

Introduction

“A Place of Prostration”: The Concept of Masjid in Contemporary Africa

This book is not about beautiful buildings, although some will be addressed. This book is also not necessarily about mosques, although they will be present as well. This book is about the masjid, an Islamic space that has over the course of its history existed at the threshold of numerous sociopolitical paradigms, geographical frontiers, and technological horizons. Defined conventionally as “a place of prostration” and often (problematically) embedded in the architectural category of the mosque, the masjid deserves reconsideration as a space not easily contained within such limiting structural frameworks due to its reality as a site in which emergent, often alternative, forms of Islamic practice have been and increasingly are being practiced. The masjid in fact constitutes a sophisticated bit of spatial technology that has been increasingly used in the contemporary period to generate unique solutions to the problems of performing Islamic identity within a variety of diverse societies, whose own complex, nuanced realities require forward-thinking, flexible environments that reflect the shifting realities of Islamic communities as they engage in processes of sociopolitical and cultural transformation. This is particularly the case in Africa, a space that contains one of the fastest growing, most diverse Muslim populations in the world. Within the intersectional spaces of the continent, the masjid has increasingly come to help Islamic communities spatially articulate what it means to be a Muslim in the contemporary period, often by adopting flexible, adaptive forms of spiritual practice and performance, and pushing back against traditional spatial forms like mosques and mausolea as incontrovertible statements of collective Muslim identity and presence. In many ways, the nature of the “masjid” as it is unfolding across the diverse contexts on the continent is reimagining basic ideas of what Islamic space entails through the creation of new cutting-edge spiritual sites that speak to the multiple modernities existing across the continent in the contemporary period. As such, this introduction aims to establish a theoretical and methodological platform for understanding how the masjid has come to function as a spatial articulation of what it means to be Muslim in modern Africa.

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i.1 Defining the Masjid: Spiritual Spaces as Performative Places

Toward starting this conversation, the concept of the masjid must be unpacked in terms of both its conceptual history as well as the diverse realities it has occupied over time and space. In addition, it must also be separated from the architectural genre of the mosque, which has long stood as an inappropriate synonym for masjid space and a mode of collectivizing and subsuming masjid space under the generalized umbrella of a singular structural qualifier. Masjid space requires conceptualization in a way that privileges its reality as a concept that has been summoned time and time again by different stakeholders to define space for diverse identities.

So, what is a masjid in its most essential state?¹ From an etymological standpoint, the term “masjid” is a derivative of the Arabic word *sajada* (*sujūd*), which means “prostration” with masjid subsequently defined as “a place of prostration” or, more specifically, “a place in which ritual prayer (salat) is performed” (Sourdel, Sourdel-Thomine, and Higgitt 2007, 106).² Yet from a spatial standpoint, neither Islam’s sacred text – the Qur’an – nor the hadiths dictate the nature of the masjid as it is made physically manifest in the world. As Ahmad notes, “If reduced to basics, [masjid] is no more than a wall at right angle to Qibla axis and behind or rather before that wall, there can be anything.” Indeed, simplicity in the spatial design of the masjid is privileged by the words of the Prophet (pbuh),³ who said “Wherever you pray, that place is a mosque” (Ahmad et al. 2016, 97).

Adding to its opacity is the fact that the masjid maintains a number of ambiguous identities and realities throughout its appearance in Islam’s holy texts, with numerous verses in the Qur’an speaking of “masjid” generally without pinpointing specific mosque identities.⁴ Although Islamic hermeneutics offers various interpretations in this regard, often identifying ambiguous masjids in various Qur’anic verses as one of three – the Masjid al-Aqsa

¹ It should be noted that the English plural of masjid – masjids – will be used throughout the volume rather than the Arabic plural, *masājid*.

² This is in contrast to the term “mosque,” which is a derivation of the Spanish *mesquita* (Sourdel, Sourdel-Thomine, and Higgitt 2007, 115).

³ When mentioning the Prophet Muhammad or other prophets in the Islamic faith, it is traditional and respectful to follow their name with the added phrase *‘alayhi s-salām* (عليه السلام) or “peace be upon him.” In English texts, sometimes one also sees the abbreviation PBUH (peace be unto him). While not appearing after each mention of the Prophet’s name in this volume, it is my intent that such respect be accorded after each mention.

