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Deen and Dunya: Islam, street spirituality, crime and redemption in English road culture

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Deen and Dunya: Islam, street spirituality, crime, and redemption in English *road* culture

Abstract

This paper presents ethnographic and media analysis that explores how Islam has come to shape conceptions of the material, sacred, crime and redemption in contemporary English street culture. Islam's clear dichotomy between the mundane 'Dunya' and sacred 'Deen' has become highly influential in shaping how socio-economically marginalised, ethnic-minority men make sense of the world around them. Stark inequalities have tainted the material world for the UK's most disadvantaged, prompting them to seek redemption entirely outside of it – in the world of the sacred where they can experience warmth. In analysing this, we highlight how paths to desistance have arguably been overlooked where analyses of Islam in street culture have focused more on questions of radicalisation.

Introduction

Existing studies of the relationship between crime, redemption and the religion of Islam have arguably owed more to the security concerns of western states than the everyday struggles of those who live at the socio-economic margins. For these reasons questions of radicalisation and imprisonment have been to the forefront of scholarship, whilst significantly less attention has been paid to the discursive significance of Islam within the lifeworlds of the disadvantaged. This article takes a fundamentally different approach from its antecedents, highlighting the theoretical consequences of our empirical exploration of the way in which young disadvantaged, ethnic minority men in English urban centres have been utilising concepts of the 'Dunya' and 'Deen' to explain their lives and experiences and to overcome feelings of crisis and malaise. Developing the concept of 'street spirituality' we go beyond the argument that contemplating the sacred can provide a salve against material deprivation. Instead, we argue that the pressures and ambivalences of late-capitalism inject a toxicity into the ways in which the marginalised experience the material world, to the extent that they can only conceive of peace and redemption outside of it. Exploring the complex entanglements of the sacred and profane, crime and redemption, this article indicts the failure of contemporary socio-economics to provide a sufficiently meaningful and inclusive secular-material existence for those on the margins. Street subjects deeply engage in processes of moral reasoning and development, the implications of which raise grave doubts about the capacities of current models of secular rehabilitation to facilitate behaviour and identity change in starkly unequal societies.

Far removed from geopolitics and formal theology, the analysis here rests on everyday discourse in spaces of deprivation. As non-Muslims we recognise the importance of scholarship contributed by those who follow Islam and write with the utmost respect for the faith and its adherents. We present two forms of data in combination: the first author's insider-ethnography of men 'trapped' in London's violent drug economy and the second author's immersive analysis of British rap music and video-based street culture. The empirical picture painted balances depth and breadth: lived experience and cultural patterns. We first consider a range of literatures: on street culture and marginality; crime, imprisonment, redemption, and Islam; and the sociology of the sacred. We next discuss methodological concerns before moving on to the substantive sections of the article examining: Islam as street spirituality; the Dunya and toxic materiality; Deen and redemption.

From the Streets to the Sacred by way of the Prison

In the early 21st Century west, understandings of the relationship between the Islamic faith and criminality have arguably become dominated by fears about, and to a far lesser extent the

experience of, jihadi terrorism (see Jackson, 2007; Quraishi, 2017). This has had significant consequences for Muslim communities in terms of experienced Islamophobia (e.g. Mason and Poynting, 2007) and securitisation (e.g. Awan, 2012). Whilst studies of religion, criminality and desistance have tended to find that spiritual development reduces reoffending (Maruna et al., 2006; Adamcyk et al., 2017) this has not necessarily translated into a widespread view that Islam is a potentially anti-criminogenic force (see Wilkinson et al., 2021). Ultimately, it might be surmised that fears and a state-centred view of security have tended to elide the Islamic faith and questions of political violence, and this must be understood as an extraordinarily narrow frame. Alternatively, other literature understands religious ideology as but one of a range of factors that informs jihadi violence, where the marginality of terrorist attackers becomes a more important explanation (see Cottee, 2011).

Mark Hamm (2009) in his study of prison Islam, noted an 'alarmist' tendency in some literature that contrasted to his and others' findings. In portraying the complexity of prison religiosity that included thriving conventional and African-American variants of Islam, he concluded that a movement rooted in traditional Muslim practice had become an important de-radicalising force in the Californian prison system. Webster and Qasim (2018) and Wilkinson et al. (2021) similarly view Islam as practised in prison as supportive of 'rehabilitation' away from criminal activity, in much the same manner as other religious practices. Linge (2021) demonstrates how aspects of faith feature in the 'desistance narratives' of Muslims who turn away from crime. Coretta Phillips (2012) in her study of *The Multicultural Prison* provides a sense of the politics that applies to Islam in UK prisons, particularly amongst Black men (see also Earle and Phillips, 2013). Her participants inform her of the extent to which it has become a 'cool' religion amongst those who were raised Christian, but the study ultimately recognises that there are a range of different motivations that support prison conversion, which vary over the course of a sentence and beyond. This study furthermore is one of the earlier academic works to explicate the concept of 'reversion': the notion within the Black diaspora that Islam is their true underlying system of spirituality, such that they are not 'converts' *per se* (see Reddie, 2019). These issues of reversion, cultural status and spiritual hygiene all feature in the participant accounts considered later in the paper.

