Beyond cultural intimacy: The tensions that make truth for India's Ahmadi Muslims

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How should anthropologists write about the public self-presentation of minority groups? In the Indian town of Qadian, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community – a marginal group with a long history of persecution in South Asia – uses visual media to counter hostility and produce images of its members as exemplary Muslims. That such images are artificially produced is an intimate secret shared by the town's residents. Understanding this secret without undermining the political struggle that Ahmadi Muslims are engaged in means moving beyond the idea that truth need be located in either the everyday or the public. For Ahmadis in Qadian, the disjuncture between these realms is a space of possibility that reveals truth.

[Keywords: cultural intimacy, visual media, exemplarity, self-representation, Ahmadiyya, Islam, India]

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, or *Jama'at* as it is commonly referred to by its members, is a transnational sect that emerged in nineteenth century India. Adherents, who are known as Ahmadis, face persecution and social ostracism from other Muslim groups around the world.

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The *Jama'at* is centralized and hierarchical, and uses a variety of media – the most important of which is a satellite television network – to present the world with images of its members as exemplary Muslim subjects who exhibit discipline and serenity in the face of persecution.

As is the case for many precarious minority groups, however, the official self-presentation of the Ahmadiyya *Jama'at* poses an ethical and analytical challenge to anthropology. This difficulty lies in understanding what Andrew Shryock describes as the "off stage": the hidden spaces of the group where "the explicitly public is made, even staged, before it is shown" (Shryock 2004b, 3). Writing about Arab Americans – another group who face intense pressure to represent themselves in a particular public fashion – Shryock demonstrates how ethnography can capture intimacies behind the making of official discourses in a way that is embarrassing for his interlocutors (2004b). Indeed, to even acknowledge the possibility of artifice in the self-representations of minority groups can dangerously destabilize their ability to make political claims (Shryock 2004a, 286). To quote Laura Jeffrey and Matei Candea's work on the similar problem of writing anthropologically about groups who make particular political claims to victimhood, there is "no comfortable mode in which to do" this; it necessarily comes from a place of "discomfort" (Jeffery and Candea 2006, 290).

The idea of "cultural intimacy," which opposes messy, changeable and vulnerable interiors to neat, timeless and controlled exteriors, has been crucial to anthropological attempts to understand the construction of official representations (Herzfeld 1997). Inspired by this notion, anthropologists have often assumed that public representations tend toward identity rendered safe and generic, in contrast to the complexity of intimate private worlds (Maddox 2004; for an earlier formulation of these ideas, see Wilk 1995). When we study up and describe the official discourses of entities such as nation states, exposing a "desire for control" over external self-representations is often seen as politically liberating.[1] This same theoretical

move can nonetheless become fraught with a sense of betrayal when we study groups who use their public image to either counter oppression or claim victimhood. In such instances, ethnography can expose uncomfortable truths, undermine the politics of our interlocutors, and turn the ethnographer into an informant.

One approach to this ethical and analytical dilemma would be to draw upon an idea that is increasingly popular in the anthropology of ethics, and see exterior self-representations as disciplinary practices through which a virtuous interior selfhood might be achieved (e.g. Mahmood 2005). In the case of the Ahmadiyya *Jama'at*, this would mean seeing the Ahmadis' outward presentations of disciplined obedience to a global leader as attempts to cultivate discipline as a virtue. In fact, my ethnography from Qadian shows that this is an incomplete picture. It is paradoxically through the failures of public representations to produce virtuous persons that my interlocutors feel themselves confronted with what they understand to be undeniable religious truth. For Qadian's Ahmadis, exemplary self-representations beckon toward a religious truth not just in spite of the fact that as disciplinary processes they are shot-through with ambiguity and the possibility of failure, but because of it. For Ahmadis, truth emerges from their *Jama'at's* ability to enforce a surface against and in spite of moments of breakdown.

Anthropologists working on the politics of minority self-representation have long assumed that what is hidden can be embarrassing. Even if we argue that neither the official nor the intimate is truer than the other, we are tempted to assume that exposing difference between them can cause embarrassment (Steinmüller 2015). Yet this means overlooking how tensions between the public and the private might produce intimate cultural secrets that are powerful, valued and sustaining. For my Ahmadi interlocutors, neither the intimate and everyday nor the public and official have a monopoly on reality; rather, religious truth is found in the capacity of their *Jama'at* to force a disjuncture between the two.

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The *Jama'at-e-Ahmadiyya*

Ahmadi Muslims are followers of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (c.1835 – 1908), who was born,

lived, and was buried in the Indian Punjabi town of Qadian. Between 2010 and 2012, I

conducted 15 months of fieldwork in Qadian, investigating the lives of the town's minority

Ahmadi population.[2] Ahmad claimed to be a prophet of Islam after Muhammad, and also

declared himself to be the embodiment of two figures from Islamic eschatology, whose

appearance is usually thought to coincide with the end times, namely the *Masih* (the Messiah,

usually understood as the second coming of Jesus) and the *Mahdi* (the rightly guided one).

Mirza Ghulam Ahmad stripped these figures of their apocalyptic dimensions and recast them

as reformers of Islam in its hour of greatest need.

While Islamic history is replete with charismatic *Mahdis*, Ahmad's movement has,

unlike that of many others, been able to far outlast his death. For the last century, however,

Ahmadis have been shunned by the vast majority of other Muslims in South Asia. In the

fractured landscape of South Asian Islam, there are few points of unanimity, but Sunnis, Shias,

Deobandis, and Barelvis all agree that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was a false prophet (Zaman

2007, 11). His existence is seen to contravene the finality of Muhammad's prophethood, and

for this reason, Ahmadi Muslims are routinely dismissed as *kuffar* (nonbelievers). Many

opponents claim that Ghulam Ahmad was an agent of imperialism, tasked by the British with

dividing the Muslims of India, and to this day, Ahmadis are routinely accused of all manner of

attempts to destroy Islam from within. In Pakistan, where the Ahmadis are most numerous,

they have suffered decades of violent persecution, and their exclusion from what is officially

recognized as Islam has been central to state attempts to define majority Muslim identity and

instrumentalize Islam (Iqtidar 2012; Qasmi 2015). Since 1974, the Pakistani state has

officially considered Ahmadis to be non-Muslim, and many of the more extreme elements of society see this as providing a carte blanche for violence against them.

