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From Road to Path: The Symbolic Roles of Islam Amongst South London Gangs

Abstract:

Two different understandings of the symbolic repertoire of Islam for young British gang members have been used in this article. Islam was used to justify participation in gang life, a function of rationalisation and protection. Islamic ideas were exploited to rationalise their criminal enterprises. The repertoire was also used to find a path out of criminality, perceived as a clear structure to finding constructive alternatives to reshape their lives. Based on 18 interviews, this paper examines these aspects of the symbolic repertoire, and shows how there is no monolithic interpretation for the role played by Islam.

Key Words: Islam, Violent Extremism, Gangs, Radicalisation, Terrorism, Political Violence

Introduction

From 2000 until c. 2011, there was a shift amongst some young men in Brixton from a life of 'the road' – the idea of engaging in criminal activities on the street and in local estates – to the notion of the 'the path', the concept that a non-criminal life could be organised around Islam and religious practice. Understanding this shift, from the CREAM ('cash rules everything around me') mentality, to one which saw activities through an Islamic lens requires careful consideration. For some of these young men, the turn to Islam provided a structure for the (re)organisation of their lives which was a positive and constructive alternative to the 'road life'. For others, the turn to Islam provided a new way to rationalise and justify elements of their criminal enterprise. The transition was fluid and dynamic, with individuals often fluctuating between these two perspectives – or holding both simultaneously. What united both perspectives was a sense of being Muslim as an alternative to the *status quo ante*, and a belief that Islam provided a mechanism for resistance to social structures which they felt were discriminatory and repressive.

A study of the Islamicisation of gangs in South East London provides a window to understand how identity and perceptions of exclusion and injustice can create a context

where religion is more than a theological rubric of faith; it becomes a political repertoire that justifies behaviours (Tilly, 2002, 2003, 2006). The South London scene is important because it represents a case where there are alternative ideological interpretations of Islam; a site of conflict between those Muslims who seek, for example, to use the idea of resistance in Islam as a justification for criminality, and those who see Islam as providing a structure to resist street of life and criminal behaviour.

Amongst Salafi Muslim, in particular, the idea of the "path" of Islam is important concept. It indicates the desire to make one's life as congruent as possible with the five pillars of Islam, but also captures the way that while the direction of the path is clear, the travelling along it may not be straightforward (Inge, 2016, Chapter 4). In this way, it is the path to Islam, the path to the "right version" of Islam (*al-firqa al-najiya* or "the group that attains salvation), and it is therefore a specific path to righteousness, as opposed to a path to hell and damnation. Salafi's especially conceive of the idea of *manhaj of the Salaf al-Saalih* (the path of the pious predecesseors/companions of the prophet) view their path of Salafiya as being the most (if not only) righteous one, as, from their perspective, it is the one that is closest to the origins of Islam. In the case of this research, this idea of the righteous path isn't just contrasted with the way of the criminal "road life", but becomes a search for salvation in the face of temptation and injustice.

Methodology

The field research presented here is based on existing contacts in a largely African and Caribbean heritage 'revert' community in South-East London where 'deep hanging out' was undertaken to access individuals who either had first-hand knowledge of, or had observed 'street life', and to help shape and determine what forms of cultural expression might help to interpret this scenario. This research is based on a qualitative and ethnographic approach, which required a combination of participant observation and engagement.

In this case study, contacts had become friends and acquaintances while conducting earlier research with the Brixton Salafi community about their efforts to confront 'extremism'. Knowledge and understanding of their work in this field, and of the kinds of issues which members of this community encountered were based on years of engagement, the subject of the tension and fluidity between 'the road' and 'the path' being an issue which they referred to, rather being something which was derived from a sterile, external, academic perspective.

Accessing individuals who are currently or were formerly involved in illegal activity, whether they be 'gang' crime or 'terrorist', raises a number of legal and ethical issues which are virtually insurmountable. As Venkatesh points out, there is a thin line between being a 'good' researcher or being liable for prosecution as an accessory to criminal activity (Venkatesh, 2008). This is a point borne in mind by contemporary researchers into terrorism and extremism in the UK, especially where guidance on accessing extremist materials sets out many of the potential legal pitfalls in light of the UK Terrorism Acts (Universities UK, 2019). *Quantitative* research amongst hard to reach or clandestine groups is either extremely difficult or of limited value – because either the basis on which the data is collected (say, census data to locate populations) or the shaping of the questions (to be able to turn them into variables for multivariate analysis) may be replete with assumptions. The arguments in favour of deploying a qualitative *deep hanging out* strategy for research become more compelling, building on Geertz's concept of deep hanging out ("the value, the feasibility, the legitimacy, and thus the future of localized, long-term, close-in, vernacular field research"), as it provides access to communities which are either harder to reach, or treat external actors with suspicion (Geertz, 1998). As one of Venkatesh's interlocuters quotes, 'With people like us, you should hang out ... No one is going to answer [silly-ass] questions like that. You need to understand how people live on the streets' (2008, p. 21).

This approach is subject to the critique that, as a qualitative strategy for research, the presumptive biases of the researcher will colour the collection, analysis, and subsequent telling of the story of the research which is conducted. Such an approach provides a rich, but potentially narrow view of phenomena within the research community of interest, and is subject to a critique of reflexive bias and of being potentially unrepresentative of the wider subject of research (Charles, 2009, pp. 205-9). There is the potential that this kind of research becomes more about the researcher's engagement with the subject matter, and confirmation of or a challenge to their own biases, rather than presenting the data that is actually being collected.