More recently, studies have highlighted how spirituality and religion have served as a resource for exiting gangs both in the developing world (Rosen and Cruz, 2019) and the USA (Decker and Pyrooz, 2020). A process of becoming a 'man of God' is open to those exiting Chicano gangs in California, involving a significant rewriting of an individual's embodiment and narrative (Flores, 2016). Providing a culturally sanctioned route away from the obligations of the gang, spirituality further provides 'existential cover' replacing what is lost in terms of camaraderie and solidarity after exit. The relationship between religion and crime and the specific place of Islam as part of this have thus tended to be studied and examined within an institutional context, be it prison or the gang. There is less literature that considers such matters from the more everyday context of life on the streets/margins.

The 'street culture' perspective understands that marginality, crime, and criminalisation are dynamically related and that 'street spirituality' exists as one of the ways in which those who struggle find succour (Ilan, 2015). Vividly illustrated by Goldstein (2013) in relation to the popularity of evangelical Christianity amongst the favella poor of Brazil, transcending everyday privation and tragedy whilst gaining a direct connection to the divine can provide something of an antidote to harsh living conditions. Street spirituality can constitute a mechanism for striving where mainstream modes of socio-economic redemption and inclusion seem irrelevant or hostile. Messerchmidt (1997) in exploring the autobiography of Black American leader Malcolm X, argued that his initial

conversion to the Nation of Islam was the result of a yearning for a pro-Black form of respectable masculinity that could provide what the chaotic world of the streets could not. For X (adapted then conventional) Islam offered a clear ethical framework and existential order, and indeed a clear structure for each day and life overall without demanding assimilation into a hegemonic, 'white' middle-class respectability (Malcolm X and Alex Haley, 1964/2015). To be a form of street spirituality, the belief system requires adaptability around a street lifestyle (and as such distance from 'establishment' respectability) and ultimately to provide a route away from it. It is thus simultaneously of and transcendent of the socio-economic margins.

Street spirituality can exist in an attenuated, more aspirational fashion. The young drug dealers in Hamburg studied by Buccerius (2014) could selectively draw on their Muslim heritage to apply notions of purity and honour to criminal practices that their religion would forbid. For Mohammed Qasim (2018: 130) the young men he studied in the UK:

> '…wanted to be strict Muslims but because of their lifestyles found it difficult and, therefore, tried to abide by some Islamic teachings while neglecting others…some of them did, however, express a desire to one day become better Muslims by refraining from indulging in haram… Given the opportunity to reflect on their religion and the space to begin the rigorous practice of five daily prayers, The Boys could begin to challenge their own habitual behaviours – their lechery, drunkenness and drug use. Islam offered them a better, cleaner, life.'

Resonating with Samanani's (2022) intricate ethnography of Londoners 'on road', our participants engage in processes of ethical/moral reasoning. They are not pathological automatons but reflexive agents who demonstrate concern about how involvement in crime and violence harms themselves and others. What is particularly salient about the deployment of the Islamic concepts of the earthly-profane 'Dunya' and sacred 'Deen' is the extent to which UK street culture seeks to overcome material problems through discourses of spirituality (Mellor and Shilling, 2014a). This is a rich and revealing sociological phenomenon that speaks to the partiality of secularisation and the enduring social importance of defining and experiencing the sacred (see Taylor, 2007; Habermas, 2008; Mellor and Shilling, 2014a).

Shadd Maruna, a leading scholar of secular desistance, has argued that this project suffers from disenchantment when compared to spiritual forms of redemption, and a lack of ritual that can 'mark' individuals as changed – again in contrast to the world of religion (Maruna, 2011; see also Mellor and Shilling, 2014a). As a social institution labouring especially under its secularity, desistance efforts serve as a particularly revealing example of the extent to which vast swathes of rationalist-materialist praxis has failed. The forces of natural science, economics, positivist-sociology, and of course the liberal-capitalist model of governance have all failed to spread the promises of modernity into the world's most deprived and marginalised spaces (Anderson, 1999; Ilan, 2015). Where subjectivities are defined by material and social lack, trauma, victimisation, and the struggle for survival, and the authorities seem to offer little by way of assistance, it is not difficult to understand why the marginalised turn their eyes to heaven and seek salvation in the world of the sacred and spiritual. Indeed, from a postcolonial/decolonial perspective the forces of modernity can be experienced by the marginalised as a form of coercion, whereas spirituality can be experienced as more intrinsic and nourishing (see Blagg and Anthony, 2019; Dimou, 2021). The idea of 'reversion' is arguably decolonial, offering those with heritage from outside of Europe an opportunity to connect with venerable traditions and well-developed systems of philosophy, spirituality and thought, outside of those that were imposed as part of racist-capitalist-colonial modes of extraction. Islam can thus be experienced as the inherent and organic mode of spirituality of the multi-ethnic, English

socio-economic margins, however more complicated the history might be. Following a consideration of methods, we explore the implications of this phenomenon to criminological thinking.