Nowadays, the *Jama'at* is a hierarchical organization, structured around the infallible leadership of a Caliph. It has branches in over 200 countries and maintains its boundaries rigorously. All Ahmadis are expected to demonstrate allegiance to their leader, the Caliph, as well as pay a contribution (*chanda*) of 1/16th of their income to support the missionary activity and growth of the movement. The Ahmadis I knew were exclusively endogamous, and marrying outside of the *Jama'at* – especially for a woman – carries the risk of excommunication by the Caliph.

In both the UK and India, the two places where I have conducted fieldwork, there is a persistent concern among Ahmadis to correct the misconceptions that the majority populations might have about Islam. This involves a promotion of the *Jama'at* as a counter-example to the image of the feared Muslim terrorist, who in different ways haunts these countries' public discourses. In the UK the most prominent example of this in recent years has been a series of advertising campaigns on the sides of buses with the slogan "Muslims for loyalty, peace and freedom."[3] At times, such efforts can amount to something approaching a branding of the *Jama'at*, with its motto "love for all, hatred for none," its slick press packages, and its soundbite-ready spokesmen.[4] What is easily obscured about these impressive surface discourses is that they are not just directed at the outside: they are also essential to how Ahmadis come to appreciate the truth of their own movement.

The most obvious feature of the *Jama'at*'s public self-presentation, however, is its promotion of an image of itself as the unified, dynamic, fast-growing and peaceful face of Islam. Ahmadis contrast this with what they see as the sectarian and backward character of their opponents. They curate every aspect of their public self-representation to give an impression that their *Jama'at* is organized and united, while claiming that their opponents

remained hopelessly divided. For Ahmadis, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's teachings are the only path toward a revitalized and unified Islam, and the only way to know these teachings is to live beneath the Ahmadiyya Caliphate.

For most Ahmadis in the global *Jama'at*, a relationship with the Caliph is cultivated through the *Jama'at*'s network of satellite TV channels, MTA (Muslim Television Ahmadiyya). The first MTA channel was launched in 1994, and there are now three, two of which broadcast mainly in Urdu and English, and one entirely in Arabic. Every household I visited in Qadian had a TV, and MTA constantly played in the background of most homes, the Caliph's face and words illuminating the private spaces of the town. Programs are produced across the world, and it is through MTA that Ahmadis in Qadian witness the *Jama'at's* entanglement in global modernities and its growth in countries – particularly African nations – that many in Qadain see as places of expansive possibility. One senior cleric in Qadian declared that even if there were no longer any missionaries, books, or journals to proselytize with, the message would continue to spread so long as MTA were broadcasting. Presenters on MTA are celebrities within the *Jama'at*. Programs – particularly those featuring the fourth Caliph – are watched no matter how many times they are repeated, and it is through the network's talkshows that Qadian's residents come to viscerally feel their theological superiority over others in debate (Evans 2016).[5]

This network was not, however, just the background to the consumption of truth in Qadian: there was also an MTA studio in town, the output of which was small compared to studios in London and Pakistan, but which was responsible for producing some programs broadcast around the world, as well as documentaries of major *Jama'at* events across India. Although this studio only employed a few young men, the town's entire population shared the burden of producing programs, for as the next example shows, it was my interlocutors' behavior that became metonymic of Ahmadiyyat when this studio produced its programs.

Exhibiting Discipline

In late September 2011, the *Jama'at* curated an exhibition about the Qur'an in New Delhi. It was a meticulously planned event held in an exclusive and expensive club. Most of those involved in organizing the exhibition were from Qadian, and I travelled to Delhi by train with a large group of Ahmadi missionaries and students, who helped set up the exhibition and later guide visitors around it. The exhibition was completely in English, and sought to position Islam within cosmopolitan and wealthy India. More fundamentally, it was an argument, sustained through the visual beauty of its material presentation, for Islam as the end point of modernity. For most Ahmadis, the idea that Islam is compatible with modernity is too simplistic. Rather, they see Ahmadiyyat as providing a way for modernity to culminate in Islam. Although most organizers of the exhibition had come from Qadian, little reference was made to the town. As it turned out, this was perhaps no accident.

High quality glossy posters explaining various principles of the Qur'an covered the walls of the exhibition, and in brightly lit and specially made cases, every single one of the *Jama'at's* many Qur'an translations were displayed. In its physicality, its beauty, and its shining, glossy exteriority, the exhibition thrust itself upon viewers as a testament to truth. Integral to this was an MTA camera crew, who documented both the event and its reception (see Figure 1).

[Please insert Figure 1 here]

In preparation for the exhibition, one hundred thousand text messages were sent out to residents of Delhi inviting them to attend, and particular groups were also targeted with publicity. Among these were journalism students, people who I was told would be "shaping the opinions of tomorrow." Such individuals, one Ahmadi in attendance argued, would almost

certainly have "misconceptions" about the Qur'an; the idea was to persuade them of its beauty and relevance. As such, the exhibition was not initially an explicit reflection upon the difference between Ahmadiyyat and other groups; rather, it aimed to put forward a particular reading of the Qur'an, in which science and modernity are wholly encompassed by and contained within Islam.

On only its second day, however, the Qur'an Exhibition became the subject of a dispute between the Ahmadis and Delhi's substantial non-Ahmadi Muslim population. For the Ahmadis present, this marked the moment when the exhibition transformed into a battle between atavistic localism and Islam as a modern success story of global growth and encompassment.

The exhibition came to the attention of a broad Muslim public on Friday 23rd September, when the *Shahi Imam* – often regarded as the *de facto* leader of Muslim opinion in Old Delhi – denounced the Ahmadis' actions in his sermon. That afternoon, a group of Muslims gathered outside the Qur'an exhibition, waving placards and shouting slogans. The scene was tense but thus far non-violent. The protestors claimed that in displaying the Qur'an, the Ahmadis were dishonestly representing themselves as the voice of Islam, and thus misleading people into thinking that they were Muslims. This argument was similar to a Pakistani Ordinance that criminalizes Ahmadis for posing as Muslims (Gualtieri 1989). The Ahmadis' propriety in representing Islam was questioned, and some protestors even doubted the appropriateness of displaying the Qur'an in any fashion, claiming, "The Holy Qur'an is not a thing to be exhibited." When I showed a video of this to several Ahmadis that evening, they laughed openly. "They are worried only because they will lose their income," one contended, referring to the recurrent idea that once Ahmadiyyat gains ascendency and removes all misconceptions, the *mullas* will no longer be able to peddle fraudulent theology for money.