For Clifford Geertz, this ethnographically inspired 'deep hanging out' is a crucial way to engage in conversations and participant observation that allows the researcher to understand resonant perceptions of issues and events. This is in part accomplished through unstructured conversations based on a modified 'narrative' technique, which seeks to elicit personal experiences and life stories to gain a first-hand account of the relationship between street life and Islam. This article uses direct quotations from these conversations as data, but they remain undated and unreferenced in order to preserve anonymity, and are meant to reflect a degree of observation, especially in terms of vocabulary, more than a definitive factual or

necessarily representative account. All the interviews for this article were undertaken between November 2011 and August 2013. They were conducted with and via existing contacts in the South-East London Muslim and gang communities (with some individuals actively engaging in youth, prison and gang work, and others being former members of such gangs themselves) and were carried out in a variety of settings including the Mosque and cafés. This approach provided an opportunity for the researcher to better understand the power of what Smith (1986) calls the 'myth-symbol' complex and the *mythomoteur* – the collection and maintenance of myths, memories and symbols of a group in both a contemporary context and across time, preserving and maintaining the form content of identity.

Eighteen interviews were conducted for this research all amongst individuals who had embraced Islam as part of being a gang, some whilst in prison. It is worth noting that all the interviewees were men, predominantly of Afro-Caribbean heritage, and all were practising and observant Muslims. This has obvious effects on the findings presented here. On the one hand, it only captures those who ultimately view their faith as an important element of their identity, and who view Islam as playing a constructive and positive role in re-orientating their life from criminal activity into one which is law abiding, and from their point of view, constructive and peaceful. What is not captured in this research are individuals who continue to nominally practise Islam, but who use this faith as justification to continue in their 'road life'. An aspect of this selection bias is addressed in trying to understand how these individuals may have understood, in the gang context – or at a personal level, Islam as being used to rationalise criminal activity. Additionally, as all the interviewees were male, another potential avenue for research here would have been to deconstruct this data through the lens of masculinity, criminality, minority status, and Islam. This article focuses instead on unpacking what Islam meant for these individuals in terms of being in the road life, or trying to use Islam as a structure to exit the criminal life.

The Muslim Hype

For gang members in South-East London between 2000 and 2005 it was clear that something had changed. From the street perspective 'the Muslim thing had happened' and 'the Taliban, rebellion and Islam' were in the air (Pritchard, 2008). Between the 9/11 attacks of 2001, and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2002 and 2003 respectively, the world seemed orientated to a conflict between Islam and the West – often reduced down to George W. Bush's 'Axis of Evil' against the forces of Western Liberal Democracy.

'Taking Muslim' was a phenomenon that was, in part, being passed from 'olders' to 'youngers', from uncles to nephews, older brothers to younger brothers. The 'hype' of Islam was cascading down the street – and it was evident for these young men that:

> *When the hype of Islam was going around in South London – I don't really know where it started from. I was a bit late. I'd heard of it – but I was one of the late ones to it. The way I heard about it was when my Uncle came out of prison, after about 3 years. The time before when he went to prison – he came out and was talking about Islam. I was about 13 or 14. He was still doing bad things – and it would make me laugh, because he was talking about Islam, but he was still rolling with the bad boys and with guns and all this stuff going on and armed robbery.*
> - Interviewee SL

There was also a crowd effect at this time. Those gang members who embraced Islam talk about how once one member, or one whole gang, embraced Islam. Some described this as part of a fad:

> *…I always knew, and another issue that I found, you know, at that time a lot of brothers were coming to Islam, but it was more for, I always knew it was like a fashion thing, because I saw it from being in college because a lot of people that were Muslim, but they were using it to be protected from, you know, maybe gangs, and they were using it, I don't know what was in their hearts, but didn't practice Islam in totality ….*
> - Interviewee AK

Others viewed the embrace of Islam as a function of peer behaviour and peer pressure. Take for example:

> *A brother gave me dawa in 2003/2004 … I was only 13 or 14, I didn't really know what Islam was, apart from praying. Cause of me growing up in the school that I went to, and my peers, I was a product of my environment at the time. I could only see what my peers saw, and was misled.*
> - Interviewee BB

For another former gang member:

> *Before I got kicked out of school I took Muslim at 16. A good majority of my friends took Muslim – it was a South London thing, so I started to think about it. This was about*

2006. So I remember I talked about it to one of my friends – and he didn't know much, but he gave me some of the basics – like we believe in one God, and stuff like this. Then he gave me some tapes – it was on Tahweed – that there is one God, that we have to worship, Allah – and that he had a messenger – and that I had to go to Jumma on Friday.

- Interviewee WF

This 'hype' was all pervasive, transcending postcodes, gang memberships and ages. For one young gang member who had only just entered into secondary school at the time:

When I was in about year 9, that was when SMS [a Muslim gang] came out. I was about 13 or 14. That was when the Muslim thing became popular in South London. My cousin was in SMS. He didn't eat pork and those things – I thought it was like an Asian thing not to do that. I thought everyone in the world was a Christian. Then it started coming down to the young people - everyone was embracing Islam. Everyone in the school. Everyone started wearing scarves. It was the hype.