Methods

The impetus to produce this paper emerged from discussions between the authors who had been analysing data from their distinct research projects exploring the street culture at the socio-economic margins of England's major urban centres. The nature of our data meant that we could achieve a balance between specificity and generality.

Between July 2013 and March 2014 the first named author conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews in *Northville* with 29 socio-economically disadvantaged men[1] between the ages of 16-40 that she calls the *mandem* (standard London street-slang to describe a group of peers, friends or associates). From different ethnic backgrounds, they tended to share experiences of interrupted education, extensive un- and under-employment, familial stress and trauma (often including experiences of the care system) and a majority of them had spent time in prison (further methodological detail on this project can be found in Reid, 2017). More or less full-time, alongside other academic duties, she spent time in the spaces they frequented: on streets, in cars, around the estate and in various licensed and illicit venues in which they spent leisure time. Having grown up proximately to most of them, the first named author was thus able to undertake 'insider ethnography'. As a woman she furthermore invoked particular responses from the *mandem*. She felt herself often becoming a confidant for aspirations and concerns that her participants would not always voice in front of other *mandem* (as well as constituting at times the target of boasts and romantic advances that other kinds of researchers might not have received). There is thus a unique profile to her data that pierces the masculinist bravado that animates what she and the *mandem* call 'the trap' and/or *life on road* (see Reid, 2023). The *mandem* were invested and hemmed in by a set of orientations, norms, and attitudes that value crimino-entrepreneurialism, luxury consumerism and respect-based violence as modes of relating to each other and the world outside their estate. They describe their lives as extraordinarily stressful and traumatic as they struggle for meaning and status with few qualifications and labour market prospects, where 'opps' or rivals from another estate frequently take up weapons to hunt them, where they are expected to respond in kind to such attacks, and where the pressure to *make ps* (money) and spend it on the right consumer goods can have an importance that would likely puzzle those from outside the culture. The first named author had the opportunity to observe many of her participants apply Islamic thought and practices in varying different ways.

The findings generated by the second named author emerged from an immersive media analysis that began in early 2017. Set out in more detail elsewhere (Ilan, 2020) this involved consuming hundreds of hours of UK rap and drill music videos and associated media of various kinds. This primarily took place on YouTube where channels such as Mixtape Madness, PressPlay Media and the suggestion algorithms ensured that there was a steady stream of relevant and related content. Produced by young, predominantly Black, socio-economically disadvantaged men (and some fewer women) drill and rap videos tend to narrate the concerns of *life on road* to a broad youth audience. The artists in these genres thus draw not only on their background and experience but from a sense

[1] This paper like much research on street culture (see Ilan, 2015) focuses on the male perspective. It is recognised that this omits an examination of the female perspective, and thus we restrict our analysis to the position of men on the socio-economic margins.

of what they imagine is expected of them from those outside of their estates and lifeworlds. Consuming hundreds of relevant videos, decisions around the significance to assign to their lyrical, visual, and discursive content were based in part around popularity and controversy, but also relied on the insights gained through following gossip channels and other scene media, and the inherent understandings of the genres built up through countless hours of immersive exposure. Although misunderstood as glorifying 'gang violence' and street crime, rap and drill can be better understood as dynamic performances that explore the ambiguity, existential dissonance and practical strains that accompany the contradictions of espousing a lifestyle of wealth but coming from a background of poverty and marginalisation. Importantly themes of redemption, escaping the streets and attaining a peaceful life exist *sotto voce* underneath the louder, more sensationalist depictions of violent road life.

With our varied data we strove thus to analyse the tensions that emerge where street culture seems to simultaneously revere conspicuous consumption and humble spirituality; life affirming peace and life-truncating violence. The contradictions could only be resolved when we began to see Islam as a preferred mode of redemption in the contemporary English street. Neither of us expected to find Islam in the street cultural milieux we were exploring, and we have been reflexive around our positionality as non-Muslims. This reflexivity is somewhat different from the direct comparison of experiences reported by Qaurishi et al. (2022) who could trace out the faith, ethnicity, and gendered contours of the insider-outsider dynamic. In our case, the first named author is a community insider with participants in terms of socio-economic background and minority ethnic status, although not sharing in their more new-found faith. She felt nevertheless a depth of understanding that their explanations of their faith helped to shape and enrich. The second named author meanwhile is outsider in every sense and is thus constantly aware of the need to vigilantly examine findings and analysis for loyalty to the lived experience and perspectives of the people who contribute to the data. There was nevertheless a lack of knowledge about Islam common to both researchers. Perhaps mirroring a process by which some *mandem* begin their spiritual journeys, we were both forced to learn from basic principles. Most useful was the deployment of opening listening and a willingness to view the faith through the eyes of our participants. It was instructive to learn that a space as troubled as the UK streets could contain peace, harmony, and devotion.