Soon, television camera crews arrived at the exhibition, and the various protestors,

although still few, spoke over one another and clamored to speak in the microphones proffered in their direction. In response, the Ahmadis performed quite differently. They stood back from the protest, either remaining within the building or, when it was necessary, venturing out in such a way as to form a perimeter line. They did not speak to journalists, and despite the protestors' attempts to engage them, they held back from either name-calling or entering into debate. Moreover, they drew comparisons between their ordered behavior inside the exhibition and the protesting rabble outside. An important change had thus occurred, for the systematized behavior of the Ahmadis in attendance, rather than the exhibition, had become the primary object on display.

While the protests at the Qur'an exhibition intensified, I moved to the opponents' side to take pictures and record what they were saying. But, as I was talking to one of the protestors, an older Ahmadi gentleman grabbed me by the arm and steered me inside.

"Come this way," he said.

"But I was talking to that man there!"

"I know. Come this way."

It was an order, not a request, for I had broken rank and upset the running of the system.

The personnel at the exhibition consisted of a number of Ahmadi clerics, including nearly 30 final-year students from the theological college in Qadian, but as events unfolded, none of them moved forward to speak to the waiting journalists or engage with the protestors. The reason for this was simple: "we do not have permission."

Only one group of Ahmadis did cross this line: the MTA cameramen, who silently documented the incoherence of the opposition while also training their cameras on the TV news crews who were in turn filming the crowd. It was a representation of a representation, a witnessing of the fact that this event was about to receive nation-wide coverage (see Figure 2).

[Please insert Figure 2 here]

It was only when an official spokesman from the *Jama'at* came forward to give a statement that the Ahmadis finally engaged in dialogue with the waiting news reporters. The spokesman delivered a speech to the press in which he recited the *kalima* ("there is no god but God, and Muhammad is his messenger"), confirmed that the Ahmadis consider themselves to be Muslim, stressed their doctrine of peace, underlined that they are law abiding citizens, and made the point that the exhibition was going ahead with permission from the authorities. His message was straightforward: we are doing this in a correct, orderly fashion, and our doing so has direction and coherence. As this statement was read out, a group of Ahmadis stood around their official spokesman. They spoke only to join in with his recitation of the *kalima*, and to unite in intoning *"sall Allahu ʿalay-hi wa-sallam"* (peace be upon him) after the name of the Prophet Muhammad.

As the spokesman turned to go, however, there was a brief moment when the Ahmadi group and their opponents found themselves face to face. To my side, several protestors began talking among themselves about whether the Ahmadis believe in the *Nabi* (the Prophet Muhammad). They evidently had little familiarity with Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's notion of prophethood, a theology that rests upon fine distinctions that might easily be lost in the middle of a heated protest. A young Ahmadi missionary in training, unable to resist, turned to them and said, "we do believe in the Prophet".

"And after him?"

"There is no prophet."[6]

Another Ahmadi then interjected, "Muhammad is the last law-bearing prophet."

At this point, a senior Ahmadi cleric looked over with concern, and, understanding that a discussion was about to flare up, began to usher the young students physically back in. "Don't debate! In accordance with our system!" he told them. Then, turning to the protestor, he said, "It's over, sir."

Once again, there was a worry that breaking ranks could lead to confrontation and violence. The large number of young Ahmadi students was particularly problematic, as their religious zeal was liable to become "hot". Juvenile fervor has historically resulted in confrontation between Ahmadis and non-Ahmadis, for example in 1974 when clashes between youths led to Pakistan-wide riots and killings of Ahmadis. Reading the Ahmadi reaction as a mere fear of violence, however, is to miss how Ahmadis understood their studied non-engagement with the opponents to be a presentation of truth. The protestors, they told me, did not need to be argued with, because they were demonstrating their own falsity through their raucous and uncoordinated protest. By contrast, the *Jama'at's* superiority was seen as evidently knowable from this comparison. Display thus became part of a broader competitive polemics through which the Ahmadis engaged their opponents.

My presence as a witness to these displays of discipline was enthusiastically embraced by most of my interlocutors, but it took me a little while to realize that they were equally concerned that they witness these displays themselves (see Figure 3). Witnessing has historically been an important mode of ethical action for many Muslims, and yet anthropologists have only recently begun to explore the significance of witnessing within Islam (e.g. Mittermaier 2012). For my Ahmadi interlocutors there was a further theological reason for their desire to see truth. They live in a world that refuses to believe that they are Muslim, and being a witness to truth is thus about demonstrating that to the contrary, they alone have not ignored the coming of the Promised Messiah and Prophet, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad.[7] To be an Ahmadi is to have recognized truth to which other Muslims remain blind. [Please insert Figure 3 here]

Inside the exhibition hall, Ahmadis took pleasure in elucidating the manner in which the truth of Ahmadiyyat became visible and knowable through a comparison with the disordered opponents outside. Following the protests a number of major Indian newspapers – including

The Times of India and *The Hindu* – featured articles about the exhibition, and these were widely hailed as allowing the public to see for themselves the truth of the *Jama'at*. In the days and weeks that followed, Ahmadis shared and looked back at images and recordings of the exhibition as proof of their triumph over the opponents. As one interlocutor explained to me when I returned to Qadian, "now that you have seen the opposition, you can really begin to understand why we are true." They saw their own display of unity, cohesion, and discipline as signs of Ahmadiyyat's indubitable truth.

Several months after the exhibition, I visited the MTA studio in Qadian. The studio workers were producing a documentary about the Qur'an exhibition, and their plan was to show the opposition in only a few still shots without sound. One reason they gave for this was their desire to avoid fanning the flames of dispute, and yet there was something more fundamental at stake, for they explained that the aim of the documentary was to make visible the success of the exhibition, the achievements of the *Jama'at*, but most importantly, the ability of the *Jama'at*'s voice (*awaz*) to reach the population of India.