⁴ In Qur’an Surah 2:114, the plural of masjid – *masājid* – is used to describe “Allah’s Masjids,” a cryptic description that potentially refers to either all masjids on earth, or a specific one on which no one can agree on which one.

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(the “Far Mosque”), the Masjid al-Haram (sanctuary at Mecca around the Ka’ba), or the Masjid al-Rasul (structure sited on the original location of the Prophet Muhammad’s house) – this type of specificity is rarely supported by the verses themselves, which seem to frame “masjid” less as a specific structure in many cases and more of an idea, or ideal, to be followed and applied to one’s life space. Similarly, there are numerous instances in which the masjid itself is known by other names. Qur’an Surah 24:36 reads “In house (*fi buyutin*) which Allah has ordered to be raised (to be cleaned and to be Honoured).” Here, the term for houses or dwellings – *fi buyutin* (sing. *buyut*) – in fact implies “all places of pure worship” or all prayer spaces on earth, hence all masjids (Sourdél, Sourdél-Thomine, and Higgitt 2007, 49–50).⁵

Such ambiguity is hardly surprising, given the fact that a number of other spatial concepts within Islamic tradition also exhibit similar interpretive ambiguities. Perhaps the most abstruse spatial entity within Islamic spatial practice outside the masjid itself, however, is the *mihrab*, often taking form as a concave niche in the *Qiblah* wall⁶ of most mosque structures indicating the direction of Mecca. A majority of its descriptive uses in the Qur’an and other medieval Islamic texts are actually nonarchitectural in nature, gesturing loosely to an “honored location” and sometimes shifting identity from noun to adjective to describe the height or elevated nature of a space or structure (Nuha 1998, 8; 11). Its subsequent translation into a form of Islamic liturgical infrastructure is thought to have been influenced by non-Islamic spiritual architectures including Christian church apses, Judaic synagogue arks, and even the throne niches of early medieval palaces. Indeed, its pervasive presence within multiple religious and political infrastructures within the first millennium made it “both too common and too neutral a form to yield precise, incontrovertible sources of origin, let alone meaning” (Nuha 1998, 2). The word itself – *mihrab* – also has a complicated generative history, given its origin may in fact not be Arabic at all, but possibly Syriac, Hebrew, Ethiopic, or even Pahlavi, which also explains the fact that, like the

⁵ Others feel that “*buyutin*” in this case actually refers to three “special” masjid spaces, namely Islam’s three holy “mosques”: the Ka’ba in Mecca, the House of the Prophet in Medina, and the Masjid Bayt al-Maqdis in Jerusalem (El-Khatib 2001, 49). It should also be noted that at least two out of the three “mosques” mentioned are not “mosques” in the most direct sense but occupy the position of “masjid” due to the venerative performances of prayer that occur there.

⁶ The *Qiblah* has also not only occupied various conceptually ambiguous/fluid realities, but has also been absorbed and in many ways fossilized into architectural form. Yet within the Qur’an, it has also been identified as an indicator for directional orientation, a site of prayer, and even an actual place of worship, numerous realities that position it simultaneously as a physical construct as well as a metaphysical concept (Nuha 1998, 14).

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masjid, the general meaning of the *mihrab* is open for debate.⁷ Nuha notes that “the term *mihrab* contains no references to specific forms or functions. Rather, it operates primarily as a metaphorical and emphatic device that receives its function from its context” (Nuha 1998, 11). Thus, within its various definitions and utilizations, “the only constant is the word *mihrab* itself” and the subsequent intermingling and assimilation of the concept into the context of Muslim culture and religion went on to not only Islamize the term but also cement its physical reality in the form of an “indivisible architectural element that is singularly associated with mosques” (Nuha 1998, 13; 17). The application of the niche form to the *mihrab* concept would also inscribe the *mihrab* with a specific spatial identity that in many ways erased the term’s past and essentially “transform[ed] all occurrences of the word *mihrab* in texts into niches.” Thus, the *mihrab* has in many ways become cemented as a “verbal and visual signal of the presence of Islamic functions and values” (Nuha 1998, 18), just as the masjid has become architecturally calcified in the form of a mosque structure, hard-pressed to exist beyond this reality and entombed in a structural genre that does not do justice to its conceptual breadth.

