then they will offer the thoughts on their respective projects for about eight to ten minutes each, and then we'll move on to a Q&A with the virtual audience. So our first speaker is Ahmed Afzal, who completed his undergraduate education in third world cultures at Vassar College, his master's in cultural geography at the London School of Economics, and PhD in cultural anthropology at Yale. Dr. Afzal is Assistant Professor of Anthropology and contributing faculty in the department of Asian American Studies at Cal State Fullerton and he is author of the book *Lonestar Muslims: Transnational Lives in the South Asian Experience in Texas*, published in 2015, by NYU Press. I also love this book and I'm kind of geeked out I have to say, Professor that you're here. So it's wonderful to meet you. Um, Professor of Afzal's current research interests include ethnographically grounded research on globalization, transnationalism and cosmopolitanism, gender and sexuality cross-culturally, and anthropology of mass media and digital media. Our second speaker is Mujahid Osman, who is a PhD student at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. He received a Master's of global affairs with an international peace studies concentration from the University of Notre Dame in 2019, where he examined the prophetic theologies of three religious activists in the city of Jerusalem. Before that, he graduated with two bachelor's degrees and honors from the University of Cape Town in South Africa. He has worked with social justice organizations like the Claremont Main Road Mosque, and UCT Muslim youth movement where he was able to cultivate research skills and enhance his understanding and practical application of contextual theology, intersectional political action, and religious ethics and I think our third and final speaker has entered the chat. Hadeth, are you there? Hadeth Rassol, a second year master's student at York University in Toronto, Canada. She has scholarship centers sport as a lens through which one can understand different social processes. More specifically, her master's study examines the negotiation process of identity, belonging and feelings of citizenship for Muslim Canadians participating in community and religious based sport, in this case, the Umoja soccer tournament. She examines feelings and experiences around idealized narratives of acceptability within the nation state, like the model minority and the good Muslim. In the context of this community sporting experience and participation. Her work amplifies the voices of Canadian Muslims and provides space for

participants to ponder and share their experiences. So those are the bios of the incredible scholars we're featuring today. And now I'd like to invite Professor Afzal to share his work with us.

07:45 Ahmed Afzal

Um, hi, everyone. Um, thank you, Neda, for the very kind introduction, thank you to the Association for Asian Studies, for hosting this dialogue series. And thank you, Stan, for your leadership and for organizing the series and for including me, I am thrilled and honored to have this opportunity and to be here. My research has focused on Pakistan and Pakistanis in the United States. I come to the study of Pakistani communities as a cultural anthropologist, and what that has meant for me is a few things. One, I do not make any assumptions about the religiosity, let alone the centrality of Islam in the lives of my interlocutors. I follow my interlocutors as I learn about their lives as they narrate better life experiences to me through the immersive research that I've done, for example, in the Pakistani American and Pakistani immigrant community in Houston, Texas. And to be honest, [I] initially started my research in Houston, Texas. My intention was not to focus on Islam. Because my fear was that when you talk about a community that is so closely affiliated with a particular religion and to the homeland that has been constructed in terms of religion, there's a danger that you reduce that community in their lives to just religion. So that was my intention. It wasn't something that I was interested in doing. And it was not, you know, very intentionally something that I thought I was going to focus on. But I started my research in Houston, Texas in June of 2001. And only a few months into my research, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 took place. And I felt if my responsibility is to try and represent the community in terms of what their lives are, like, how it is that they are positioned in the US, how it is that they are positioned locally in Texas, then I would be remiss if I did not speak about and address issues related to religion, right. So as a cultural anthropologist, I was guided by what it was that I was seeing what it was that I was hearing, in terms of where the community and the interlocutors that I was engaging with, were telling me about their life experiences. Um, and, you know, it suddenly appeared that that religion something that I thought, you know, I would address but not necessarily focused on was everywhere. And, and, and it did end up being a central lens for making meaning of the lives of my interlocutors. But it was not based on any presumption or any, any any intention that I had when I started my research. A second way in which my research speaks to me as a cultural anthropologist, a cultural anthropologist, is, I'm not a religious studies scholar. I am not someone who is looking to analyze correct religious practice. I come to it as a cultural anthropologist who's more interested in approaching religion, approaching Islam, approaching Muslimness through lived experiences and through narrative, right?

12:38

So I examine it as a lens for thinking about the everyday life and situations of my interlocutors. Thinking about it in terms of Scripture, thinking about it in terms of correctness was neither my goal, nor an expertise that I offered in this project. A third way that my research speaks to my background and training as a cultural anthropologist, is that I utilize the theoretical lens of transnationalism, to make meaning of the lives of my interlocutors and the ways that these lives, and communities are embedded in local, national, regional and international networks,

ideologies and communities. And in that I follow anthropologists of transnationalism who have similarly and very productively utilize transnationalism to look at the embeddedness of communities residing in the United States, in networks in geologies, and communities that extend far beyond the borders of the US. So, these are some of the ways that my entry point into Pakistani communities, the anthropological studies of the communities that I have done research in, speaks to my background and training as a cultural anthropologist, just to offer a couple of examples. You know, I do use a case study approach, if only to highlight and emphasize the heterogeneity of the life experiences of my interlocutors who may be grouped together as Pakistanis, but their lives speak to a range of life experiences. So for example, focusing on working class and undocumented Pakistanis. I do see them as a write about them at the edges of the neoliberal economy. I've looked at their participation in the South Asian ethnic economy in Houston, Texas, as a source of better livelihood, as well as a site for a cultural familiarity, that being in a place like that provides them but being a part of the salvation that ethnic economy, for my working class and undocumented interlocutors comes with its own exploitations and oppressions, right, and marginalities, and likewise belonging to Islam, their professed belonging to Islam and to being Muslims contributes to greater public scrutiny and state surveillance that we encounter on the one hand, but also, as as something that mediates their struggles and sufferings, a common refrain that I heard was, it's Allah's will. You know, when I would ask them about their lives, that it begins at dawn, they're working for 14 hours, the only break that they have is to go to the local mosque for their prayers. And, and, and to see them struggle in the way that I was able to experience. You know, through direct observation, the only way that they make sense of it, you know, the ways in which they rationalized it was by saying it's Allah's will, right? So Islam in their life is is both a source of strength, but also, you know, equally a source of vulnerabilities that they experience. Another grouping that I focused on within the Pakistani American and Pakistani immigrant community in Houston was the Pakistani gay and bisexual men.