As we chatted about this, something that I had previously overlooked became apparent in the way in which my interlocutors were sharing newspaper clippings, viewing photographs of the exhibition, and participating in creating and then watching MTA footage of the events. Such materials were seen to make the truth of the *Jama'at* tangible and knowable, but this was not just because of their obvious value as depictions or records of disciplined behavior. Rather, as the MTA workers implied, Ahmadis were witnessing these images for their very ability to be disseminated. What mattered to them was not just that these images promoted an image of the *Jama'at* as it should be – it was that they were backed by an institutional and organizational capacity to be replicated, reproduced, and broadcast across a vast area. MTA produced a representational capacity that could itself become an object of contemplation.

For my interlocutors, the public display of disciplined obedience at the Qur'an

exhibition quite clearly captured the truth of their movement, and it was in knowing this truth that they sought to attune their own ethical sensibilities. This was a form of idealized exterior behavior, which far from just acting as a sign for inner virtue, was also capable bringing such virtue about (Mahmood 2005). This is a situation in which the camera, as "an instrument of surfaces" seemed posed to achieve "results of depth" in the form of ethical action (Hirschkind 2006, 94). As my final experience in the MTA studio showed, however, there was an ambiguity as to where the truth lay, to which my interlocutors hoped to respond. Was it in the disciplined images themselves, or in their ability to be dispersed? Was it in the truth of the picture, or in that picture's capacity to be reproduced, copied, and endlessly viewed?

Qadian as a beacon of Muslim discipline

While the Ahmadis' public self-presentation might have seemed uncontested at the Qur'an exhibition, through the course of my fieldwork, I slowly learnt that many of Qadian's residents were highly dubious of any claims that the town was a space of moral excellence. Ahmadis are everywhere under enormous representational pressure, and nowhere is this more evident than in Qadian. Its very name symbolizes this fraught terrain of the religious conflict: *Qadiyani* is a common term to describe any Ahmadi, but members of the *Jama'at*, including those actually from the town, see it as derogatory.

Qadian remains a place of enormous theological and historical significance for all Ahmadis worldwide. Ahmadis often speak of Qadian as the third most holy city in Islam (after Mecca and Medina), and it is referenced repeatedly in Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's writings. Its most visible monument – its white minaret – is the ubiquitous symbol of the global movement, appearing on flags, websites, and images displayed upon the walls of Ahmadi homes across the world. Although Qadian's Ahmadis do not face regular violence like those living in

Pakistan, their existence as Muslims is precarious, and they remain the objects of much hostility from other sects, among whom Qadian is rumored to be a place of iniquity. Qadian's residents thus face a moral imperative to live their lives as unbroken demonstrations of discipline such that Qadian can emerge as an unequivocally Muslim place. In defending their *Jama'at* from accusations, they are thus preoccupied with what Clifford Geertz described as the "industrious polishing of the surfaces of social life" (1975, 399).

For my interlocutors, however, this was a surface riven with cracks. At a mundane level, tensions emerged in spaces of everyday social life. A sign found in teashops in the Muslim quarter read, "no smoking, by order of local *Anjuman* [Council] Ahmadiyya." I initially though little of this, until an interlocutor told me that it had been placed there so that other Muslims would know that "those smoking are not Ahmadis." That some Ahmadis might smoke was seen as unavoidable: the problem was that they should be seen publicly to do so. At one level, this example tells us much about the kinds of representational pressures facing Qadian's Ahmadis. Tobacco – a new world product unknown in 7th century Arabia – is not mentioned in Islamic scripture, yet its legitimacy has more recently become an object of intense debate about proper Muslim conduct.[8] The shop sign thus has to be seen as part of a wider effort in Qadian to avoid any practice of ambiguous morality, which might open Ahmadis to further attack by hostile opponents. Yet this led to the creation of a surface that my interlocutors often felt was an untrue reflection of everyday life.

The longer I spent in Qadian, the more I learnt that concerns about Qadian's image extended from minor infractions like smoking all the way to rather more serious allegations about material greed and professional misconduct. Behind closed doors, Ahmadis in Qadian argued that the divine system of the *Jama'at* was corrupted by nepotism, and berated themselves for lacking spiritual conviction and consequently being liable to lapse into harmful cultural practices such as the giving of dowries. Most incriminating were rumors of

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individuals using the Jama'at system for material gain at the expense of others. These were not statements of humility, but rather critiques voiced with anger.

Underlying all these concerns was Qadian's structural position: its marginalization within the global Ahmadiyya movement and more importantly, a sense that it had been abandoned by the Caliphate at the partition of India in 1947. The Caliphate was based in Qadian until partition, when it moved to Pakistan along with the vast majority of Ahmadi Muslims. Following increased persecution in Pakistan, the Caliphate was once again moved in 1984, this time to London, where the current Caliph still resides. Thus, while Qadian was the global center of the religion for the first few decades after Ahmad's death, it is nowadays seen as a shadow of its former glory. It remains the administrative center of Ahmadiyyat in India, and the *Jama'at* is the only major employer of Muslims in the town, but these Muslims are now in a minority. With the partition of India, what had been the center of religious movement with global aspirations became a tenuously held outpost.

Separation from the Caliph is about more than just a loss of the town's prestige. Disciplined obedience to the Caliph is seen to separate Ahmadis from other Muslims, for the Caliph is the safeguard of a truth that would otherwise be liable to corruption. To be near the Caliph is to be close to Islam; to be far from him is to risk dangerous innovations in one's practice. Unity under a single leader was the mode of being in the world that most clearly demonstrated truth and superiority over opposing Muslim sects, and to publicly demonstrate an exemplary discipline toward the Caliph was thus to make an argument for the truth of Ahmadiyyat. For Ahmadis, demonstrating discipline under this single universal leader meant being Muslim.

Many people, however, privately told me that the spiritual connection (*ruhani t'aluq*) of Qadian's people to the Caliph was far weaker than their public displays might have suggested. Following partition, Qadian was largely isolated from the Caliph in Pakistan for a

number of decades, frequently having to communicate with him via third parties in other countries. Qadian's Ahmadis point to this historical condition as the root cause of what they see as moral decline in the town. Many Ahmadis send frequent letters and faxes to the Caliph in an attempt to infuse his presence into their lives, but his physical distance from the town – the fact that his predecessors left it and for over forty years could not even visit – is seen to have harmed the ability of Qadian's residents to truly understand what it means to live under the system of a single universal leader.