- *Interviewee AB*

For many of these young men, the emergence of Islam on the streets of South London was something a bit strange, but had seemingly become deeply important for gang 'elders' and others coming out of prison around the period 2005 and 2006. For the likes of Shaheed above, it wasn't just about family members and friends coming out of prison and espousing the merits of Islam, but also the evidence of a wider fashion in and around South East London at the time:

When I used to go to the High Street in Brixton, we used to see lots of people wear Islamic scarfs. And I was thinking to myself, why is everyone wearing this then.

- Interviewee SL

For others, there was deep initial scepticism about what it meant to become Muslim, and a sense that it was part of a dangerous fad. For one interviewee, it even seemed like people were joining a cult:

Being on the ends everyone was taking the Shahada etc. and I wasn't Muslim. And one of my closest friends, like we were raised together … we've always been together, you know. … And its like, one day, he's like Rah, you know I took my Shahada though, innit. You know I become Muslim. And for me it was like, Rah,

my man's become Muslim, like, this thing, this cult thing, its getting closer to home, bruv [sic], like what's going on here. So I was kinda scared, like Rah, what's he got himself into. Like, you know. And so from when I heard that, I was like yeah, I hear you man, you gotta do your thing, innit. But really, like, for me, it was like Rah, what has my man got himself into. … Like, remember, bearing in mind I'm saying I thought it was a cult, you know. I thought it was this like some, you know, I didn't think it was a rightful thing. And I have never ever known about it, so it was even more strange for me.

- Interviewee AR2

Get Down or Lay Down

The relationship between Islam and gang violence started to come to public attention in reporting on the 'Muslim Boys' gang of South London, first mentioned in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, and gaining particular prominence after 2005. The Muslim Boys were portrayed as a form of 'radical' Islamic group that sought to recruit (often described as 'groom' or 'turn') 'vulnerable' young men, who were already participating in low to mid-level criminal activities, such as robbery and drug dealing, to a form of Islam which sanctioned violence against non-Muslims (gangs and 'civilians') and encouraged them to support, if not participate, in Al Qaeda style activities (BBC Online, 2005; Ashford, T. et al., 2007, p. 4). Indeed, during this time, some young men in South-East London, previously involved in criminal activities including (but not limited to) gang membership, physical violence and intimidation, drug dealing, robbing ('steaming'), property theft – all often termed 'Street Life' by former and current actors, embraced (particularly what they perceived, though many would dispute) as an observant an orthodox Salafi-inspired form of Islamic practice. At the time, they were described by newspapers as an established 'offshoot of Al Qaeda', alleged to have plotted to kill prison guards, celebrate anniversaries of 9/11, and avenge the death of Osama Bin Laden through a full-scale prison riot (Box-Turnbull. 2011a, p. 11, 2011b, 2011c, p. 31, 2006, p.17; Armstrong, 2011, p.11).

The murder of Adam Marriott was the pivotal moment when both the police and the media identified the new threat of Islamic gangs in South-East London. Three individuals, who were reported by the media (via tip-offs from those working on Operation Trident) to have been members of the Muslim Boys were arrested and prosecuted for the murder of Marriott, who was alleged to have been a member of the Peel Dem Crew (Cohen, 2005). Accordingly, it was claimed that Marriott had been murdered because of his refusal to

embrace Islam. For another member of the PDC, who had been a close friend of Marriott, the link between Islam and gang culture was not clear cut – he described Marriott's murder by saying that the 'truth was more complicated than a hyped up story about a group of kids shooting someone because he wouldn't convert to Islam ... feuds in Angel Town [South-East London] were rarely simple' (Pritchard, 2008, p. 245). The three tried for Marriott's murder were eventually found not guilty. On the one hand Pritchard suggests in *Street Boys* that it was in fact police engaged in Operation Trident itself that had latched on to and bolstered the name Muslim Boys to 'scare the community and everyone in the justice system ... for the judge to give a harsher sentence' during the Marriott trial (p. 246). On the other hand, in the aftermath of the trial, Detective Chief Superintendent John Coles, who was leading Operation Trident at the time, said that while the Muslim Boys were responsible for at least two execution-style murders as well as other criminal acts, he believed the Muslim Boys to have been 'over-hyped', and they were 'just nasty, ordinary south London criminals' (Cohen, 2005).

What the Adam Marriott murder did, on the streets of South East London, however, was to create a 'hype' around what people on the streets were calling 'Get Down or Lay Down' – that gang members and people in the road life either had to 'get down' with Islam, or lay down all their cash, supplies and activities for those who had embraced it. In many cases, few could actually come up with concrete examples of this happening, yet all felt as though it had been very important at the time. For one former gang member:

> *In Brixton, there was that period of get down or lay down – making people become Muslim. And this was about the fact that in Islam, like in every religion, there are bad Muslims and good Muslims. To be honest, I never been approached by it … But basically, that get down lay down stuff, I won't say it was myth, cause it was going on – and other people said they were getting with it. But obviously the Muslims be – if you don't get down with them, you got to lay down. And at the time it sounds good – it's like, yeah, I am with a big crew now, and no one going to mess with us, but no one was really getting layed down. Some people say they have experience of people getting layed down and that, but I reckon it's a figure of speech.*
> - *Interviewee AR*

This idea that it wasn't actually true – but that the impact of the get down or lay down mentality was still important – is echoed in a number of accounts from this period of time. Take for example the account of one young gang member:

Then there were the horror stories. That people was being killed because they wouldn't become Muslim and those things. From what I understood later on – it wasn't really that you got killed for not being a Muslim – it was more political. But at the time, it was on the street that SMS rolled up and chased you if you weren't a Muslim. Not because it was a terrorism thing, but because these are the olders, and now they are Muslim. We had to follow them before, now we have to keep following them. It wasn't Islam itself – it was the gang.