This thus brings up an important question, indeed the key question: what is the difference between a mosque and masjid? The diverse spaces of prayer and prostration that exist in the world, informed as they are by numerous socioeconomic, political, and cultural conditions, generates natural push-back against their collapse within the space of a bound structural genre or essentialized formal envelope like the mosque. Thus, perhaps a better question is: what is the true relationship between the mosque and the masjid? The previous discussion would indicate that while all mosques are masjids, not all masjids are mosques, and this is supported in some ways by the various requirements different communities and bodies of belief place on a space for it to become “mosque.” For some, permission must be given to pray in that space. For others, space must be *waqf* or the result of a donation provided for that purpose. Yet as a spiritual paradigm that is “spatially and temporally unbound,” Islam is “not necessarily practiced only in officially designated spaces (or at allocated times)” (Della Dora 2015). As Kong notes, “there are many ways in which every-day spaces can be implicated in religious meaning-making, legitimating, maintaining and enhancing, but also challenging religious life, beliefs, practices and

⁷ In various pre-Islamic fourth- and fifth-century inscriptions from Southern Arabia, one finds the term used to describe a fortress structure, while other sources use it to describe a royal court or palace (Nuha 1998, 6). In addition, some scholars have equated *mihrabs* to *majalis*, or spaces where one sits in the context of a meeting or council.

identities” (Kong 2010, 758; in Della Dora 2015). Such “unofficial” spaces include professional venues, urban avenues, domestic spaces, and even mediascapes and this breadth of space lies at the heart of the masjid as a spatial concept that challenges the traditional binaries of sacred vs. secular in ways that speak to Islam’s reality as a way of living and being in the world.

Thus, as a space articulated through practice and mobility, and one that can be “continuously made and dissolved” (Della Dora 2015), the masjid does not abide structural boundaries or infrastructures, which points to one of the most defining characteristics of a masjid space: its fundamental dependence on the presence of a performing, ritualized body for its existence. Indeed, as a place of prostration, it is the venerative act alone that can summon forth the masjid, transforming the individual into a channel through which masjid space is made manifest. Indeed, it is also this defining element that allows the whole of the earth to be interpreted as “masjid,” a space that is accomplished rather than established through the ritualized movements of the body. In this way, to quote Oleg Grabar, “it is ritual and sanction practice that . . . creates ‘Muslim space’” (Metcalf 1996, 3).

This leads to a consideration of the performative process itself, a process that begins with the position of the sun, which provides cues for the body to begin its transition from “profane” to “purified.” The pre-performing body undergoes a purification process with water (*wuḍūʾ*), which itself has a number of nuanced symbolic properties further explored in Chapter 3, toward cleansing the body of pollutants (Joseph 1981, 290). Thus, it is not only the performing body that establishes masjid space, but a performing body existing in a state or condition of purified being. The prayer act begins when the body engages in a series of motions, each designed to physically and symbolically transition the self from a profane to a spiritual plane of existence and, in doing so, differentiate one’s spiritual self from that of the profane self. Roger Joseph, referencing Titus Burckhardt, notes thusly:

the standing attitude distinguishes man from all other animals, investing him with a special status, while the reclining attitude recapitulates the notion of submission to God (cf. Burckhardt 1976, 87). The act of submission is made when one is closest to the ground, metaphorically recognizing man’s biological status as earthbound just as the upright position is mimetic of his biological uniqueness. (Joseph 1981, 290)

These movements, according to Burckhardt, establish a type of spatio-spiritual cartography that maps the relationship between humanity and the divine through a bodily imprint. As movements unlikely to be replicated over the course of everyday existence, these actions create a space

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that stands apart from one's surroundings and together with a ritualized body in action, support and reaffirm each other as mutually constitutive elements of spiritual practice (Chidester and Linenthal 1995, 10).