In 2007, the last member of the family (*khandan*) of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad to remain in Qadian died. Since 1914, every Caliph has been a member of this family, and their exemplary upbringing is seen to help those around them remain close to, and disciplined by, the Caliph. The passing of this central figure signaled a much-lamented rift from the presence of the Caliph, and meant that MTA is now one of the few direct technologies available through which Qadian's Ahmadis might reinfuse the Caliph's presence into their everyday lives. It is thus no coincidence that many hail this television network as the most important development in the modern history of Ahmadiyyat.

There was one final problem arising from Qadian's isolation. For my Ahmadi interlocutors, worldly success was tied directly to spiritual truth. This was the case at both a personal level – believers are continually reminded that for every rupee they give to the *Jama'at* they will receive many more through worldly success – and at an organizational level, with the global expansion of the *Jama'at* being taken as a sign of its truth. For my interlocutors, to grow exponentially was to be doctrinally correct, and in this regard, Qadian was the subject of specific prophecies by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad – in particular that the town will grow to reach the river of Beas some 17kms away – that have not yet been realized due to Qadian's isolation after partition (Ahmad 2009, 1043). Everywhere in the world, organizational growth was seen by Ahmadis to index doctrinal triumph over opponents, and

yet Qadian – the most symbolically important location in all of Ahmadiyyat – remained comparatively impoverished and small.

Responding to this problem, many Ahmadis chose to extol the spirituality of Qadian as emerging from material simplicity borne of hardship and forbearance, and indeed, the small group of men who had stayed behind to keep Qadian in *Jama'at* hands at the time of partition are now revered throughout the global system for precisely these virtues. Yet such a description was seen as inapplicable to the current population of Qadian, consisting of new arrivals who had no direct link to the Caliph or his family and thus did not understand what it meant to live a disciplined life. As an exemplary space, Qadian's potential lay in a future blossoming; its present state was one of moral ambiguity.

This can help us understand the curious veiling of Qadian at the Qur'an exhibition. Qadian's ambivalent status is a result of its station as both promised telos and abandoned origin of the *Jama'at's* global modernity. Even though Qadian should be the beacon of Ahmadiyyat in India, it remained the "off-stage" shadow of the cosmopolitan exhibition.[9] Stranded at partition, Qadian was insufficiently global to carry Islam to an audience in Delhi and was thus effaced.

It would be easy to argue that the failures of Qadian's residents to live up to their own exemplary self-representations constitutes the authentic reality of life in the town. Indeed, a number of ethnographic accounts of Muslim ethical life have recently begun to privilege moments of everyday failure and ambiguity as sites of authentic existence (Schielke 2009; Schielke and Debevec 2012).[10] There are many potential problems with this approach (for a broader overview of which, see Fadil and Fernando 2015), but perhaps most important to my argument is the fact I never felt that my interlocutors themselves saw this everyday space as reflecting the truth of their existence. Rather, as the rest of the article will explore, for Qadian's Ahmadis, truth could be discerned in the tensions between the everyday and the

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official.

Understanding this can help explain why my interlocutors never saw their own exemplary self-presentation as hypocritical, even though they frequently accused their opponents of being disingenuous. Ahmadis were scornful of other Muslims who would dress in a pious fashion and grow long beards, but then use these superficial signs of religion to conceal a multitude of sins. They would also frequently extend accusations of hypocrisy to other public figures and politicians in India who would hide inner corruption with outward claims to morality. On one occasion during my fieldwork, a young interlocutor took me aside to explain that Gandhi was a terrible role model because he had consistently done one thing in public and another in private. While this was an unexceptional critique, it signaled a deeper distaste for surfaces that masked and obscured. Despite their willingness to attribute hypocrisy to others, however, Ahmadis did not see their own situation as involving a rift between a public surface and a hidden interior. Indeed, they would often go in completely the opposite direction to claim that there was nothing concealed in Ahmadiyyat, and that the movement's truth was apparent on its surface. They boasted about the transparency of their *Jama'at,* be it in claims that the finances of the movement were legitimate, to arguments that the *Jama'at's* global expansion was unstoppable because it was so transparently incorruptible that even oppressive governments such as China could not find fault with it. In this way, the *Jama'at* was felt to provide plentiful opportunities for anyone who looked at it to clearly perceive its truth. Qadian's Ahmadis saw their own exemplary displays as un-hypocritical because truth lay neither in the everyday nor in the public, but as we shall see, in the *Jama'at*'s ability to sustain a tension between these realms.

Becoming One's Own Exemplar

Throughout my fieldwork, MTA camera crews and Qadian's Ahmadis would frequently co-produce themselves as disciplined subjects of the Caliph. For outside viewers on MTA, this television footage could appear as a straightforward image of disciplined behavior. For those within Qadian, however, it was a surface production of virtue that could never quite take authentic root within the everyday structures of a town bereft of its divine leader. As such, events that highlighted Qadian's failure to be disciplined were frequently compared to instances in which MTA's cameras produced exemplary images.

For *'Eid al-Adha* 2011, celebrated on the 7th of November, a large group of worshippers gathered in Qadian. The weather was mild, and so *'Eid* prayers were held outside on a field to the south of the main town. Not everybody at the *'Eid* prayers was a resident of Qadian or even a long-time Ahmadi. Many were recent converts. Others were laborers who worked in Punjab but originally hailed from other states such as Uttar Pradesh or Bihar. These non-Ahmadis appeared to have had little stake in the vitriolic arguments regarding the Ahmadi's place in Islam, and thus had no issue with the fact that their *'Eid* prayer was being led by an Ahmadi *imam*, for in terms of the ritual observance in prayers, Ahmadi practice is largely indistinguishable from that of many other Sunni Muslims in the subcontinent.

Before the prayers began, a respected and senior Ahmadi cleric made a long announcement to the assembled crowd, describing exactly how they should conduct themselves during the prayers, and explaining that the prayer would be followed immediately by a sermon that was an integral part of the ritual. This particular prayer is said only once a year, and the cleric was thus anticipating that many of the outsiders in the congregation would not know what to do. The cleric also stressed the importance of listening to the live televised sermon by the Caliph, which would be broadcast later on in the afternoon due to the time difference between Qadian and London. Yet in spite of this admonition, after the prayers ended, a very large portion of the congregation rose and started to leave the field. The man

next to me looked on in disbelief, and said "you see, that is the problem with new converts. They do not know that the sermon is a part of prayers."