- Interviewee AB

Another individual involved in the road life at the time stated:

And it did happen. That's the reason a lot of people took to Shahada – to get that protection – and people thinking, now I can do what I do and have that protection, so people can leave me alone. It did get quite a bit hectic for a while, and now obviously it has died down. I remember one time we were hanging around in our estate, and the [gang] elders were there, and they gathered us all together and told us to go pray, that it was time to pray. I was thinking, wow, like – they're saying their Muslim, but they're still in gang deals and shootouts or whatever. They never tried to explain – they just did it. Maybe out of ignorance. They thought, if someone is a non-Muslim, I am allowed to kill him. It just got a bit ridiculous – it was when good and bad got mixed together. Even though they were Muslim, and everyone in that gang are Muslim they were still a gang.

-Interviewee SL

The choice was more than about violence, however. It may have been forced on other gangs, as it became known on the street that an Islamic gang believed that it had a right to rob, harass, and commit violence against non-Muslim gangs. It wasn't that there was no violence between Muslim gangs – it was merely that violence between Muslim gangs was inherently *status quo ante*. Where a gang wasn't Muslim, rival Muslim gangs could even come together to take their territory and their business in what was perceived as a justifiable way. However, at the same time, some describe that period of embracing almost in business terms – a chance to increase the reach and power of their criminal networks. In a sense, the embrace of Islam by these gangs created a kind of identity arms race for legitimacy and power on the streets of South London. For one former gang member it was clear:

Even though there was normal street going around the Muslim thing, all the ones that were Muslim were networking from whatever the local Mosque. I could meet my friends at a local Jumma … we would go to Jumma, and then talk about certain things after – we thought we were doing the positive thing by going to Jumma, even though we were doing the negative thing by talking about gang beef and drug deals afterwards. It's like we had a network now. People who weren't Muslim never had a chance to get into that network now. If someone was a Muslim, you'd have more love for him that your friend who wasn't. If you weren't a Muslim you were getting robbed. … after they took Muslim, they probably have more of that feeling that they have do something – have more protection for their brother – love for that person to the extent that they feel like they have to kill for them. Now they are used to having more love for their brother than yourself as an excuse to do whatever they were doing before anyway.

> -Interviewee AK

In fact, the interviewees suggested that it became more dangerous not to embrace Islam, as it provided a twofold effect: it gave a moral rationale for participating in the road life, and simultaneously gave a degree of protection from harassment by other gangs that had embraced Islam. In this way, the pressure on gangs and members of gangs to claim an Islamic identity became a form of bandwagoning. Once one local gang nominally embraced Islam, it forced a choice on rival gangs to do the same or face conflict. One of the key factors for the impact and resonance of Islam on the street was its power to cross previous gang, estate and post-code divides. One interviewee described a situation where:

… a guy was about to get beaten, and the guy was going up to him to hit him – and someone said nah, he's a Muslim, you can't touch him. And I was like, wow, this Muslim thing is actually protecting people now. As long as you are a Muslim, that's it, you're part of the gang I would say. As long you're a Muslim, and you're in this road life, you can roll – you can just hang out in this, be a part of whatever you're doing. It even got to the point where when people were doing drug deals, someone would ask if you're a Muslim, and then they'd give you a discount on drugs and stuff. You're a Muslim? We can do more drug deals or whatever.

> -   Interviewee SL

For these interviewees, these were not isolated experiences, and they felt that the majority of gang activity at the time was dominated by the get down or lay down mentality. As one interviewee said:

It got to the stage where so much people have taken Shahada now. I'd say at that time, from my experience, at least 70 percent of anyone classed as road man was claiming Muslim at some stage just to have that protection – because at the time it was the hype. Over time, we're seeing that no one really cares about Islam – there's no hype over it. It's only the sincere ones that are still practising – still going to the Mosque – still trying to help out the community.

- Interviewee SL

Street Resistance

For many of the gang members, Islam had a special resonance, because it was considered as being 'real' compared to other religious and political discourses. The resonance of Islam amongst these young men was not *ex nihilo* – neither random nor without meaning. The overall context of Islam over the course of the first ten years of the 21st century was transferred, (re) constructed and embraced by those for whom it resonated. For these young gang members, the resonance of Islam was not least about the symbolic meaning of Islam on the global stage – and the way in which the performance of a repertoire of contentious politics on a global platform (the notion of Islamic resistance to the West, the idea of Islamist politics, the belief that this is a new and different axis of political orientation that is neither Socialist nor Western – and not subject to European and 'White' dominance and control) bleeds into a street level discourse – and is transposed to have meaning on a small corner of Brixton, London.

The power and resonance of this Islamic symbolism meant that some viewed it as having a kind of discourse of power and resistance against "the system". On the streets of some parts of South-East London, 'the Taliban' might refer to a set of orthodox and militant Afghans on the television and in the news, but it may also be used to portray a mind-set of those willing to challenge the perceived hegemony of "white" non-Muslim society – and so translated to the street, it means understanding the bases by which some view and interact with the 'feds' (police). The streets buttressed this interpretation. The strange mix of clerics, such as Abdullah Al-Faisal and Abu Hamza al-Misri, and former gang members who had converted to Islam in prisons who were all decrying the 'West's demonization of Islam' helped to emphasise the racial prejudice that was seen to hamstring the potential for economic and social advancement for these same gang members (Pritchard, 2008). Former Chairman of the Brixton Masjid, Dr. Abdul Haqq Baker, has written extensively about how firebrand scholars such as Abdullah Faisal and Abu Hamza al Misri were attempting to 'radicalise' young men into perpetrating terrorist violence. (For extensive

discussion of this see: Lambert, 2008a, 2009, 2010; Lambert & Spalek, 2008, pp. 527-550; Baker, 2011.)