Such practices constitute what David Chidester and Edward Linenthal define as a "particular type of embodied, spatial practice . . . [that] . . . can act out and embody perfectly the way things 'ought to be'" (Chidester and Linenthal 1995, 9). In these performances, the ritual manipulations of the human form as "formalized 'gestures of approach'" enable the body to become a portal through which masjid space emerges. Indeed, the specificity of the actions and movements undertaken by the body create a "habitus," to reference Pierre Bourdieu, in which ritual performance constitutes "a localized fusion of thought and action in and through which human beings negotiate the social relations and practical knowledge of their worlds." And through this ritual performance as "embodied practice," the masjid space that emerges not only acts as an apparatus of performance but represents "a dynamic spatial ordering of knowledge and power" (Chidester and Linenthal 1995, 10).

Similar repertoires of action, space, and performance are made manifest in other Islamic spiritual practices as well such as the Hajj, which according to scholar and architect Sami Angawi, symbolizes both "unity and continuity" through the Ka'ba as "constant," as well as "change and diversity" accomplished by the circumambulation of pilgrims around the Ka'ba and to various sacred sites in the Holy City (Hammond 2012, 216). Often interpreted as the "first true temple" (and one might exchange "temple" with "masjid" in this case), the Ka'ba's location is often viewed as "the center of the world . . . where God's presence is felt the most on earth" and indeed "the heart of Islam" (Hammond 2012, 215).⁸ Yet its power lies not only in its location and history, but in the performative elements of the Hajj itself, in which pilgrims circle the Ka'ba and visit a series of sacred sites in the area toward establishing a type of "cosmic order." Egyptian scholar Abdul Hakam al-Sa'idi notes that "the planets revolve around the sun, each in a separate orbit, with specific speed. In the same way, the Ka'ba which God made the first sanctuary for mankind is located at the center of the earth" (Hammond 2012, 216).⁹ To return to the question of the relationship between the masjid and the

⁸ The Ka'ba is thought to have been built by Abraham, the "genealogical father of the Arabs" (Hammond 2012, 216), and his son Ismail.

⁹ However, the faithful are discouraged from privileging the Ka'ba as space or object, lest they end up venerating the structure and not the prayerful act in an exercise in idolatry. Indeed, Caliph Omar, senior companion to the Prophet Muhammad, once addressed the Ka'ba saying, "I know you are only a stone and can do neither good nor ill, and if I had not seen the Prophet kiss you, then I would not do so too" (Hammond 2012, 216).

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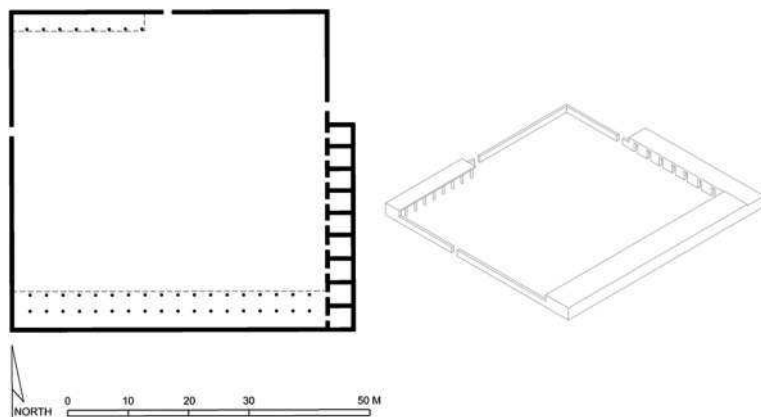


Figure i.1 Theoretical rendering of the House of the Prophet Muhammad (*pbuh) (c. 632).
 Illustration by the author after Mortada 2011.

mosque, thus, it becomes apparent that mosque space in and of itself is not masjid full stop, but is at best a “masjid-in-waiting,” an anticipatory yet fundamentally dormant space requiring a performative body to enable ascension/affirmation.