Nearly two months later, another huge gathering of many thousands of Ahmadis took place on the same patch of open ground. This was the *Jalsa Salana*, a yearly gathering instituted by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, which is by far the most important event of Qadian's annual calendar. The three-day program had almost concluded, with only a speech by the Caliph, broadcast live on MTA from London and addressed directly to the gathering at Qadian, to come. An MTA camera crew was also ready in Qadian to film the congregation's reaction. This live footage would then be streamed to London, mixed into the live video of the Caliph's sermon, broadcast across the world, and watched in Qadian.

Before this final session began, however, the Chief Secretary of the Indian *Jama'at* stood before the enormous crowd to give a final roundup. He offered thanks to the various government authorities that had allowed the *Jalsa* to take place, and commented upon the positive signs of spirituality he had seen during the *Jalsa*. He then discussed the nature of the *Jalsa Salana*. It was, he explained, a worldwide gathering, a global *Jalsa*, because people across the world were simultaneously watching and experiencing it via MTA. This event was made global by its visual representation on screen. Because it was global, however, the Chief Secretary chose this moment to give a special warning to the crowd regarding the imminent live broadcast from Qadian. Do not react, he instructed the crowd, when you see your face on the screen. And behave yourselves for the entire duration of the live recording. Crucially, nobody was to be seen leaving the arena before the Caliph gave his speech, for such an act of indiscipline would be seen on MTA by people around the world.

At this point the Chief Secretary recounted an anecdote, a favorite of his that I had heard at least once before. He recalled the events described immediately above, when many new converts and non-Ahmadis came to Qadian for *'Eid*, but because their *tarbiyyat*

(cultivation/upbringing) was weak, left before the sermon was finished. He then compared this to a *Jama'at* function he had attended in Kerala, where the Ahmadis are often held up as being the most devoted and disciplined in India. At the end of the function in Kerala, the Chief Secretary explained that he had had to quickly rush out, and when he shortly returned to the function room, he fully expected that everybody would be leaving. But instead, every single one of the attendees was sitting exactly where he had left them, waiting for him to give them permission to go. These were people, he explained to the *Jalsa* audience, who truly understood the system, people who displayed the *tarbiyyat* appropriate to a community led by a Caliph.

In giving this speech, the Chief Secretary was thus instructing the entire gathering, comprising thousands of people, on how to be disciplined in front of a camera in order that such discipline could be known across the globe. In this process, those sitting in the *Jalsa* could then look at this image and be profoundly moved by the way in which it encapsulated the truth of Ahmadiyyat.

The *Jalsa Salana* is always exalted by Qadian's residents for its experiential qualities; for its intensely spiritual (*ruhani*) affective qualities. This is partly due to a spatial reconfiguration of the town creating new intimacies between people who were previously strangers. Yet this intoxicating spiritual experience – described both by those attending the *Jalsa* and those witnessing it on MTA – was also attributed to the powerful display of discipline among such huge crowds, out of which the truth of the movement emerged. The convention is both an event and a visual object that is created for the purpose of being witnessed over and over again for years to come. The Chief Secretary's call to discipline was thus far more than mere window-dressing for the cameras. It was a profound statement about what it means to be ethical in this situation – a call to perform a truth that could supersede a less tidy reality.

After the Chief Secretary's preparatory talk, the Caliph's speech began, with cameras

rolling in both India and the UK. That year, as the Caliph was in London, the *Jama'at* had decided not to pay the expensive fees for a live satellite broadcast of the *Jalsa* from India. Instead, the Qadian video feed was streamed to the London studios via the Internet, and then mixed into the footage from the London mosque where the Caliph was giving his speech. This footage was subsequently broadcast live on MTA across the world. It was, however, addressed directly to those in the Qadian *Jalsa,* who watched it on a giant screen at one edge of the field: they watched themselves watching the Caliph.

As a result of this set up, a loop was created, albeit one with significant lag, in which the cameras in Qadian filmed the faithful watching themselves being filmed on the screen. In addition to this, a TV screen in the mosque in London where the Caliph was giving his sermon showed the live stream from Qadian. An endless cycle of being seen and seeing was created, a *mise en abyme* in which they observed themselves observing. Cameras in Qadian took footage of Ahmadis watching the big screen there. This footage was then broadcast on a screen in the mosque in London. A camera picked this up as part of the broader image of the mosque in London, and the image of Qadian seeing and being seen was once more projected on the big screen in Qadian, only for the process to begin again (Figure 4). This was an occasion for the performance of the globality of the *Jama'at*, not just because it was an event shared between disparate locations, but because the cycle of seeing and presenting a self to be seen became linked across transnational boundaries.

[Please insert Figure 4 here]

A custom in the *Jalsa* is the shouting of *n'are*, or call-and-response slogans. These usually begin with a loud cry of *"n'are takbir"* to which the congregation respond *"Allahu akbar,"* before getting more complex to include *n'are* such as "*Jalsa Salana Qadian*" or even *"insaniyat"* (humanity) followed by a rousing "*zindabad"* (long live!). This can occasionally get out of hand, as zealous Ahmadis jump up and shout out slogans at the slightest mention of

the *Jama'at*'s success. As a result, the *Jama'at* attempts to control *n'are* by assigning a microphone to an official slogan-shouter. In the example at hand the *n'are* were a shared product of London and Qadian, originating in one place and being answered by the congregation in another. It was a shared representation, but also a material instantiation of the *Jama'at* as global, expansive, and worldwide.

Once the broadcast of the Caliph's speech began, young men patrolled the aisles in the Qadian *Jalsa*, ordering congregation members to stay in their places and, on occasion, physically ensuring that this order was followed. The congregation could thus be seen, in this endless cycle of seeing and being seen, to be devoted witnesses who actively partook in the presence of their leader. There was to be no loitering in the aisles and no one could leave while the Caliph gave his speech. This was an enforced surface – almost a case of dissimulation – that could nonetheless be instantaneously viewed as an absolute record of truth by those who were producing it. The image of the *Jama'at* unified under the discipline of a single global leader thus came to further discipline those who produced and watched it.