17:29

And I write about it in my book, how it was that I serendipitously encountered one of my interlocutors who went on to become a very good friend of mine, and introduced me to his circle of friends. And I was struck by for this grouping of Pakistani gay men, they had deeply felt sense of their faith and religiosity, their deep engagement with looking at the Quran, reinterpret reinterpreting it in ways that would be inclusive of their sexualities and life experiences. And equally, at the same time, they're self identification as as gay and bisexual men, and then adding an upper register in terms of making sense of their life experiences was their invocation of transnational, South Asian cultural idioms to speak about the erotics of their identity. Who it was that they were attracted to, what it was that they aspire to find in a life partner was encapsulated in the term *yaar*, which translates as friends, but as I write in my work, you know, has many different layers and symbolic and historical meanings associated with it, including the transgressive possibilities of a friend to be both a companion and a sexual partner. So these are just representative of some of the different ways in which I have looked at the heterogeneity of the Pakistani American, Pakistani immigrant Muslim experiencing Houston, Texas in my research. In my current research, which focuses on media representations of Pakistani immigrants, and Pakistani Americans, you know, I'm following the same principle of disavowing

an impulse to think of Muslim Americans as either terrorist on one hand or model minority on the other. So to disrupt this dichotomous positioning of South Asian Muslim Americans, and also to look at the heterogeneity of the South Asian Muslim experience in a range of media. In a second project, which is an ethnographic study of the uses of Grindr, a social networking app among for gay and bisexual men in Pakistan. I'm also not privileging Islam as a central lens for thinking about their online engagements. But really looking at how it is that it comes up and contextualized interactions and innate. So I'm gonna end there and and and happy to chat more in a discussion.

21:04 Neda Maghbouleh

Thank you so much for that overview of this compelling research program that you have. Next, we're going to turn to our sec- second panelist Mujahid Osman, please go ahead.

21:16 Mujahid Osman

Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you to the critical Muslim studies and Association for Asian Studies for inviting me, *Ramadan Kareem* to everyone. And a very, very warm hello from a not so warm Atlanta today. My research kind of broadly is at the intersection of Queer Studies, Peace Studies, and Islamic Studies. And for the presentation, my presentation today I'm going to be speaking a little bit about my research with queer or LGBTQ Muslims in South Africa. I think to kind of start off in terms of conceptual clarity. One of the ways I've been thinking about kind of analyzing this and analyzing this kind of vast network of different positions with regard to sexual diversity, homosexuality in particular and queerness, more generally within a South African Muslim community, is to place it on a spectrum. On the far right of the spectrum, one sees an underlying verbal homophobia which explodes in the communities on occasion. And then kind of just right of center one almost has a don't ask don't tell position within the South African Muslim community. But the right of center one is attached with particular tropes. So gay people are good friends to have, gay people are great hairdressers, gay people are wonderful dressmakers, and because of the social value that they add to society, we can then tolerate the sexual deviancy as long as it doesn't come up within the realm of public. Whatever you do in your bedroom, that's kind of your own thing. So that's kind of the central position. And then on the far left of the spectrum, one has a comprehensive acceptance and embrace of queerness and queer identities. And the Inner Circle, a Muslim organization based in Cape Town can be seen as an embodiment of this inclusive Muslim ethic. And this will be the focus. This is the case study of my, of my presentation today. So today, I want to kind of just do three very, very quick things. Number one, I want to give you a brief account of the Inner Circle and how it kind of started. Secondly, I want to talk a little bit about the work. And thirdly, I want to kind of suggest possible avenues for potential future research. And I just want to open up some questions, which are going to hopefully start some dialogue and a discussion. Within the South African context, queer Muslims particularly in Cape Town, have found a spiritual home at the Inner Circle. The Inner Circle is a human rights based organization in Cape Town, South Africa that was established in 1998. And it was actually established under the name Al-Fitrah Foundation. The founders of the organization, interestingly invoked the Quranic logic of *fitrah*, which signifies or indicates a sense of a god given disposition or essential nature. Here, the Quranic term *fitrah*, is used to describe how God created all things distinct in their individuality, yet making up a

harmonious whole, and queer Muslims in particular, read and understand this verse, to mean that God created each human being, each human being with an original nature that cannot be changed or *fitrah*. The founder of this community, Imam Muhsin Hendricks is the kind of spiritual guide of this community and one of its founders and he grew up in Cape Town and when in what he describes as a traditional Muslim family, and he also interestingly, links his understandings of Islam very much to an understanding of community and kind of a presence within a Muslim community within a local Masjid within a local mosque. And he says that his childhood was closely intertwined with Islam through the presence of the local mosque, where his grandfather was an Imam, and his mother was a Sunday school madrasa teacher. His father was also a local spiritual healer within the community and people would come to him for kind of Quranic base vernacular forms of healing. Imam Muhsin was trained in a traditional Sunni madrasa system in Pakistan, where he studied Islamic Studies classical Islamic studies such as Quran, the Quran and its discourses, the taxed literature, the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, the hadith and the sunnah, Islamic law, fit and theology, *kalam*, and philosophy, *falsafa*.