Our intention was never to 'speak for' or be extractive towards our participants, but to share what we observed in terms of reverence and peace amongst people and within places where perhaps they are not expected to be found. Inevitably this entails engaging with the politics of representation around the Muslim faith. The prevalence of Islamophobic stereotypes meant that we felt the need for caution in drawing links between those involved in street violence and the Islamic faith. We learned, however, that Islam in street culture tended to offer an escape from the toxic materiality, paranoid suspicion, and gnawing sense of lack that affect too many young men on the socio-economic margins and is generally experienced with warmth and love as a force that counters violence and crime.

Islam as Street Spirituality on the UK Roads

The camera moves around three men in tracksuits huddled by a gravestone. The lyrics begin: 'It broke my heart when I found out Kevin passed, I went in my cell and I prayed about ten rakat' (Potter Payper – Filthy Free © Faceless Sounds, 2020). The rapper Potter Payper (Jamel Bousbaa – of Irish and Algerian descent, raised in East London) released quite recently at the time from prison, invokes the rituals of Islamic prayer as the means by which he copes with the death of a friend. The

lyric is but one example of the ubiquity of references to Islam in UK rap music. It demonstrates the influence that people of North and East African descent (and indeed those of South Asian Muslim descent) are exerting on the accent, flavour, and spirituality of UK street/road culture. Islamically-inflected terminology abounds – Akh sometimes replacing 'brother' (particularly if referring to someone of the Islamic faith) and 'Wallahi' has become a key mode of emphasis through oathtaking within the vernacular within London's multi-cultural inner-cities. UK Rap songs are frequently punctuated by 'Alhamdulillah' (praise be to Allah). Podcasts such as 'Blood Brothers' hosted by Dilly Hussain and 'Da Bridge' hosted by Abdul Lateef, regularly discuss issues concerning and road life from an Islamic perspective. There is undoubtedly a discernible turn towards Islamic faith and culture observable within England's multi-cultural socio-economic margins.

Over the course of her ethnographic fieldwork, the first named author was able to observe the participant she called 'Mohammed' actively turn away from violent criminality to embrace a pious Muslim life. His accounts feature throughout this paper as he is able to articulate in a clear and exemplary manner, what many of his peers believe and aspire to, but as will later become clear often have difficulties achieving.

> *Life on road isn't all it's cracked up to be. It's just one big trap that sells you dreams and then spits you out. You're just lost on road. Islam is the truth; it's a beautiful religion that helped me see things in the grand scale of things. I use to take my life's problems out on the roads, bad up man and just move reckless. I didn't have any direction, no guide, didn't know what I was doing from one day to the next. When I found Islam, everything just made sense, I became calm, at peace with myself, I wasn't stressed out or in pain, you get me. All I now worry about is the five pillars and the creator. I have submitted to the will of the creator.* (Mohammed, 28)

Mohammed's explanation of his own trajectory merits unpacking to understand what Islam is offering a generation of socio-economically disadvantaged, ethnic minority young men in England. Mohammed's invocation of 'life on road' is a reference to the strong 'street culture' (see Ilan, 2015) of the marginalised British inner-city, where the illegal-drug economy, respect-based violence and a hedonistic culture of consumerism thrive amongst those excluded from mainstream socio-economic life (see Bakkali, 2019; Irwin-Rodgers, 2019; Samanani, 2021). Mohammed (and his contemporaries) speak of it as a 'trap' (Reid, 2032) that prevents them from entering the socio-economic mainstream, and indeed a destructive, traumatised mind state from which they cannot escape. He contrasts the empty promises of the trap and the brutalising violence it coaxed from him (where to 'bad up' invariably involves betrayals and violence) to Islam that he praises as true, beautiful, calming and nourishing. Mohammed had embraced the identity of the 'badman', a seemingly heartless dispenser of predatory violence in pursuit of profit, but associated this lifestyle with crippling stress. Meanwhile the proximity of death served as a catalyst for spiritual reflection and an openness to living life differently. As will be further explored later in the article, there are a range of different modalities of Islamic practice observable on road that reflect the different circumstances and capacities of individuals.