Ahmadi uses of the camera bear similarities to cases encountered by ethnographers of other religious movements. Simon Coleman, for example, describes a comparable process for Charismatic Christian television, in which the audience for self-presentation is not just the other, but also the self. He reports a process in which the camera, in capturing and commoditizing worship, enables ordinary participants to be turned into "iconic objects of contemplation" (Coleman 2007, 172). "Personal experience becomes collective representation, and, moreover, one that can be reconsumed by individuals as they buy and watch a service in which they have taken part" (2007, 172). An important distinction, however, remains. In the case explored by Coleman, words and images are understood as Maussian gifts that expand the charismatic agency of their creators. They are therefore inalienable from their creators, for they always carry something of their creators with them. In contrast, the alienability of

exemplary representations in Qadian – the fact that a disjuncture could be recognized between the images and their creators – was key to their ability to stabilize truth, and thus ultimately communicate meaning back to those who had created them.

To audiences outside of Qadian, this broadcast could be viewed as no more than a beautiful surface. For those within the town, however, the broadcast's disjuncture from Qadian as they knew it made apparent a whole new set of relationships through which the *Jama'at* inscribed truth-as-success. For those inside the arena, it was what the camera captured only in "passing" that enabled them to see everything (compare Deger 2006, 173). What my interlocutors saw in this moment was the power of their *Jama'at* to show them to themselves as the disciplined, virtuous subjects that they feared they could never be. They saw in this moment an undeniable truth that emerged not because the image was a faithful representation of reality, but because the *Jama'at* could nonetheless sustain that image in all its artificiality. These exemplary images thus did much more than represent; through their disjunctures and fractures they evoked the power of the Jama'at to have things seen. In this cycle of witnessing the self witness, what became apparent was not only an image of discipline, but the capacity of the *Jama'at* to have that image seen.

For Ahmadis watching the screen in the *Jalsa Salana*, there was an understanding of the potential failure of Qadian to represent itself well: a knowledge that the town might not be able to produce its own image of discipline without the coercive force of the young men patrolling the aisles. It was this danger that the Chief Secretary was referencing when he warned that Qadian had previously failed to demonstrate the systematic, disciplined image of beauty that all were being enjoined to witness. Nonetheless, the image of disciplined Qadian, once separated from the individual and circulated at a global level, afforded those in Qadian an opportunity to witness the fact that they were following the true path. The global system of media capture and distribution allowed Qadian, as a place of ambiguous exemplarity, to

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become a shining beacon of the *Jama'at's* theological triumph over opponents: of its ability to have its message seen. The intimate secret shared by all in the *Jalsa* was thus the power of their *Jama'at* to make truth, to force truth, and to see truth through artificiality.

Truth at the surface

The relationship between the MTA cameras and truth is part of a broader theological discourse of surfaces, in which truth is linked to material success. This can be illustrated by the example of Qadian's minaret (the *Minarat ul-Masih,* see Figure 5). For Ahmadis, this tower corresponds to a hadith (saying) of the Prophet Muhammad that the Messiah will descend near a white minaret in the eastern part of Damascus (Ahmadis interpret this as Qadian lying east of Damascus at the same latitude). This minaret has become symbolic of the movement as a whole, and it is particularly associated with the media broadcast of the message. For example, the silhouette of the minaret appears as the "T" in the MTA logo, and it is occasionally depicted like a radio mast, with concentric waves emitting from its tip.

[Please insert Figure 5 here]

A fact seldom acknowledged in Qadian, however, was that the minaret was commissioned in the lifetime of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, finished many years after his death, and only clad in white marble decades after this (Rashid n.d., 68). The minaret might thus appear to be a failed prophecy, built after the event that it was supposed to be a feature of, and then completed late, and indeed, several interlocutors even acknowledged to me that they found this theologically problematic. The official *Jama'at* position on the minaret, however, is that its meaning in the Hadith is metaphorical, but that as a material structure, it is an example of a prophecy that, through sacrifice, perseverance and industry, was fulfilled in a worldly fashion. As such, it remains the central symbol of Ahmadiyyat's transcendence over the world.

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In his own 1900 explanation for why he did not descend next to an already existing minaret, Ghulam Ahmad reframed the minaret as a metaphor for the lofty dissemination of his message, much as light might spread from a high place. For Ahmad, this was a matter of technological advancements that would allow his message to travel in the world. In the sentence immediately prior to this metaphor, he informed his readership that: "the railways, telegraph, steamships, excellent postal services, easy modes of travel and tourism and other such means have been established to fulfill the prophecy that the message of the Messiah will illuminate every corner like lightening" (Ahmad 2006, 18). A literal reading of the Hadith was thus rejected in favor of a metaphorical interpretation that focused on expansion through technologies of mass communication and contact.

The minaret can therefore be seen as metonymic of Qadian's broader representational complexity. As an unambiguous index of fulfilled prophecy it is unsuccessful, but as a demonstration of the movement's technological ability to make prophecy apparent in the world, it is remarkably potent.

The minaret is a useful analog to how public self-representation is understood in the *Jama'at*. This is most clear in the manner that MTA images are thought to signal truth. To understand this requires us to consider the camera's potential for truth telling, an issue that has long been of concern in Western photographic theory (Roberts 2014). My interlocutors did not locate the indexicality of the photographic event solely within the image or video thus produced and broadcast on MTA.[11] Rather, they seemed to be rejecting the idea that the image is the final product of the photographic event (Azoulay 2012). When MTA captured spectacles in Qadian, truth-telling was understood to reside in the photographic event as a totality, not just the recording subsequently produced. In both major examples discussed in this article, it was the total event of recording that indexed a truth about the *Jama'at* rather than the specific images thus created. Truth-telling in Qadian lay not in the image as an indexical representation

of reality, but in the camera as an evocative node of productive possibility.

My interlocutors could look at idealized images of themselves and see these images as testament to an absolute truth because their concern lay not with the fidelity of the image as a representation of the world, but with the relations behind the making of the image. When Ahmadis saw their own disciplined self-image on the screen before them, they saw the worldly, material success of their *Jama'at* substantiated as a capacity (economic and technical) to momentarily make them appear disciplined. They thus understood that they belonged to a transnational organization that enabled them to fulfill their obligation to both produce and bear witness to the successes and triumphs of Islam – even if it was only for the duration of the broadcast.