25:49

Upon his return to South Africa, and after ending a difficult marriage in which he had fathered three children, Imam Muhsin publicly came out about his sexuality, and he describes his public coming out as a process following a retreat of *khalwa*, in which he undertook a process of spiritual reflection, *muḥāsabah*, by undertaking stock of his life, examining his queer desires, and examining and interrogating his relationship with God. During this *khalwa* in my moccasins fasted for 80 days, and he says that, towards the end of that seclusion period, towards the end of his *khalwa*, he says, and I quote, "I felt, I can't say it was a dream or Wahid wasn't revelation or anything like that. But it was an overwhelming sense that I am okay with who I am." End quote, Imam Muhsin describes his experience as one that was guided by a compelling need to be authentic. And eventually, he formalized his activist spirit and founded the Al-Fitrah, which was later named The Inner Circle in 2006. To provide support, and a community to people struggling to reconcile their faith and their commitments to Islam, with their gender and their sexual identity. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the Inner Circle organized a number of community based programs and activities. And according to one of its research reports, these activities includes: public education, capacity building and networking, which are all essential services and tools required for the transformation of society and building a particular queer based movement. One of the key terms that I found very interesting that this community engages with, is the term, al-ghuraba, as the spiritual leader of the community, Imam Muhsin says that he draws inspiration from the very foundation of Islam, from the prophetic tradition as a resource for his own understanding of the ghuraba. It's interesting to note that the Arabic word al-ghuraba, which is where the word ghuraba is derived from means to act strange in speech or act, to be marginal, to be queer, to be odd. And so by naming his community, al-ghuraba, Imam Muhsin draws on a hadith of the Prophet Mohammed where he is reported to have said that Islam started as something strange, and it will return to a strange thing. So, so give glad tidings to the strangers. And here for Imam Muhsin, this hadith acts as a hermeneutical key unlocking the ethical message of Islam. In October 2018, Imam Muhsin kind of gave some more guidance on this particular concept in [indistinct]. And in this quote, he provides maybe a queer reading of this particular hadith by stating that the ghuraba of those who follow the Sunnah and the lifestyle

of the Prophet Muhammad. However, it is not only a fixation on the ritual aspects, the things that you actually do, the external manifestations, but it's also about cultivating certain virtues, cultivating certain ethics and [indistinct]. And for Imam Muhsin, this is what the *ghuraba* is about cultivating an ethics that is in solidarity with the marginalized by grounding his understanding of Islam within the tradition, using the *kilala* side in terms of discursive tradition, Imam Muhsin draws from the Islam, the religious resources of Islam to derive an authoritative claim from its wisdom. In this way, the Imam understands his jihad, his struggle for the dignity of Muslims for the dignity of queer Muslims in particular, and one that is fundamentally linked to the nurturing of souls. So it's not only about the production or the cultivation of certain, um, of certain kind of external markers of ones Muslimless but it's also a cultivation of a certain type of piety and a certain type and a nurturing of soul. And so the Imam is he's he's, he's putting these two traditions side by side is linking the external [indistinct] here and is linking the [indistinct] and the internal energy a very intimate way. And for the Imam this nurturing of these this the nurturing of souls can take the form of creating a safe and a welcoming Masjid for all opening up a space for women's full religious participation, officiating same sex marriages and a number of other types of educational activities focused on nurturing and cultivating the virtue of the soul of the person. In nurturing these souls, his queer activism makes an epistemological and ontological claim. And for the Imam, as I said, before, there is no, there is no divide between the external and the internal. I want to end off with a little saying, a little quote from Imam Muhsin, where he tries to describe this link between the external and the internal. And he says, once you have tasted halal with eeman, the sweetness of faith, there is no turning back. So for me, he says, you cannot take the sweetness of eeman unless you are authentic, and authentic and Arabic is haqiqa, he [indistinct], and that is the third level of spirituality. So when you are on this path of authenticity, you absolutely have to trust that what you do, whatever risk you take, there is support for you on the other side. This particular statement of halal with al-eeman, once again can be traced to the hadith, the hadith traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, in which he describes the qualities of the person who has tasted the sweetness of eeman, the sweetness of faith. Here, Imam Muhsin withdraws on the spiritual resources to provide a set of a grounding basis for his set of reflections on social political issues. So you ground his politics in a type of theology, he grounds his politics in a type of spirituality. And I argue that this organic embrace of the traditions of Islam is not only a continuation of the tradition, we can also see a subtle rupturing of the tradition, and is this type of rupturing that and that I'm trying to figure out that I'm trying to analyze and study in my work. This rupture, I suggest, is also primarily based on a repositioning of the subject of religious meeting making. Thank you for your patience with me.

32:29 Neda Maghbouleh

Thank you Mujahid, that was such a provocative and intriguing entry point into this work that you've been doing for a long time. Thank you very much. Now, we'd like to invite the third panelists Hadeth, from York University in Toronto, to please unmute and share with us your project.