In contrasting the pain and brutality of his secular existence, to the truth and light of his spiritual experience, Mohammed implicitly invokes an Islamic distinction between the profane 'Dunya' and sacred 'Deen' that have become common to UK road culture as everyday expressions. There would seem to be some evidence for the use of these terms outside of traditional Islam, perhaps specifically in Jamaica, a country that has in turn contributed much to British culture (Afroz, 1999). That this ontological distinction has resonated amongst people at the socio-economic margins has a

particular salience where so much social and personal value is vested in material accumulation and social status and where desirable levels of these things are in short supply.

Yusef Bakkali (2019: 1327) in his deep study of life 'on road' develops the concept of the 'munpain' – a combination of boundless monotony and stasis with traumatic rupture and existential dread: 'the agony of living behind the façade of impenetrable masculinity in the everyday… coping with stigmatisation and being stereotyped, managing social expectations, feeling weak or inadequate, lonely and unloved'. The road becomes something of a refuge for those so alienated from the institutions of mainstream socio-economic life that any kind of felt sense of a viable, included future in it is absent. Such are the material inequalities of neoliberal late capitalism and their attendant existential limits to the marginalised-self that there are advantages to bracketing off the profane as terminally tainted. In UK street culture thus, the 'Dunya' has come to take on a specific meaning, referring to the difficult material world that exists from a road perspective, where redemption is rare and fleeting. This concept is developed in greater depth in the next section.

By contrast, references to 'Deen' (a righteous Muslim life – in UK street slang it is often referred to as being 'on (my) Deen') resonate to a certain extent with secular notions of desistance and redemption. As will become clear, however, adopting a pious Muslim life is perceived differently within UK street culture – rather than constituting a capitulation to the hated forces of the criminal justice system – it is perceived as an independent journey to spiritual enlightenment and entry into a warm community of brotherly love. Those who 'revert' to Islam can transform and re-narrate the self in a manner that is culturally acceptable to 'the roads', such that their respect in the eyes of neighbours and peers can be maintained:

> *I'm a Muslim, not a 'badman'. Hate when people call me that; I've changed. Yeah, I'm still on road, have to survive somehow, but ain't keeping up half the fuckery I was doing before becoming Muslim. I'm a respectable man, Islam has helped me do that; I'm a new man. The mandem are doing their own ting, let them run around on this gangster shit, that ain't me anymore, I'm respected differently. Shot Gun [his road name], (kisses his teeth) that name didn't help me; didn't get me anywhere fast, don't wanna be that kinda guy anymore. I'm getting there, ain't no such thing as a perfect Muslim, but in time I'll get there. (TJ, 19)*

Here TJ explains the unique combination of upright behaviour and street presence that Islam facilitates. This is different to how a secular 'transformation' might be perceived. Submitting in thought and deed to probation and the minimum wage economy, for example, would not be viewed with the same degree of understanding and respect. Indeed, it could be dismissed as a dead-end strategy and a form of humiliation where low pay and security labour is understandably derided as 'cunts' work' and establishment institutions are loathed for their hypocrisy. On road few rationalist-materialist routes to financial self-sufficient and existential self-realisation are viewed as viable and appropriate (with the exception of select and rare routes such as 'making it' in music – see Ilan, 2015; Bakkali, 2021) and thus the spiritual takes on a particular significance. Indeed, individuals such as Mohammed become seen as inspirational and heroic by his peers who long for a different life. He has transcended his street self without compromising with 'the system'.

The turn to Islam as the prime form of UK street spirituality marks a departure from previous generations who turned often to Rastafari as a mode of realising spiritual fulfilment outside of establishment religion and churches (see Monrose, 2020). As Mohammed explains:

> *My dad is a Rasta, peace and love they preach, and not war. Dad always use to tell me to become a Rasta, your life will change, the mandem won't trouble you. I just didn't really*

> *relate to his religion, for me, it didn't provide me with the answers I needed. Even when I use to go church, I use to ask questions, but they could never give me a clear answer. But with Islam, when you go and ask a brother, he will tell you the answer, clear and simple. Christians are confused man, they don't have proof. For me the Islamic story makes more sense, and there is truth in the teachings. I started to read the Qur'an deeply and realised I had a purpose, or my life always had purpose. I was always a Muslim, I just didn't find the truth until I started to read and gain knowledge. It is a beautiful religion. From the teachings I kinda learnt, it shows you the purpose of life in a basic form, straightforwardly. (Mohammed, 28)*

Much like Monrose's (2020) Black British participants who turned from Christianity to Rastafari, rejecting their parent's spiritual traditions, 'reverts' have exchanged a system of beliefs they view as incomplete and unsatisfying for an ontological schema they view as more relevant. Where Rastafari resonated so strongly in the 1970s with young, Black people exposed to street culture there are signs that Islam now occupies a much stronger position as the preferred spiritual modality of the streets (see e.g. Jensen et al., 2021). This resonates with the extent to which those British young people whose Islam is inherited from family invest in their religious identity as a bulwark against experienced racism and islamophobia (see e.g. Hussain, 2022). There are no doubt significant differences in the ways in which individual 'reverts' and those with deep family and community ties to Islam experience the religion but reflections on this did not emerge strongly from the data. In their reversion narratives Mohammed (and others like him) explain that they can find in Islam a straightforward, unambiguous and totally structured set of concerns and practices through which they can reorient their consciousness and become wholly transformed. In part this involves a downgrading in significance of the material struggles that otherwise seem to drive desperation amongst the poor and marginalised. In turn Islam has lent to English street culture concepts, vocabulary and what is viewed as a relevant and accessible path to redemption.