This thus begs the question of how mosques themselves came to occupy the role of “masjid made manifest.” The mosque as a structural genre had rather inauspicious structural beginnings, with most scholars pointing to the house of the Prophet Muhammad as its original inspiration and the template upon which the essential blueprint of the mosque would develop as a genre (Figure i.1). The Prophet’s house was a simple (theoretically), vernacular structure, composed of a rectangular courtyard whose north and south sides were bookended by hypostyle halls that offered shade during the heat of the day and a space to congregate, work, converse, and socialize.¹⁰ The Prophet’s house would also come to accommodate Friday communal worship and the *khutbah*, or sermon which would have been delivered by Muhammad from a raised platform that would serve as a proto-*minbar*. This space would also serve as a forum for discussing communal affairs and making decisions with regard to the congregation as a type of judiciary seat (Kahera 2008, 41).

Yet the Prophet’s house was also a space of intimacy and family life. A series of rooms lining one of the two remaining sides housed the

¹⁰ Because this was where the Prophet’s companions would meet, they would eventually become known as the *ṣāhib al-ṣafa*, or “people of the portico” (Rizvi 2015, 10).

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Prophet, his wives, and his children, who were protected from public view by curtains and screens, elements that would be made architecturally manifest in later mosque spaces in the form of female galleries and various partitions designed to separate space and control visibility. Given the fact that the Prophet's life is typically seen as providing the ideal model by which every Muslim should live, his home space, thus, came to be co-opted as a spatial ideal of the faith and thus an appropriate template on which to model subsequent spiritual spaces.

Such functions align with historian Gerard van der Leeuw's proposed correspondence between the "home, temple, settlement, pilgrimage site, and human body" in that "they can be discerned as transferable metaphors for the same kind of powerful space" (Chidester and Linenthal 1995, 7). Thus, the Prophet's home came to act not only as a space for prostration but also as "an agora, a courthouse, a learning center, and a refuge for the poor, homeless, and destitute" (Rabbat 2002, 2). This demonstrates the important fact that mosques from their very inception were designed to accommodate functions beyond that of just performative spiritual space as the "House[s] of the Nation (*Bayt al-Umma*)" and as such would subsequently become representative of a distinctive type of spatial program that symbolized derivative virtues associated with the Prophet himself. In addition, this space came to be the working template which later mosques would follow, structures that ranged from early formative "humble" spaces "determined for worship" such as the basic rock mosques of the Sahara region in North Africa (Kahera 2008, 44), to later mosque spaces that functioned as formidable political, socioeconomic, and aesthetic fortresses of faith and power, such as the contemporary Nizamiye Mosque in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Thus, in conceptualizing the relationship between the mosque and the masjid, the mosque represents one iteration of masjid space that, by its nature, also accommodates additional activities beyond that of performative prayer. Likewise, as a space that is "open-ended and constructed anew by each observer" (Erzen 2011, 130), masjid cannot by their nature be contained by structural boundaries and thresholds; in fact it is a space that expands and contracts within and beyond its surrounding environment according to the performative actions of the bodies within. This likewise gives masjids the ability to move, relocate, and re-emerge across multiple spaces, contexts, and conditions and assume multiple forms that are only loosely architectonic in nature.

One such example of this type of masjid space might be the prayer mat (Figure i.2a and i.2b). The prayer mat in many ways underscores the creation and mobilization of space in that its presence indicates intent. As first and foremost an anticipatory spatial tool kit – one might even say

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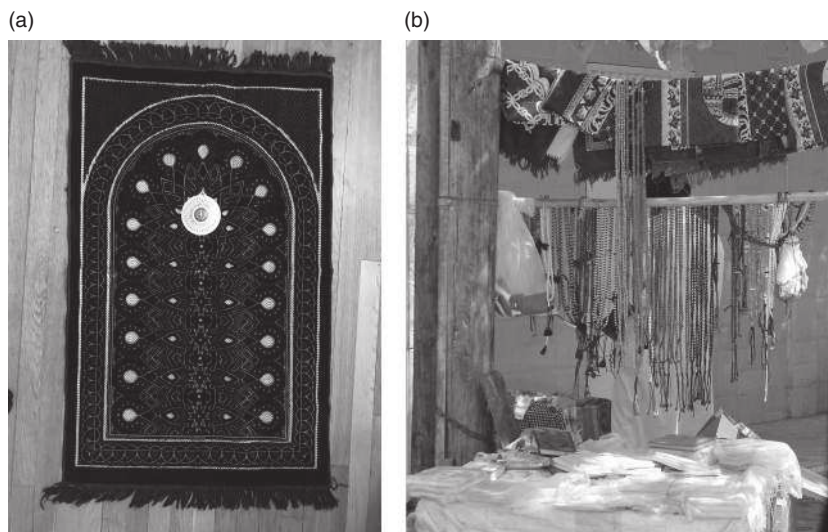