32:44 Hadeth Rassol

Hi, everyone. Um. I just want to start off by saying, I think I'm lucky and grateful to be here and be invited to speak about my work and have learned so much from what everyone has said thus far. So, my project concerns the process of identity negotiation, feelings of national belonging and accessibility when it comes to Canadian born Muslim youth who participate in faith based, community based sports. So before I really start talking about the project in depth, I really want to contextualize the background of the study in regards to sports. So using sport as a tool for fostering inclusion, and sense of belonging is pretty well researched in the literature, specifically within immigrant or diaspora communities, those for us as a space where new connections and relationships can be made, ultimately acting as an inclusionary force. So it allows those who participate to feel like they are a part of something larger, be it a community or a nation. However, on the flip side, sport can also act as an exclusionary force, where structural barriers are socially perceived barriers may prevent certain people from participating in sports, which highlights to them their inability to fit in or belong within the community, or in generally with the nation. So my project really intends to understand the process and the nuances of the relationship between sport participation and feelings of national belonging and identity, specifically through the dissemination of common othering narratives of citizenship, like the acceptable Muslim, or the model minority, and the good Canadian. So these narratives, they really shape a person's understanding of themselves. And it also sets the standard for the minority. It tells us how we're supposed to be, how we should act, and what we should do to ultimately embody the ideal citizen in hopes of fitting in and feeling like you actually belong here. So one a lot of the research, the existing research that addresses the ideas of inclusion, belonging, and national identity, it tends to focus on Muslim immigrants who play mainstream sports. So playing with non Muslims in a homogenous environment. And the literature points to mainstream sport participation as a place where meaningful interaction between different members of the community can interact and bond to an extent where those feelings of belonging to the nation can be successfully established. And that's why we see governments and government initiatives, they really push for minorities to be involved in mainstream sports. So they even consider non participation as failed integration. But you know, there's lots of research that shows why minorities don't participate um, and it's because they experience many barriers, structural or social barriers, so many minorities, they feel, specifically Muslim, they feel that it's more comfortable to participate in face based or ethnocentric sport leagues. So my study just, kind of where my study kind of fits in, is that I'm looking at faith based community based sport. And that means a sporting environment that is exclusively open to Muslims. And it's organized and led by the community itself. So specifically, I'm looking at the Umoja and it's an annual traveling soccer tournament. And it's open exclusively to Shia Muslims. So Shia Muslims is a subset of Islam, it's about 10% of all Muslims are Shia Muslim. And the tournament is held in various cities across the United States and Canada. The Umoja, itself is a part of a larger Foundation, called the Umoja Outreach Foundation. And that foundation really is to serve various aspects, and members of the Shia Muslim communities across the US and Canada.

36:55

So I interviewed Canadian Muslim youth, Canadian born Muslim youth who participated in the Umoja games, specifically in the games that was held in the most recent one in Detroit,



Michigan, and to see how they may understand their identities in relation to their sport participation. So I conducted interviews with participants of the team who live in the Greater Toronto Area. And I also interviewed the founder, the Umoja Outreach Foundation. So the first interview with the participants really focused on their experience being involved in a Umoja game. And then the second interview focused on understanding how they perceive the intersection of identity of their identity, specifically being Canadian, being a Muslim, and being an athlete. So the line of questioning really was aiming to understand their perceptions of what means to be Canadian, also, when it means to be a Muslim. And for the founder, I wanted to get a better understanding of why the tournament was originally founded, and to just get a better understanding of the purpose, the goal, the vision for the organization, for the tournament specifically. And you know, what benefits to the community or specific impacts that they had observed thus far. So I'm currently in the midst of analysis. But one thing that I wanted to share here today is that, at first, what I saw was that the participants were kind of defining themselves using the us versus them dichotomy. And the us versus them dichotomy is something that we see in a lot of literature specifically, relating to Muslims and diaspora communities, relating or kind of addressing us, the people who are othered, and then the other people. However, the participants were kind of defining it as Muslim versus non Muslim, Canadian versus American. So that's kind of how they came to negotiate and understand who they were in this particular environment. So since this is a traveling tournament, it really allowed the participants to tangibly experience their Canadianness in relation to their American counterparts. So traveling to the US specifically was a meaningful experience for many of the participants, because it highlighted because of the differences between being Canadian and being American, but it also highlighted the fact that they were Muslim. A lot of participants mentioned that they had been stopped at the border. Some parts of them said that they kind of went through with no issue, but they do, or they did recognize that, you know, being a Muslim, in this particular context was highlighted to them because of crossing from Canada to the United States.

39:36

And also, you know, although the participants in the games were all Shia Muslim together, the participants noted that being Canadians is very different than being American or being a Canadian Muslim was very different than being an American Muslim. So the Canadian stereotypes of how we're nicer were more polite and kind. Compared to Americans, we've mentioned that almost every participant, and they know that because it was highlighted to them in this particular experience. And one thing that really stood out to this particular location in Detroit, Michigan, was the abundant use of political imagery in forms of posters and slots. And participants also mentioned that, from my own experience, as a participant in the in the scheme, I remember walking into this particular venue and, and seeing the Trump-Pence poster on the window. And I thought to myself, now, out of all the venues that they could have chosen, we really chose the one in the Trump writing. So it really highlighted to me as a participant right then and there, that A) you know, Muslim versus non Muslim, but also the Canadian versus American. And so, you know, those comments on identity and con- identity in regards to Canadians, but also identity regards to Muslim this really came up once, in our, in my discussions with them. Another interesting point is that the participants defined good Canadian and the ways that they define the good Canadian, and the good Muslim, was very similar, there was a lot of overlap and the

characteristics that they attribute it to who a good Canadian was, or how they look like versus, you know, what a good Muslim looked like and how they acted. And it really shows how interconnected those identities are. It also speaks to the negotiation process that goes on, around goodness itself. So being kind and caring and thoughtful, and you know, caring for thy neighbor, all values that are shared amongst being a good Muslim, and also sharing being a good Canadian citizen, because a lot of the stereotypes surrounding communities really align with being a good Muslim as well. So ultimately, this case study really is to provide new insight into the intersection of rules that sport plays in identity building, and negotiation, feelings of belonging and community building through the specific case of Umoja. Thank you.

42:05 Neda Maghbouleh

Thank you so much for all of that, as someone who's also based in Canada, I think I really related to so many of the insights that you had about the specificities and nuances of claims to belonging and non belonging in Canada versus the US. There are some shared attributes, but also some very distinctive differences. So it was great that you were able to attend to some of that in your brief comments. So now we invite members of the audience to please jump into this discussion by using the Q&A button at the bottom of Zoom. I see right now that there are a series of very provocative questions that have been offered by Stan Thangaraj. So perhaps we could start with the first one that Stan has posed for Ahmed. He says, How does not centralizing Islam then provide different types of geographies and spacecalities of difference? How does this offer a geography of Muslims that is not centralized on Islam? And he also asked another question about the idiom of *yaar*. And if it's reprieve to heteronormative, and homegrown normative practices of community and identity, so please, however you see fit Professor Afzal, please go ahead and reply to Stan.