The Dunya: Trapped in toxic materiality

In 'Dunya' (© Suspect Music, 2019) the Birmingham rapper Big Stygs (assisted by the better known JayKae) invites the viewer/listener to view and experience a range of material luxuries. There is a collection of flashy sports and muscle cars, centred around an orange Lamborghini; an expensive quad bike, stacks of banknotes that the rapper brandishes close to his face (the infamous 'money phone' pose) and later 'rains' onto the ground. He wears a thick collar of gold jewellery and a parrot lands on his shoulder to complete an incongruous pirate effect. He is pictured amongst supportive peers and displaying largesse in a local chicken shop. The lyrics in the song emphasise the kind of toughness and hard work that is required to raise the money to indulge in this lifestyle. Given that Stygs is known to have been previously incarcerated, there is an implication that criminal means might be part of this process. 'It's peak in the Dunya', the rapper declares. The use of 'peak' is noteworthy given that this word can denote something positive or negative depending on the context (although it is now more often used to denote something negative). At best thus, this is an ambivalent portrayal of the material world – from someone who is seen to have conquered it. The famously Muslim, well-known English rappers Krept and Konan in their song 'Dunya' depict it as a space of pain and problems. The term is also used in a casual, neutral manner within UK street slang to refer to the material world of accumulating money, possessions, and experiences, for example as evidenced by lyrics by Skepta in his song 'Mains' with Chip and Young Adz (© SKC M29, 2020): *'In the Dunya but I'm livin' nice, bought a chain, didn't see the price'*. Here the 'Dunya' is not necessarily

deeply considered as the counterpart to a more spiritually pure life, rather it seems to simply refer to a material life that is either suffered, enjoyed or both.

The different uses of the 'Dunya' concept highlight the contradictory and doubly-disadvantaged ways that the socio-economically marginalised experience the material world. On the one hand there are the obvious deficits of property that greatly differentiate them from the ranks of mortgaged middle-class. On the other hand, there are deep wells of critique for the ways in which those on the margins materially consume such as they do. There is a thread of scholarship and popular discourse that portray the urban poor as revering luxury goods and conspicuous consumption to a pathological fault (see e.g. Hall et al, 2008). Others have conceptualised the proclivity towards consumerism as an over-identification with one of the more open aspects of a materialist society, where anyone with the requisite funds can take part (Nightingale, 1993). Even where the marginalised 'play by the rules' of consumerism they are maligned via aesthetic notions of taste (Hayward and Yar, 2006). The depreciating luxury car is the pinnacle of street cultural investment, as opposed to the appreciating real estate favoured by the middle-class. What is arguably under-appreciated is the extent to which the quest for luxury stems from the seeming impossibility of a reasonably secure existence. The street culture of the marginalised places emphasis on 'quick money' (Jacobs and Wright, 1999) easily raised and spent. There is little point in saving, managing or marshalling resources that will never be sufficiently consistent and clean to realise a 'better life' of socio-economic advancement. If one can only dream of decent employment and home ownership, why not dream of attaining a billionaire's lifestyle?

With few and diminishing opportunities for a reasonably secure socio-economic existence (particularly for those with histories of offending behaviour), the material world offers little in return for the abandonment of criminal lifestyles. Indeed, men on road have often built-up significant histories of violence and trauma stemming from their insatiable desire for wealth and luxury, arising precisely because a middle-ground of comfortable sufficiency seems impossible. Instead, the experience of lack and the desire for fantastic wealth, running simultaneously, steer men 'on road' into a hostile and paranoia-inducing set of struggles against peers, rivals, and the criminal justice system (Reid, 2023). They must then emotionally process what they have done and witnessed. The contradictions of their economic experiences and the violence linked to them come to constitute the kind of toxic 'trap' that our participants articulate. Even at the tender age of 19, TJ was able to explain how the violence surrounding the material struggle prevents the subject from attaining a measure of peace and progress.