The Islamic repertoire promoted by individuals such as Abdullah al Faisal provided a degree of empowerment and resistance. Al-Faisal (also known as Faisal Al Jamayki) is a Jamaican, born Trevor William Forrest, who grew up in Jamaica as an Evangelical Christian, and travelled to Trinidad, Guyana and Saudi Arabia after embracing Islam as an 18 year-old. He was a major player in the London-based jihadi scene in the 1990s seeking (unsuccessfully) to take over the Brixton Masjid, and was ultimately convicted of inciting racial hatred and sentenced for 9 years in 2003. Subsequent to his release on parole, he was deported from the UK and permanently banned from re-entering. Al Faisal sought to instrumentalise Islam amongst the gangs by promulgating the idea that Islam was a form of resistance; arguing that Islam provided justification for criminality which constituted a challenge and opting out of a system which was stacked against them, and thereby justifying their road life.

Abdullah al Faisal consistently sought to promote the idea that Islam was a way to rectify colonial injustices of the past, and to confront discrimination in the present. For him, true Islam was a way to reject inherently unjust systems that co-opt the repressed. In fact, for Abdullah Al-Faisal, the necessity to opt out of the system is clear: 'The kuffars [non-believers] use DSS to buy you out, poverty leads to kuffar' (Quote from Lecture on Al-Wala Wal-Bara in *Abdullah El-Faisal al-Jamayki: A Critical Study of his Statements, Errors, and Extremism in Takfeer*, 2011, p. 169). This means that those that don't understand the link between Islamic identity and the need to challenge the system cannot be truly Muslim. For al Faisal:

> *And if you are living this country and a person approaches you and asks you "what do you think about the system?" and you say to yourself, or you say to the person "Alhamdullilah [thanks be to God] it's not a bad system, it's a good system, even though my name is Muhammad, I am allowed to sign on and on top that I live in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, I can't complain". Now you are in this system and you can't see anything wrong with the system you say "it's okay"! Just give that answer you become kuffar! (*p. 100)

This required revolutionary engagement with the system such that:

> *You're allowed to take these benefits that these kuffars offer you, because everything that the kuffar owns is yours. Every single thing that the kuffar owns is yours so you're allowed to take all the benefits that they offer you and you're even allowed to have four*

wives and put them on benefit, so hope that they give you a mansion in Hampstead Heath. (p. 130)

Al Faisal's messages resonated deeply with young gang members at this time, who had the perception that social structures were stacked against them, and felt that they had little choice or option but to engage in criminal activity, and that criticism of the 'road life' was little more than white mainstream society rejecting their reality. For the likes of Abdullah El-Faisal, it is the white hegemon that seeks to control black Muslims, but not only because the system is racist, but rather because it seeks to disempower and diminish Islam as the true message which poses such a substantial existential threat to the British way of life. On the street, one former criminal who embraced Islam sums it up when he says:

Rebellion is attractive. The Taliban and all that. The goodness of religion. This what they feel they are about. We wanted to be part of a movement and a rebellion. You are hitting up the system – and lots of people don't like the system (Pritchard, 2008, p. 226).

This link – between criminality, resistance, and the wider narrative of conflict between Islam and the West – led some to feel as though the road life was a form of striking back at the system that was against them. For one interviewee, the way that this kind of argument resonated was clear:

When someone has come from a violent background where they're familiar with violence, these people… when you take someone who is already involved in crime and hurting people and this, that and the other, and you give them what seems like a more righteous thing. Because look, when your'e robbing and stealing from people, your'e doing it for selfish reasons, because you want to be accepted in society, so you want nice things. You want to be accepted by guys, girls, you want people to stare at you when you come outside the club. So you do it for your own selfish views. But when someone gives you the reason that there are innocent women and children being killed, and here is the video tape, and these people believe like you believe… That's it! What you're gonna do if a guy has no knowledge of Islam and you sit him down in front of babies getting their heads chopped off, women getting raped, innocent men getting dragged out of their house by soldiers in uniform and getting stabbed up and stuff. And then you also get accounts by the speaker saying you know in paradise you're get a reward for doing this … Then of course, its a noble cause! Before you were just fighting

because you were just harming people because you wanted selfish things, now you are doing it to make the world a better place.

- Interviewee HT

This process of fomenting resistance against the British state was not just couched in terrorist terms. For the interviewees, these approaches felt "real", as it combined what they understood as authoritative and legitimate knowledge of Islam, and the concurrent application of an Islamic justification for criminal activity amongst the gangs as a form of resistance to a system which they perceived as racist and discriminatory. In this way, the sense of 'realness' for Islam was more than an individual's search for moral rationalisation of criminality and the fear of not being in the cohort of Muslim gangs. By embracing Islam, it provided a sense of community, coherence and moral duty and purpose amongst criminal groups, according a degree of respect amongst rival gangs and individuals that transcended previous splits – both on the streets and in prisons. For this interviewee, it was a manipulation of an Islamic perspective that argued that there should be "more love for your brother and less focus on the individual", in order to solidify these new gang networks and relationships:

The gangs that were Muslim – you don't have no problem with them. That's the sad thing. See, here in South London it's like people – they're already in gangs and unwilling to change themselves. So they take on that love for your brother, love for yourself, so that all the other gangs that are Muslim – they are all linked up with each other. But as for problems, we never had any trouble between ourselves.