43:27 Ahmed Afzal

Sure, um, thanks, Stan. For these questions, um, you know, for the first one, I'm sorry, I was looking at the question but it seems like it's disappeared.

43:45 Neda Maghbouleh

It was now under answered you can see it again. But it was about the central not centralizing Islam, and how that might provide different geographies and spacecalities of difference.

43:57 Ahmed Afzal

Okay. Um, you know, one way of not centralizing Islam is it allows you to be attentive to the secular, the non Muslim communities, spaces, and experiences that these communities are also embedded in, you know, focusing on Islam, making that into a central lens risks, you know, positioning a Muslim community as some sort of village community that where all aspects of their life leads back to Islam or belonging to other Muslim communities, in doing so erases the complexity of their experiences and reduces the complexities of the transnational affiliations that they have and networks that they are embedded in. So in in, you know, as, as an example, you know, a lot of the ethnic spaces in Houston, where you will find a lot of Pakistani and Indian Muslim businesses are not entirely 100% Muslim or South Asian, these are spaces that Pakistani and Indian communities share with other ethnic groups and communities. Right. So

being attentive to to these kind of solidarities and alliance building that is happening, the ways in which space is shared and negotiated, beyond the confines of your religious community. You know, also these centers, this emphasis on Islam. So I think that's, that's one of the ways in which not centralizing Islam is very useful. Another way is that there's a multiplicity of our ways in which one can express Muslim ness. And sometimes it's very central as it turned out to be in post 9/11 where it was the discourse for thinking about who you are, how you are positioned in the United States, how you are positioned as part of a wider transnational, global Muslim *ummah*. But it also, you know, highlights that there is a variety and heterogeneity of Muslim experiences within this seemingly monolithic population. So centralizing Islam, also risks kind of fetishizing Islam being understood in one particular way. The second question and I'm trying to find that the idiom of *yaar* you know, it was very interesting to me it was it was a word that I saw my interlocutors in Houston used to describe their ideal partner. But whether you look at Indian and Pakistani, popular culture, films, poetry and historical accounts, you know, they speak to very romanticized imagine is imagine of a *yaar*, or a friend. Um, so it allows one, it allows one to kind of I'm sorry, I'm looking at the question again, and it just, you know, it, yeah, I okay. Um, so it allows one, um, to look at how it is that these heteronormative understandings of our friend it's reconfigured in the context of the narratives of gay Muslim men in the diaspora. Sorry, I'm like having some issue with the question and answer these seem to be moving a little bit. So my apologies for that.

But, but it also, you know, one of the things that's really interesting about the term *yaar* is that it also speaks to cultural idioms that are South Asian, and that transcend the borders and boundaries of the post colonial South Asian nation state. Right, that here it is that you have Pakistani Muslim men in the diaspora, invoking cultural idioms that reach far back into pre colonial and colonial histories in which they are also embedded. Right. So there's a layer and a complexity to how it is that this term *yaar* crosses transnational, linguistic and cultural borders.

49:43 Neda Maghbouleh

Thank you. That was two very lovely responses. Perhaps we can move now to a series of questions for Mujahid. Again from Stan, what is it about this negotiation and practice of sexuality that becomes a site of racial, ethnic and class difference within a very heterogeneous community in Cape Town? That was the first question and then the second set of questions has to do about social formations and understandings of *ummah*. And where does that fit in relation to the Inner Circle? And what are the readings of the Sunnah and the Hadith that render this nostalgia or desiring of racial hetero patriarchy? So please, however you'd like to enter those provocative openings, please go ahead.

50:29 Mujahid Osman

Yeah, definitely provocative. Thank you, Stan, for these questions. I think I want to start with the second one, because I think that will help me tie it all together. I think we must, what this community has taught me and one of the things that they that they are that they advocate, is that the idea of a heteronormative *ummah* over hetero patriarchal *ummah* is something that they are realizing has been constructed, post the death of the Prophet, right. And so one of the ways in which this community that one of the ways in which the Inner Circle makes this argument is to

say that, at the very start of the prophetic movement, the prophet had what was called mukhannathun, within his community within his household, so called a 'effeminate men' mukhannathun which I think could be loosely translated, and kind into today's type of transgender behavior may be very, very loosely. And so I think what Imam Muhsin does, he says, well look at the first look at the first case of the of the first Muslim community. Here's the case of people who exhibited non normative sexual and gender, non normative sexual intention and dispositions, right. And what did the Prophet do? The Prophet didn't say anything about the particular behaviors, the prophet was only worried about, and the cultivation of certain ethical standards, the cultivation of a good polis of a good flourishing community in the city of Medina. And so Imam Muhsin says occupy, if you look at the very first moment of Islam from the very beginning, Islam kind of start off with these strange moments, these kind of queer moments that begin of the history. And so I think you can use the, using the *ghuraba*, using queerness, or marginality, or estrangement as a lens, in my Imam Muhsin is kind of rereading this, these notions of *ummah*, revealing these notions of a hetero patriarchal community by pointing to the existence of non normative bodies from the very beginning. Although, and I think this the idea, Dr. Afzal, brought up the idea of reconfiguration, and I think that is something that is also going on with this particular community, they have found parts of the Islamic tradition that has been generative and nourishing and incredibly productive for the cultivation of new types of subjectivities, new new subject positions, new kind of relationships and associations with Islam. But then they also call it a recognizing that the tradition isn't clean and isn't a wonderful inclusive space from the very beginning. So it's trying to very meticulously go through the tradition, the Islamic tradition and look for the parts that are that are uplifting, and look for the affirming parts and into work from the embolding, a particular type of identity. And so this process of reconfiguration and reimagination, kind of go hand in hand. And then I think, going back to the first question, the challenge of intersectionality is one that this community is deeply grappling with. When I was last in South Africa, and when I was last engaging with a number of the members of the community, one of the things that I was picking up was that this was a space that space that was dominated by, by Muslims who are colored in the South African racial landscape. So that's could be could be very similar to kind of mixed race people, here in the global north. And it was a space that was dominated by kind of colored and Indian men, in particular gay and bisexual men. And so I guess the challenge then for this community is that even though it's a community on the margins, they would also have to grapple with the patriarchal elements that that kind of creep in, that creep in people through people's subjectivities that creep into people's lived experience. And the way it kind of gets performed and inhabited in very different ways. And so I think this is a challenge that that the Inner Circle is very much aware of, and the challenge that this that is slowly starting to kind of struggle with and engage with, and to try and write some of those patriarchal elements and reimagine a new, more egalitarian.