In a very different context, Lisa Wedeen (1999) has described how a politics of "as if" sustained power in Hafez al-Assad's Syria. This was a personality cult in which public dissimulation underlined the power of the regime precisely because it made everyone aware of the fact that this regime could compel anybody to say things that nobody believed (1999, 12). In the same way, the public performances I have described were powerful precisely because of their inherent instability. The tension of the surface as a place of "as if" made the relations of power which had produced it ever more apparent and obvious. That these exemplary images were somehow artificial made the truth that they produced more potent. They were difficult to produce, and as we saw in the ethnographic examples, they required economic resources, organizational capacity and technological expertise, all of which, when multiplied on a global scale, were understood to be manifestations of the *Jama'at*'s worldly success. In consuming an untrue truth, Ahmadis were witnessing the *Jama'at*'s organizational capacity to sustain their ethical lives as people who might both signify and know the truth.

In accounts of the Ahmadiyya *Jama'at*, the centrality of shining surfaces has been largely overlooked, perhaps because there is an obvious austerity to the *Jama'at*'s aesthetics.

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An architect responsible for many of the *Jama'at's* new mosques, for example, told me how his religious duty was the creation of buildings that were functional and law abiding – preferably domestic in inspiration – rather than imposing or strikingly beautiful. Likewise, Qadian's Ahmadis are unusual among their Punjabi neighbors for holding weddings that seem to lack all qualities of display, until one realizes that their goal is the demonstration of an austere discipline that might then be seen as a sign of truth.

In focusing upon the surfaces of life as spaces of ethical potential, I have deviated from much of the literature on Ahmadiyyat, which has tended to emphasize the esoteric and hidden aspects of the faith due to the much documented links between Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's theology and Sufi thought (Friedmann 2003; Khan 2015). Turning back to surfaces does not mean that we need fall back upon the pitfalls of earlier Orientalist scholarship which focused only upon the perceived "superficiality of Muslim mental and spiritual life" (Hirschkind 2006, 15). Rather, it means understanding how truth might be seen to emerge neither from an everyday private nor an idealized outer, but rather in the disjuncture between the two.

Conclusion: Truth in Tension

This article has been an attempt to think about the self-presentation of a politically vulnerable minority group as something more than just an official façade at odds with an intimate reality known only to insiders. Any analysis that simply accepted such dichotomies at face value would have the effect of portraying the Ahmadis' self-presentation as disingenuous. This has occasionally occurred, and it has led to accounts that hazardously align with the claims made by opponents of the *Jama'at,* who see Ahmadis as fake imitations of Muslims.[12] Rather, for my interlocutors, truth exists neither in glittering surfaces nor in the messy depths of the everyday, but can instead be seen in the friction produced when these two frames are forced to

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grate against one another.[13]

The grand, public displays I have analyzed were disciplinary techniques through which virtuous Ahmadis might have been produced. For the Ahmadis in Qadian who had suffered under a lasting separation from their Caliph, however, these disciplinary practices necessarily had to fail. Nonetheless, this failure paradoxically ensured that the truth of Ahmadiyyat was made visible, for as the Ahmadis' exemplary public displays clashed with a shameful everyday, the worldly success of the *Jama'at* became apparent in its capacity to make truth with blunt force where it had not been before.

Anthropologists have often been wary of describing the constructed nature of minority groups' official self-representations. Perhaps most crucially, our theories of cultural intimacy have led us to expect the tensions between public and private worlds to be places of intimacy and political vulnerability. More recently, ethnographers have investigated the manner in which tensions between official discourses and vernacular ones (how things are as opposed to how they should be) can create opportunities for ethical reflexivity (Steinmüller 2015, 223–24). The case of the Ahmadis shows how we have to stop thinking of disjunctures and cleavages as straightforwardly problematic and begin to think about how they can have generative potential.

My interlocutors saw truth within the images that comprised the glittering, shining surfaces of their lives, precisely because these surfaces kept glittering and kept shining even as they repeatedly failed in their disciplinary functions. The intimate secret possessed by my interlocutors was not the embarrassment of failure in Qadian, but rather a knowledge of a transcendent truth. In looking upon mass-mediated images of themselves as disciplined subjects, Qadian's Ahmadis saw complex surfaces whose tensions and fractures paradoxically underlined the ability of their global religious system to make truth seen in the world. This was a triumph of truth against the stubborn and intractable nature of the world.

[1] On this desire for control, see Herzfeld (1997, ix).

[2] 2011 Census of India. Nowadays about 1 in 8 of Qadian's 24,000 residents is Muslim. There are hardly any non-Ahmadi Muslims in Qadian.

[3] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12956746.

[4] http://www.loveforallhatredfornone.org/about-love-for-all-hatred-for-none/

[5] MTA could be described as central to an Ahmadi counterpublic structured around the figure of an ethical viewer (compare to Hirschkind 2006, 106).

[6] Although Ahmadis believe that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was a prophet after Muhammad, this young missionary's statement that there is no prophet after Muhammad was not a mistake, but rather an attempt to second-guess the opponents' use and understanding of the term *nabi* (prophet). For Ahmadis, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad is a prophet only by virtue of his annihilation of the self in the Prophet Muhammad (*fana' fi-l-rasul*) (Ahmad 2008, 207–12). Mirza Ghulam Ahmad is understood to be a prophet of a lower status to Muhammad, in that he brought no new law, but rather fell within the sharia of Muhammad. The young missionary's statement that there is no prophet after Muhammad was an attempt, in the middle of a very heated and potentially violent situation, to explain without subtlety the fact that for Ahmadis, there can never be another prophet of the same status as Muhammad.

[7] For a more detailed examination of the importance of witnessing, see Evans (2016).

[8] For anthropological accounts of these debates, see Deeb & Harb (2013) or Schielke (2009).

[9] For a discussion of the "off-stage", see (Shryock 2004b).

[10] As part of what might be seen as anthropology's more general turn to the everyday or ordinary (e.g. Lambek 2010)

[11] This is an engagement with photography that has historical resonances in South Asia (Pinney 1997, 76–96).

[12] For example, see Valentine (2008, 165).

[13] As such, my argument is in implicit tension with many recent anthropological approaches to Islam which have focused on the ways in which people try to produce truth through a merging of the distinctions between public and private piety (Deeb 2006, 228), while still falling within a longer tradition in the anthropological study of Islam that rejects hierarchies of depth-as-real versus surface-as-façade (Abu-Lughod 1999).

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