-Interviewee AL

Rationales were constructed for participation in criminal activities, but only in nominally 'Islamic' ways. For example, another interviewee refers to how gangs approached 'scholars':

In terms of the stealing thing, it happened in various ways, I mean one of the ways was, these brothers, they already made up their mind, in a lot of instances, what they wanted to do, and they just looking for someone to comfort their souls in terms of what they wanted to do in terms of stealing. So in some instances they'd go to to the scholar and they would say to him: look is it permissible to do A, B, C, D. And in those instances he would say yes, and in some instances he would say no. For example, brothers started to take loans from the bank and not pay it back. He said it's not permissible because you are signing, it's not permissible why, because you sign an agreement to pay back a riba [interest], which is a sin in itself. But

taking their wealth, credit card fraud, whatever, that is permissible. And in some instances, there were some things that were actually courteous, part of the methodology that look: they are killing us with this tax we are paying, they are killing us with our wealth, we have to steal this wealth back from them, which eventually led to the Fatwa.

- Interviewee AY

Interviewees described the effect of this justification as an argument that sought to turn criminality into a 'righteous thing'" but for many the contradiction between trying to practice Islam and simultaneously engaging in criminality was problematic.

The Structural Discourse of Constructive Resistance

The role of Islam was double-edged for many of these young men, because while on the one hand it was used to rationalise criminal activity, on the other hand many of these individuals were also searching for ways out of the road life. This meant that while Islam had a power of realness, resistance and rationalisation on the road, it also was part of the 'path' out of the road life. From this perspective, Islam provided a means by which to structure personal change to attain a peaceful existence and wider social acceptance. It was not that this did not make Islam a form of resistance. In essence, it became a combination of a structure for the reorganisation of their lives, but on their terms, and not on the terms of what they understand as the white hegemon. In this context, Islam became symbolically important because it focused on the rejection of street violence and the insatiable, and what they perceived as ultimately immoral, quest for the material. Take for example one interviewee, who stated:

What it was, was on coming out of my second sentence, me seeing my Mum, and the amount of trauma and stress she was going through, and the chase for the duniya [the temporal worlds and its earthly concerns], it was too strong for me to the point where I was willing to kill people for money as well. I got to the point where I was like how could I have been so mislead; the point where a man would do anything just for material things …

- Interviewee BB

In this context, the practice of Islam provided an alternative focus from the road life for these individuals, providing them with other activities, and new peer groups. For one interviewee:

So [Islam] was my outlet to get out of that. So I was always used to pray and I, you know, I find that, Alhamdulillah, it is protective for you. Islam can protect you from these things that are bad. In terms of like, you preoccupied in finding out what Islam, for me I was preoccupied in finding out what Islam was about, so that kept me busy in terms of, like, I didn't know I need that, from when I started practising those brothers around that was more practising or they came from a more practising family and they'd always say, you know, that this is Haram, gambling is Haram, you know, chess is Haram - obviously now I know chess is not Haram - but they used to always comment that, you know, reprimand me on the things that I thought maybe I can just do in my leisure time. So I stayed away from those things and I started to research more about Islam and read. So that was the balance, that I was reading more and staying away from the things that I could have done, you know, like gambling, you know, being in gangs, you know, extorting the other inmates - all these other things that people around me were doing in my area that I knew.

- Interviewee AB

The push and pull of the road and the path was a regular feature for those interviewed here. For some, a "moment of truth" was associated with a specific trauma, which led them to question their lives and their criminal activities. Again and again former gang members relate stories of how their participation in gangs was about context (friends, social circles, family issues, lack of educational and economic opportunities), reputation, and a sense that life is only about getting things they couldn't otherwise have. For one interviewee:

Then as we get older, and things get more serious – then there a comes a moment when you realise what path you're gonna take. So for me, that was when one of my friends died from our activities. So either we stop what we are doing, or we carry on – cause now people are dying or going to prison. I had just turned Muslim at that time – and we started to pray – but we still had that attachment with looking for one God, and trying to be a better person. But because we were young, we thought changing our ways wasn't a step we were ready for. So me and my friends, we didn't want to be part of the guys that were just taking Shahada for protection. 'Cause remember, at that time, everyone was turning Muslim, but we didn't want anything to do with them, because we had actually thought about it before taking Shahada, and we spoke about it, and we did actually want to change our lives around. But it was just about trying to

take those steps that actually would have made it a reality – the right steps that would change our lifestyle – but we didn't have that resource to do what we intended to do from taking our Shahada. So I carried on being Muslim – but still living the lifestyle – trying to avoid the voodoo, and the other things that a Muslim shouldn't do, but secretively , we were doing things that were wrong – we were still doing sins.

- Interviewee SL

For others, it is not so much a specific traumatic moment, but rather the realisation of what their lives had become as a result of participating in gangs. This was particularly true of individuals who had served prison sentences. For one interviewee:

And then you come out of jail and the whole thing starts again. And then I got arrested again, and I decided, it is about time I get out of this road thing because it is not really working in my favour. But I would come to the mosque and I wouldn't feel comfortable. See, when you're doing sin, you automatically feel paranoid. The brothers that are close to you are your brothers that are helping you – are against you. And the brothers that are bad for you – that are trying to help you do evil, are with you. So you get paranoid – so brothers are looking your way you think they are trying to get you.