54:52 Neda Maghbouleh

Thank you Mujahid. I think that your explication of the work of reconfiguration has really left me with a lot to think about. And that is an incredibly productive term, I think for so many of the different field sites that we all traffic through in our research. So I want to thank you very much for that.

55:12 Mujahid Osman

I just want to add I am getting the term from Atalia Omer who has written a book called *Days of Awe*, and she was based at the University, is based at the University of Notre Dame and her book *Days of Awe* looks at how American Jews are trying to reconfigure their Judaism in solidarity with Palestinians. And she uses the term reimagination to talk about that. And so I'm drawing from Atalia Omer's work to think about re imagination. Yeah.

55:39 Neda Maghbouleh

Thank you so much. We're getting a Work Cited Reference List from you as well. I really appreciate that. Thank you. Okay, shall we move on to a question for a Hadeth? This is again from Stan, what are the sports that are sought out? And what is the relation of the sport to nation and racial heterogeneity? Also, what are the practices of intra Muslim and intra ethnic othering in the sports spaces? How does a good Muslim and good Canadian become incorporated within neoliberal models of good self governmentality?

56:14 Hadeth Rassol

Yeah, so thank you for these questions. And I'm glad that even Daniel mentioned, some aspects of ethnicity is insufficient as knowledge. So in relation to Stan's first question. The sport that I'm specifically looking at is soccer here, but in relation to Canada and what we know about Canadian-ness and sports, hockey is a really big sport here. And even the statements of, you know, hockey is Canada or being Canadian means playing hockey shows us the relationship between sport and nation already. And historically in Canada, you using hockey or or the utilization of hockey and sport, specifically relates to to whiteness. So what's your point of racial heterogeneity, there becomes like this triangular relationship between hockey, Canadianess, and whiteness. So you see like in, Courtney Siegel's work, she talks a lot about this about how, you know, South Asian and South Asian comedians, what happens to them and and what they experience in hockey in Canada. And a lot of the times it's really the boundaries that we see within the nation are reflected or mirrored in sport. So what it means to be Canadian, is defined, you know, on racial, classist, or, or gender lines is reflected in hockey as well. So even to whiteness, and these ideas in sport is really reflected in hockey. But in terms of intra Muslim intra ethnic othering, so yes, in this in this particular case, the participants, a lot of the times mentioned, their ethnicity, and their sex. So the study is looking at Shia Muslims specifically. So historically, and politically, there's a lot of tension between the different sects of Islam specifically, Shia and Sunni's and although it's outside the scope of this particular study, um. It is worth mentioning that participants, they acknowledged that this is a Shia only environment. And when I was talking with the founder, he also mentioned that as well as an important like daily meeting point to this particular environment that it is Shia only and I think, just from my own like experiences as a Shia Muslim, like growing up in an environment that was exclusively Shia Muslim, there is that tension that is oftentimes not spoken about it's like taboo to talk about those things. So, it wasn't surprising to me that participants did not mention the in terms of some tension between like, you know, being a Shia. However, the ethnicity part is a good point as well, because this particular organization is predominantly Khoja Muslims. So Khoja Muslims are individuals who have kind of their histories are both African and Indian. So they have their

own history in terms of migration to Canada, and migration from their homeland, and, you know, it's a lot there to unpack already. But in this particular context, the participants did mention that, you know, I'm only half Khoja, or I'm, you know, I'm Arab, and this and that. So they mentioned their ethnicities, in relation to their belonging specifically within the community, because the organization itself is predominantly Khoja, and I should mention that it was only a couple of years ago that it was open to all Shia Muslims, it was originally open just to Khoja Shia Muslims. So the reason why it was originally open to a particular subset or a particular ethnicity was because they found that, you know, at that time, there wasn't any organization that catered to them. So they wanted to play within their own environment, with their, you know, own people to say, and then when I asked the founder, why it was that way, he kind of just said, oh, now we know better. That's why we opened it up for for all Shia Muslims. So and I think, and one of the presenters is also talking about the *ummah*. And, you know, although they never mentioned the the Muslim *ummah*, explicitly, it's kind of interesting to note that it's open, only to Shia Muslims, because they want to have that sense of unity. But it kind of juxtapositions itself with the unity of the *ummah*, that we should be kind of coming out together. I know, it's a bit outside the scope of this particular study, but it kind of contextualizes why this particular foundation is set up this way, and ultimately bleeds into the experiences of the youth right of people who are raised in this environment and participating in sport in this particular environment. And I don't know why the other question [...] would probably be answered. Right? I think so.

1:01:27 Neda Maghbouleh

Yeah, I think so, Maura might be clicking answered, as all panelists satisfactorily replied to the prompts.