Figure i.2 a and b Prayer rug with a compass embedded in the fabric; a merchant stand in Dar es Salaam selling Muslim religious paraphernalia, Tanzania, 2018. Images by the author.

a type of “pre-emptive” spiritual space – the value of the prayer mat object lies not in its quality per se, but in the fact that it is an object that can separate one space from another within the physical environment through its role as a mode of demarcation and a platform for performance. Able to move and exist in multiple locations, the prayer mat also acts as a *seede* or witness to both the creation of the space and the act of prayer carried out within. Such “witnesses” have also taken the form of rocks or pieces of wood laid on or stuck into the ground, so long as they were placed a single cubit from the space where the act of prayer was to occur (Dilley 2011, 191). The prayer mat improves on this demarcation scheme by not only establishing a perimeter but also ensuring that the space within the perimeter is free of debris and other filth that could invalidate the prayer act. As such, these mats establish a new space altogether by creating an island of purity temporarily displaced from its polluted surroundings.

Like the masjid itself, the use of prayer mats within the Islamic faith is not formalized by the Qur’an and the hadith in any specific sense. As a masjid space, prayer mats are comparable to sleeping mats, woven grass coverings, and even “the sands of the desert” when one is called to perform *salat* (Morris 1921, 253). Yet in the contemporary

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period, particularly in urban areas where continuous mobility often defines one's way of life, prayer mats have become a decidedly convenient mode of accommodating one's spiritual needs in a constantly shifting environment.

Prayer mats not only help establish masjid space, however; they can also expand it. This is particularly the case during Muslim religious festivals and holidays when prayer mats are deployed to extend masjid space beyond the physical containment of mosques into courtyards, sideyards, and even streets to accommodate the number of participants. In addition, prayer mat technology has advanced to the point where some incorporate mechanisms such as compasses sewn into the fabric of the rug itself and even alarms that erupt five times daily to remind the faithful of *salat* (*Economist* 2012).

Yet such qualities do not define most everyday prayer mats, which continue to be a vital piece of spiritual technology with regard to gaining “a sense of control over disruptive forces with the potential to undermine the experience of mystical union sought by the faithful” and streamlining the set of procedures needed to successfully perform prayer (Dilley 2011, 185). A city street, a side room, a sidewalk, a market stall, an alley: each of these spaces becomes suitable as a masjid space via the prayer mat which “spread out and qibla-directed . . . defines the elemental place of prayer.” The prayer mat is a masjid in one of its most simplistic forms, and through its utilization, becomes architectonic in nature, “ris[ing] out of its horizontal plane and wrap[ping] itself around the space” (Haider 1996, 42).

These mobile masjids can be seen everywhere in Islamic Africa, both in mosques themselves as well as on the carts of mobile sellers roaming the streets, lined up along numerous market stalls and boutique shops around various cities, and stashed within the buses, taxis, and other modes of transport that define contemporary life. One sees prayer mats stuffed under chairs, folded haphazardly on shelves, crammed in backpacks, sitting on the dashboards of buses, all functioning as “spaces in waiting,” anticipatory masjids that are activated by time, place, and performance. In fact, they are almost a hegemonic presence that unfurls to claim space at numerous times during the day, suggesting that there is a place for the unexceptional, the mundane, and even the nonspace in masjid forms, whose very nature is again founded on the individual, and through said individual's purposeful action.

At its most fundamental level, a prayer mat as masjid enables a person to remove themselves from time and space through performative practice and mentally strip themselves bare of the politics of meaning and identity, yet remain embedded in these experiences as a human being and a Muslim. The masjid subsequently becomes a spatial indication of