- Interviewee BC

While these individuals viewed Islam as providing a means to exit the street life, it was also bound up in how they had survived in gangs and in prison, i.e. with being Muslim as a function of loyalty to gang membership, making their religious practices more complicated than a simple mechanism for exiting from criminal life. Interviewees were worried that old 'beefs' and friendships would drag them back into former criminal behaviours. In this context, Islam provided a framework which helped them to engage in meaningful behavioural change. For one interviewee, visiting the Masjid helped to provide a clear alternative to the street:

While in there [prison], Alhamdulillah, I started to comprehend, cause when they give you an interview in the beginning and then they ask you … I said I'm a Muslim and then that's when, you know, it dawned on me, like I'm Muslim, and I started to think that I am Muslim, ok, yeah, so I decided to look into the Deen[1], not really

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[1] Deen here refers to the way in which a Muslim understands the ways of living their life that adheres to Islamic rules, principles and practices, not least to to provide a path to tohers about what being a good Muslim looks like

much, but gradually, you know, I started to pray. … I found, you know, at that time a lot of brothers were coming to Islam, but it was more for, I always knew it was like a fashion thing, because I saw it from being in college because a a lot of people that were Muslim, but they were using it to be protected from, you know, maybe gangs, and they were using it, I don't know what was in their hearts, but didn't practice Islam in totality. … So I didn't know, because maybe they are practicing but they are still around, and they still have bad elements, you know. … Alhamdulillah, I started to take it seriously because that was the only thing that was a reality, that gave me peace in there. In terms of just the environment you know, people were always fighting, there was always some sort of mess happening, like people that, you know, you think that are your friends, they would just do something, so me personally, I didn't want to get into that, I didn't want to get sucked into that whole gang thing.

- Interviewee AW

Part of the attraction for some of these interviewees was the simplicity and clarity which an Islamic structure provided for them. The path was clear – and required adherence to distinct rules, which could be explained simply. Islam was perceived as answering the questions most relevant to their lives, rather than speaking at them, or lecturing them about the relative merits and problems of the street. For one former gang member, this literally meant answering questions about religion and life that no one else seemed to address:

I lived with Grandma from 5. She's kind of like a Pastor – so I was brought up a strong Christian … then I had a brother who started to send me letters saying to read about Islam, read up about Islam. He was in jail at the time. So was one of my good friends, who was writing the same thing. Both were telling me to read up about Islam. And I was thinking, what do I want to read up about Islam for… Then one day, there was beef with some Muslims, and I end up doing some research about this Islam thing. So I said to myself, let's go to the Mosque to speak to the Imam there. So I went to the Mosque, and speak to the Imam. Why I came out a Muslim, was because when I asked a question, it made me feel comfortable. For years I was going to church, asking who is God, who is Jesus. And every single time they would avoid these questions or move the topic. I came to the Mosque, and I asked – who was Jesus – and they said straight away that Jesus was the prophet of God. Straight away I believed it and I felt confident in it. So I embraced Islam from there. That was beginning 2005.

- Interviewee SS

In the case of this study, the attraction for these former criminals and gang members is clear – it is the order and structure put in place by Islam, specifically Salafi Islam. As one interviewee said, the role of Islam in reshaping his life was well-defined:

> *The [Islamic] way – it's like a law that keeps things on the way. It helps – its strict rules are like a law that you can't change. It helps the whole religion and makes the whole community feel as one, and makes boundaries. I feel that this is what we need. Even though it is hard for people to practice – once you look at it like the boundaries, it helps you practice and helps the community. When I felt like I had to change my life, I felt like I might as well change my life properly. No matter what you feel if you are road man, or this and that, and they all say I am going to change one day – and they know that what they're doing is not right, even if they're not Muslim, they know what is right and what is not right. You know that if you was going to change, you was going to change properly, and not pay any attention to what other people see as weaknesses. Everybody knows what the weaknesses of this life is now anyway – the phone, all the distraction from what it means to worship God in an Islamic way.*
> - Interviewee SL

For another interviewee, it was clear that the sense of order and rules associated with adherence to religious observance were directly related to how it felt to follow the 'right' or the 'wrong' path – the road life or a righteous life. He states:

> *This takfiri [Islamic practice perceived as justifying violence] stuff is attractive because it falls in line with the road, basically. It falls in line with certain stuff they want to do. When you fall in line with the right path, you know you're restricted from doing a lot of stuff you want to do. And then some people think this is boring – they want something more exciting – something which is more about this road life. But Islam doesn't really encourage that – when you follow the ways of the Salaf it doesn't really encourage you like that. It tells you to do good, and to have love for yourself and have love for your brother and all this other stuff.*
> - Interviewee SS

For the interviewees, Islam provided a structure through which to know the difference between the road and the path:

I've met people, I mean I've shared a flat with someone who was in prison in America for doing some awful things and he was the kind of guy that you'd sort of look at and if he was upset, you know, you'd feel scared. But Islam is something that transcends that. I think it's something what causes people to go off and make what I'd consider to be incorrect decisions, and is something that runs deeper into social class and deprivation and want. Because you do get, I mean you get people who through Islam, they correct themselves to no end, and you know they train themselves to have patience where they never used to have patience and Islam beautifies their character and gives them, you know, makes them better human beings.