1:02:37 Hadeth Rassol

And then I do want to also address the good Muslim, and the good Canadian, in terms of the Neo-liberal models of good self governmentality. So that is one of the themes that that kind of emerged is the responsibility to act a certain way to reflect or to represent 'your people'. So it kind of goes in two ways. It kind of aligns itself with the model minority, and in the sense where, you know, you, you're trying to appease certain people in your life to you know, that you are living up to their expectations. But it kind of deviates from the good minority, as sorry, as the model minority in a sense that the participants were kind of talking about their, their responsibility in two ways, responsibility to their parents and their community in a sense that they have to represent themselves in a particular way, as a good Muslim as a practicing Muslim, but also in a way, representing themselves for the other so that the other can take the other views in a particular way. So they're, they're becoming, you're gaining in different all over the place in order to appease other people and, and what that leads to is this kind of overwhelming responsibility on the individual to act in a certain way to constantly be representing themselves in a particular way that is "good", that aligns with, you know, being a good Muslim and aligns with being a good Canadian. But so I think there was a lot of overlap in terms of the responsibility of representing yourself in a good way. But also, I feel a lot of that responsibility falls on to women, because they are the flag bearers of Islam. They're the ones who are wearing hijab and so when they go out on the street, they are obviously Muslim, so they need to be carrying themselves in a particular way. And the female participants of the, in the study

mentioned that they specifically mentioned that 'I am Muslim, and I wear hijab, people at work are expecting me to act in a certain way. And I have to act in this particular way. I can't just do whatever I want to do all the time'. Whereas the male participants did mention some sort of responsibility to it, but it's not the same extent as women do. So there's the gender aspect, as well as being a good Muslim. And a good Canadian over time falls heavily onto, onto women to, you know, represent themselves in a particular way.

1:04:13 Neda Maghbouleh

Thank you so much. I think that I'm looking at the clock, we probably have enough time to do one more round of questions. And so perhaps we can synthesize two questions I see in the Q&A for Professor Afzal from Sanobar Umar. They'd like to know more about why 9/11 figured so prominently in the narratives of your participants, particularly given that there have been pre colonial or colonial histories that have homogenized and racialized Muslims. And there was another question also, for you with regard to the challenges and opportunities with doing ethnographies in digital space. So however you'd like to address both or either of those, please go ahead.

1:04:59 Ahmed Afzal

Sure. Um, you know, very briefly to the first question about 9/11 and how it was that it, it was seminal to acknowledge in, in, in my research, um, you know, my research was carried out you know, I started my research in June of 2001, and did consecutive 18 months of field work in Houston, Texas, until the fall of 2002. And then repeat visits, short visits to Houston for the next one decade. Um, if anthropology and ethnography is history of the present, and I was looking at this moment that transformed you know, many communities in the United States than I would have been remiss not to [address the] event that was very directly impacting the communities in which I was carrying out fieldwork. So, addressing 9/11 was not about historical context, it very much was documenting the precedent for the communities in which I was carrying out research, you know, ethnographies is have been called history of the present and that was the present, you know, 9/11 was the present when I was doing my fieldwork. So, that is why it appears in my research in ways that it does, it also endures as a moment that speaks to what has been termed as negative visibility, that, you know, in a way that Muslims were seen and heard in a way that was negative, and, and not helpful in thinking about them as part of American society. It also perpetuated this, you know, false, I think positioning of a good Muslim versus a bad Muslim, where I think in both ways, you know, it's not helpful because both of these ways of thinking about Muslims as either good or bad reduces the humanity of Muslims, and the complexity of the Muslim experience. So, 9/11 allowed me to kind of engage with also these these kind of tropes and and these constructions of Muslim Americans in a way that perhaps I would not have done had 9/11 not been on the radar as a lens for thinking about these issues, right? So that's to the question of, you know, how, how 9/11 kind of features in my research to the question of social media and the possibilities and challenges, you know, that in itself can be its own session or dialogue series, to be honest, but I would say in my research, and in terms of ethnography, you know, there there are two ways of thinking about online engagement on one, the argument has been made that we can look at online communities and and and do our fieldwork online. And that is enough, right, that we do not have to follow our interlocutors from online to offline

experiences. So that's one way of thinking and I'm thinking of Professor Tom Boellstorff's work *Coming of Age in Second Life*, where he does make the argument that, you know, for anthropologist, it should be enough that they're doing fieldwork online. And he, you know, makes the case that he did not follow his interlocutors or choose to meet with them offline. And that was fine, right? On the other hand, we have scholars like Daniel Miller, who has made the case that we have to be attentive to how it is [audio breaking up] engagements relate to our everyday life. That in terms of ethnography, if one of the goals of ethnography is to look at everyday life and experiences, then we have to look at how our online engagements are embedded in our routines, daily life routines and experiences, right. And I'm more aligned with, you know, Miller's sense of relating our experiences online to our offline, um, daily life. In my research on gay and bisexual Pakistani men, who are, who have a presence on Grindr, I certainly initiated contact with them on Grindr I introduced [myself] as a researcher. But then I did also follow up with having a one on one meetings with them, building friendships with them where we were meeting in real time, right. And I can tell you that the insights that I gathered from just the kind of intimacy and interaction that allows you to be looking somebody in eyes, sitting with them, going on a walk with them, it cannot be just captured through online engagement, no matter how immersive no matter how in depth, they may be, right? For the groups that I have studied online, really presents possibilities for gay and bisexual men, especially in a country like Pakistan, that does not have public venues where gay and bisexual men can get together, there are no institutions that bring them together, right. And it's also a society where gay sex is criminalized, right. There are a lot of fears and vulnerabilities that are associated with being gay in Pakistan. And I say that, that being said, this is not to say that we do not have thriving gay communities, however, exist in a broader climate that, you know, societal climate that can potentially persecute them. So online spaces like Grindr really provide a safe space for these men to come together. And in my research, I look at how it is that online, really, platforms provide more than just a space for men to hook up, or have these you know, um, brief sexual encounters, that it's really about connectivity, it is very much about building community and a sense of brotherhood and support. So I think, especially for at risk populations are ones that are not very visible. Um, online research and ethnography, you know, has much po- [audio breaks up]. However, I think the challenge is to be able to kind of add layers and and what is a thick description to your engagement by following your interlocutors in in offline settings? You know, so I leave it at that, but it's a topic that, you know, is on my mind, I'm currently engaged with it. And I feel like we can have an entire session on just that alone.