> *When you get caught up in all the violence and fuckery with man, you can't live a normal life, man can't even travel without fretting bout whose coming to get man. It's just a vicious cycle, where man get trapped in a persona that marks man for life (TJ, 19).*

The street-self can be orientated towards forms of material acquisition, competition, and conflict that themselves become somewhat constitutive of the subject's perceptions, expectations and habits (Shamas and Sandberg, 2016). The trap can subjectively seem like the only viable and practical way of meaningful participation in material life, whereas the world of employment and legitimate enterprise can seem inaccessible and fruitless. Whilst *mandem* and others on road did indeed find employment in the low-wage economy and began to age away from more acquisitive crime, this tended to be culturally interpreted as failure, meanwhile they remained traumatised by their experiences and potential targets for those who remain dedicated to street violence. Where escaping the trap cannot be achieved in the realm of the material – the sacred becomes one of the few avenues in which meaning, peace and redemption might be experienced. As Mohammed explains:

> *I got tired of acting bad Ebs, saw so much fuckery on road; went through it all, the post-code bullshit, robbing man, selling drugs, in madness with man. I thought this can't be all there is to life man, there must be something else. I was lost in the badman identity, didn't know who I was… When you in the hood, on road, you ain't a free man, you're trapped in all the madness that makes up the roads. I just wanted to be free, I just wanted to be at peace with myself.*

Mohammed reveals that he found even a successful street-criminal career ultimately unfulfilling and that the ultimate prizes of road life: illegitimate income (however high) and respect can have limited value. Where secular modes of transformation-evangelism for offenders seek to invoke a combination work-ethic and sensible-consumerism as the mode and prize of good behaviour, this immediately creates tension where late-capitalism spreads its rewards unevenly and unjustly (see Kramer et al., 2016; Young, 1999). The literature on desistance from crime tends to describe a route into employment, family life and a stake in society that facilitates personal change (e.g. Maruna, 2001). Implicit within our data, however, is the idea that this kind of secular-materialist 'redemption' seems more or less impossible to *mandem on road*. Indeed, where the choice is between rejection-humiliation and pursuit-burnout in the material world the only way to avoid failure is to adopt the kind of sacred enframing of worldly phenomenon (i.e. the creation of a socio-religious sacred) that is a noted aspect of Islam (Mellor and Shilling 2014a: 24-8). Where material circumstances are understood to be the 'will of God', the pressure to display wealth eases, meanwhile predatory attitudes can no longer be normalised or neutralised when faith demands a different response. The enframing of the material world within the sacred diminishes the drive to compete in the field of hyper-consumerism. Indeed, the *communitas* of Muslim life, its epistemological certainties and guiding rituals offers much to the individual who has experienced marginalisation.

On Deen: Varieties of sacred path to redemption

It was through embracing Islam, to varying degrees of dedication, that the *mandem* could challenge their toxic experiences of the material world in all of its exclusivity and inequality. Indeed, the Islamic emphasis on sacred experience and redemption becomes a particularly potent and influential mode of addressing the problems that marginalised, ethnic minority British men may have with life on road:

> *Islam was my only hope, the only way I could find a way out, but it's hard to change completely when you still have the roads around you. It's just a battle man, and I'm still trying to get out. Islam only helped me to a certain degree, the roads is all I know, all I know how to do (Aron, 22).*

The process of reversion can thus be partial and ongoing, mapping a journey that has an achievable end goal, and that is ultimately tolerant of failings, flaws and imperfections. It is this quality that allows the religion to exist alongside road life – according with the contradictory and dissonant nature of street culture itself (see Jeffries, 2011). There are varieties of street Islam in contemporary Britain. Mohammed was recognised as a dedicated pilgrim and reformed road man, the most pious and devout amongst the *mandem*, whereas others in the group described themselves as alternating between *badman* forms of road masculinity and particular aspects of Islamic tradition and practice. New reverts like TJ tended to describe their religion not as alternative to their road identity but as an extension of it. Their approach could thus at times seem 'pick-and-mix' (see also: Phillips, 2012; Qasim, 2018; Wilkinson et al., 2021). For example, some men found it difficult to adhere to the five

pillars of Islam (the essential mandatory rituals for most practicing Muslims) but upheld Islamic traditions such as reading the Qur'an, growing a beard, wearing Islamic prayer beads and excluding pork from their diet. Aron above understands his limited reversion as a failure to escape his street identity, whereas Cassius below views the chaos of street life as interfering with his efforts to change:

> *I try to stay on my Deen, when you still live in the area, and see the same fuckery. The drug economy and the mandem ain't going nowhere regardless if you are an akhee. It's hard man putting Islam first with all the fuckery that goes on the roads. I'm Amir [Muslim name], but man still know me as Bucky [road name] (Cassius, 23).*

As Cassius demonstrates here, *mandem* continuing to reside around the street cultural milieu could find it challenging either to resist the temptations of acquisitive criminality or the danger posed by those who would do them violence. Part of Mohammed's spiritual journey involved moving physically apart from his neighbourhood, whereas men like TJ who did not take such practical steps continued to struggle to escape street crime. Mohammed was very clear about the kinds of existential bounty available to those from 'the roads' who are able to leave them by dutifully and wholeheartedly attending to their Deen:

> *Islam saved me, took me away from all the madness on the roads. It a just a beautiful religion, it helped me to live clean, took move away from the madness on the roads. Being on road is a joke Ebs, being a bad man gets man nowhere. Man don't realise when they are caught up in it, but it messes up your life, can't get ahead. When you're involved in all this bad stuff, you see some real negative things, have to do some really dark things to survive, this messes man up. My heart felt heavy, had all this remorse, felt bad for the things I was doing in my life. I just wanted forgiveness (Mohammed, 28)*

For these marginalised men, often labelled as pathological, Islam's formal emphasis on racial and class equality is particularly inspiring. The community and brotherly love that are important aspects of the Muslim faith provide a radically different mode of relating to self and others than the deep suspicion and restless hunger that animates life on road. Carrying the strains of his previous life on road, he could not see any means of salving his wounds, only through a surrender to the spiritual could he find a route to healing and self-forgiveness. Exhibiting piety and devotion in the face of material pleasures and challenges can represent an alternative, but nonetheless desirable, modality to dedicating oneself to road life. The daily ritual of prayer, moreover, provides a powerful form of 'directionality' (i.e. normative reinforcement) that helps the revert feel part of a community dedicated to the performance of particular values (see Mellor and Shilling, 2014a).

The notion of 'reversion' in this way becomes an important ordering concept. It allows the *mandem* to connect to a version of themselves that has not been rejected or become tainted by material struggle – allowing themselves to feel like they are not inherently evil, but instead reacting to the tough circumstances in which they lived, but from which they can become free:

> *'I feel like I've been fighting a battle to revert. Islam speaks to me so much, I think it's only a matter of time' (Below the line comment on YouTube rap video).*

Importantly, as a form of street spirituality, outward dedication to Islam acts as a shorthand to communicate to others on road what an individual is no longer comfortable with. Instantly grasped, *mandem* come to understand and respect that their colleague may be embarking on a different kind of life. The daily discipline, structure, and ontological certainties of the Islamic faith provide the

scaffolding for those coming from England's most disadvantaged urban spaces to build a life away from the stresses and destructiveness of street-criminal lifestyles.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our analysis of participant accounts and the online material relating to rap music and culture in the UK demonstrate the significance of the sacred as a space of redemption for those men 'trapped' in in the criminogenic environments of 'the road'. Islam's enfolding of the material in the spiritual, its rich culture and warmth resonate, and the faith has become a prime mode of contemporary English street spirituality. For some the way in which the faith orders and structures everyday life and offers ontological certainty, belonging and a sense of warmth are particularly appealing. It might be surmised that the material world is viewed as offering limited agency, demanding vast amounts of emotional energy, and ultimately exposing those on road to toxic levels of harm and trauma. By contrast the spiritual world arguably offers a space where such men find the space to exist and explore. They can weigh up the spiritual traditions they were raised with and study the Islamic religion that has resonated so deeply within their culture. Here there is agency and a space for fruitful reflection, identity building and everyday practice that allows for a complete rupture from former modes of being:

> 'The theologies, bodily rituals and sensorial practices that shape the religious subjectivities of these … Muslims are neither the product of unconscious socialization nor the inculturation of individuals into monolithic traditions, but the reflexive crafting of a habitus amidst pluralism, diversity, and a range of tensions and potential conflicts. It is an instauration marked by self reflection [and], the pursuit of inner conviction… (Mellor and Shilling, 2014b: 288).

The openness and capacity for freedom represented by this idea, the harmony and balancing of traditions, stand in stark contrast to the way in which the material world is experienced as paradoxically devoid of opportunity and requiring of ravenous ambition, paranoid scheming, brutal violence and producing of untrammelled trauma.

Islam might be viewed as so street culturally popular due to the ways in which its theology and practice is understood by those on road, but also perhaps also because it has a rich, venerable history seemingly apart from those forces of western-capitalism and 'whiteness' that are seen to marginalise *mandem on road* so severely. On the other hand, these men experience their journey to redemption in individual terms which arguably leads away from the kinds of structural analyses that might help them to understand why they experience the material world in such chronic, toxic ways. Their newfound religious and practical identities need not challenge conceptions of rugged masculinity that once may have underpinned their material-consumerism. The extent to which those in the socio-economic margins seek salvation demonstrates their essential humanity and inherently challenges discourses that other and pathologize the poor. This article has highlighted some of the kinds of moral reasoning undertaken by those who are embroiled in street crime and violence. The problem lies in a system of material-rationalism that (ironically) irrationally restricts itself and ultimately makes itself of very limited value to far too many. How can the material eclipse the spiritual in a world of enforced and unnecessary scarcity, where the spiritual offers such generosity, openness, and potential?

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