- Interviewee AL

The idea that patience comes from the practice of 'real' Islam is a concept which was present in many of the interviews, and was a key element of the difference between Islam in the road, justifying criminality, and Islam as a path, the way to constructively reorganise one's life. For one interviewee:

Personally, I would say Islam has helped in a way I've become more patient. You look at life at a different perspective. Sometimes, obviously, we are not all perfect, you get a bit aggressive and, like, I'm a quiet person, but I still got a little bit of anger issues, like, if you talk a way or you look at me a way, I'm gonna do something to you. But I'm a bit quiet. So coming to Islam and knowing you must humble yourself, yeah, like the anger you shouldn't really take out on brothers, or take it out on anyone basically, like non-Muslims, because its the wrong information given to the non-believers basically …So for instance, like, me going to jail, as a Muslim, it helped me to be more calm and know that whatever is gonna happen is gonna happen, just be calm, pray, and my cell-mate at the time he was Muslim and he told me, its a test from your lord, so be strong, don't break down, don't talk about your case to no one, just be humble, pray to Allah, and Allah will see that you get out of here.

- Interviewee SS

These sentiments are then reflected in how these interviewees consider what is 'real' Islam, versus what is 'fake' Islam. This was pointed out by one interviewee:

Real Islam is what is confirmed in the Qu'ran and Sunna … Obviously we see a certain issue and then we check against the Qu'ran and Sunna and then we follow that. The

more you try to apply that sincerely, the stronger you resist temptation of the road 'ting [sic] – the more you find what is haram – well for every haram there is a halal. So instead of listening to music you listen to Qu'ran – it's better for your heart, it makes you feel better – this is from experience. So you know, for every haram there is a halal – so when you know this – when you know why there is a reason you are doing what you're doing, it helps you to do it, and this definitely helps you with temptation. You have to be willing to strive – it's all a test.

- Interviewee AB

Interestingly, many interviewees saw this evolution from road to path as being a continuum of experience. They didn't perceive a clear separation of who they were or what mattered, but they viewed Islam as providing a sense of purpose which allowed them to adapt to life outside of criminality. In this way, they considered their embracing as justifying the authenticity and claims that they were making in the moment. The embrace of Islam lent a credibility to the realness of their past road life, whilst ameliorating some of the old divisions – between gangs, estates or post codes. For one interviewee:

And when I went to Mosque, I see so many different men in there – those with cane row [hair] and piercing. I was like, hold on, you can find this in Mosque – I hadn't realised that Islam welcomes everybody. It was a bit surprising to me – I hadn't realised that Islam accepts everybody. It's like we are all going to be judged by one, it's not for man to judge man – we can advise people, but not judge.

- Interviewee AW

For many of these young men, that sense of authenticity ('realness'), which had been such a key element of gang life, is crucial in their attraction to Islam as well. One interviewee explains:

And people nowadays say, when I become Muslim, I want to become a real Muslim, I don't want to be weak. I don't want to take to internet, these women, all these distractions. This is what attracts to the religion – even if you're in prison. … you want to be classed as a real Muslim. No matter what trial you are going through, you still carrying on worshipping God. And if they're Muslim, and they're not doing it – they still have it in the back of their head that one day I'll do it the real way. I think this is being pure – it's being enlightened – trying to avoid the distractions of the world.

- Interviewee SL

Conclusion

The two elements of Islam for these interviewees – the idea of Islam as being part of the *road* life, and the idea that Islam provides a *path* out of it – sheds some insight into the way that Islam is not monolithic in its effect. It simultaneously constitutes multiple symbolic repertoires, which can be diametrically opposed. Furthermore, in this context, the interviewees demonstrate the potentially confusing way that the appeal of Islam in the road life, comradery, community and legitimacy, which contributes to criminality, can be a constructive force when channelled into strategies for disengagement from criminality, providing social networks and peer group support so as not to succumb to the temptations of the street. On the one hand, the interviewees show, in no uncertain terms, how Islam, on the streets, had become a mechanism for criminal legitimacy and protection. It was also instrumentalised by individuals like Abdullah al Faisal to link criminal activity with attacks on British society and the state. On the other hand, for the interviewees here, Islam provided a clear rubric for exiting criminal life, and a rigid and rigorous structure for reorganising their lives.

This indicates a degree of complexity about what Islam is and how its symbolic meaning depends on context. Of all of the characteristics, the most challenging one is the sense of resistance. On the one hand, Islam as a form of resistance to a system which is considered to be discriminatory and repressive, was directly exploited to justify theft, violence, even murder in the context of gang life. On the other hand, this sense of resistance directly informs how many of these interviewees view Islam as a powerful idea that that helps them to organise their lives to exit criminality. For them, Islam provides a mechanism for resisting the temptation to rob, steal, and hurt fellow Muslims, let alone fellow members of British society. It creates the basis for patience which they emphasise as so important for this transition. This resistance isn't just about resistance to immoral behaviour, or resistance to the temptations to re-engage in criminal life. It is also about resistance to being part of a system which they felt created the conditions which led them to be tempted by the road life to begin with. Ultimately, the appeal of this resistance in both contexts rests on the rejection of identities and experiences which they feel are imposed from outside of their communities. In the end, the appeal of the symbolic repertoire of Islamically informed constructive resistance allows them to transcend the street, but still find a path which they feel represents the reality of their experiences.

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