1:14:04 Neda Maghbouleh

Thank you so much, professor. We've actually had a question for Hadeth by Daniel typed twice into the Q&A. And so perhaps there's an urgency and we can push Daniel's question for Hadeth to the top. So would you like to go ahead and reply to Daniel, please?

1:14:21 Hadeth Rassol

Yeah, so I noticed that I, I didn't it wasn't moved to answer so I was typing out an answer for him, but I think definitely, then migrants migratory history, ethnicity, and citizenship they intersect and implicit ways that Canadian born Muslims, they may not explicitly realize that it definitely shapes the ways in which they situate themselves as Canadian citizens in relation to sport. I



think that they do, or the way the way that they answered the questions that were asked is that they understand that there's different social value related to mainstream sport versus exclusive sports. So when they were talking about Umoja, specifically, they expect express shock, and that it was so well organized, that it resembled mainstream sport, and is because like the, you know, the ways that they understand or the ways that people understand sport as a "valid sport" is usually understood as mainstream sport. So when community sport and on top of that community sport is usually understood as like, very not organized, probably takes place in like, the fields on the side of the mosque or something like that. It's not really understood in ways that it can be something that is organized, and, you know, competitive. Specifically, they mentioned competitiveness, the fact that the traveling tournament also serves to sort of value that it's more professional, it feels more professional playing in, like on the turf, a real turf field or you know that there's actual referees, if there's things to be want, like, trophies, and awards and money, and other better or all those things kind of shaped how they understand this experience, specifically. But so I think in this, in this case, like it does create a nuance, I think you mentioned like other nuanced hierarchies of sporting belonging, if I'm understanding it correctly, I think that because they are, like I mentioned, because they're Canadian born, a lot of them. I'm gonna say they want to, but they, they, they tend to not focus on the fact that they, that their parents are immigrants, they focus on the fact that they are Canadian born like I'm born here, I do think that people here do. And I think that a lot of the things that they mentioned is something that I resonated that I resonate with, like at growing up here, as well as the Canadian born, you try to kind of move away from the fact that you're othered, like you want to focus on the things that make you seen the same as other people. So you play in mainstream sports you play, you know, some people they hold on to the fact that they play co-ed sports as Muslims because a lot of Muslims will tend to veer away from co-ed sports, they want to play in, you know, exclusive sports, so you kind of move on to those things that make them feel that they are more like the people who are here, and in a way that might make them feel that they belong more. That because they play in mainstream sports, that they are more Canadian, or more like "mainstream" then other people who choose to not play mainstream sports. So I feel like there are definitely overlap, not overlap, but there's a lot but there definitely does impact the way that they they feel. How do I say this? It impacts the ways that they understand their own belonging and their own identity in the broader sense of I guess, as a Canadian. I hope that kind of answered it.

1:17:55 Neda Maghbouleh

Thank you. I think we're going to end with a final question posed from Kimberly Segal to Mujahid. Kimberly would like you to speak more about the idea of rupture, and negotiation of identity in the context of South African histories, quote, unquote "colored identities" have also been claiming new names in Cape Town, does this factor into forms of reconfiguration?

1:18:19 Mujahid Osman

Yeah, I think this is an excellent question. Thank you, Kimberly. Very, very quickly, I think that idea of rupture is something that I'm still sifting works and that I'm trying to work through. The way I'm looking at it is that the rupture that is presented is one about where the subject of religious meaning making is different, right? It's no longer the heteronormative Muslim man, that

is the subject of meaning in Islam, it becomes a lesbian woman, or it becomes a gay man or gay Black man in South Africa. And so I think that by by subtly changing those types of by subtly changing the positionality, one sees a new type of Islam emerge that is still within the house of Islam. So it's a type of critical traditionalism, if you wish. And so that's kind of how I'm thinking about and seeing the structure form. But it's something that it's just very new to me, and so I'm still trying to work it out, work it out. So if anybody has any suggestions or comments or thoughts, please do send them along and I'm happy to engage with you further. Yeah.

1:19:32 Neda Maghbouleh

Well, I want to thank all three panelists for sharing this exciting immersion work you are, you know, three to watch in the future. And we all wish you the very best with these projects. Again, in the spirit of how Stan Thangaraj has initiated this conversation. Please consider us part of your community as people who can be resources and continue to amplify the important work that you do. And I wish everyone a wonderful summer break. As mentioned by Maura this series is going to be on hiatus during the summer, but it will reconvene in the fall with more incredible voices from this emerging field of research. So I think that's it from me, I don't know more if you'd like to pop back on and say anything on behalf of the organization. Okay, thank you, Maura.

1:20:28 Maura Cunningham

Thank you to all of our participants today. Thank you to our audience members to the Henry Luce Foundation for supporting the AAS Digital Dialogue series. As always, thank you to Stan Thangaraj for organizing this amazing mini-series on Critical Muslim Studies, today's conversation was really rich and engaging. We will be resuming the mini series on Critical Muslim Studies on Friday, August 27. So you can mark your calendars and then we will post information on the AAS website when the date goes a little bit closer and we have a registration link up and everything like that. In the meantime, I hope everyone has a wonderful weekend. And thank you so much for participating today.

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