

## Praying through the senses: The Prayer Rug/Carpet and the Converging Territories of the Material and the Spiritual

*Minoo Moallem*



Fig. 1 Janamaz made of termeh, early 20th century

*The night is yours, this hour, of prayer;  
You'll gain whatever you desire.  
Make new the angels' carpet; raise  
Your tent at the Divine Throne's base;  
Brighten the Throne's eyes with your light;  
Fold up the carpet in your flight;  
Then grasp the crown, for you are king;  
Exalted, rule created things.  
Raise high your head in grandeur; make  
Both worlds your own, through your attack.*

- Nezami Ganjavi, twelfth-century Iranian poet

*Ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them.*

- Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

*Conceiving of space as a static slice through time, as representation, as a closed system and so forth are all ways of taming it. They enable us to ignore its real import: the coeval multiplicity of other trajectories and the necessary outward lookingness of a spatialized subjectivity.*

- Doreen Massey, *For Space*

*If the revolt has to come, it will have to come from the five senses.*

- Michael Serres, *Angels: A Modern Myth*

Religious practices are based not only on textual and ideological grounds but also on sensual and affective everyday experiences. These practices are aestheticized through embodied experiences of sight, sound, touch, and memory.<sup>1</sup> With the expansion of transnational commerce and increased circulation of commodities in modernity and postmodernity, certain objects have taken on new sacred meaning distinct from that which they had previously. They have become part of the flow of commodities that is transnationalizing religion and religious practices. In the commodification of sacred objects, or sacralization of commodities, the convergence of religion and capitalism has been crucial for the continuity of religious meanings and practices. In the everyday circulation of objects, the sacred and the profane converge, animating and producing religious subjects rather than subjects that have a religion. Consumption as a material practice changes religious meanings and practices, and value comes to be invested in certain religious objects, rituals, and ideas rather than others.

With the expansion of modern transnational consumer culture and religious tourism, as well as the development of new ways of defining and manifesting class, race, and gender through what is fashionable or stylish based on people's habits and patterns of consumption, material objects have become an increasingly important component of Muslim prayer, or *namaz*.<sup>2</sup> They mediate sound, sight, touch, smell, and location in the everyday performance of prayer. Such objects are produced to satisfy consumer needs and desires based on their gender identification, purchasing power, religious affinity (Shia, Suni, Wahaabi, Hanafi, Sufi, etc.), and/or ethnic and regional geographic location. Influenced by transnational capitalism and religious tourism, the aesthetic and sensual relations mediated by material objects in Muslim prayer have taken new forms.

Muslim prayers, performed five times a day, number among the disciplined, embodied, and sensual everyday practices of Islam. Namaz requires a bodily awareness of boundaries between what is pure and impure in everyday life. These boundaries are set and performed through a series of rituals. First, the practitioner must have an awareness of time (sunrise and sunset as the beginning and the end of the cycle

of prayer) in the particular geographic location in which he or she is present. The practitioner listens for the sound of *azan* (the call to prayer), performs the ritual ablution (*wuzu*) of the human body, and cleans the location of the namaz (it must be tidy and free of any human or animal body fluids and waste). Lastly, the practitioner must be oriented properly in space (facing towards the Kaaba in Mecca).

A number of objects are used to ornamentalize and aestheticize prayer. In Iran, particularly among women, one of the central objects is *janamaz*. The term references the location of the prayer (or namaz). Materially, jamanaz consists of two pieces of colorful paisley-patterned embroidered tissue. Muslim prayer begins with the practitioner in standing position, before moving to *ruku*, or bending the body forward by placing the hands on the knees. This is followed by *sajdeh*,<sup>3</sup> putting the forehead on the ground (similar to child pose in yoga).<sup>4</sup> Janamaz is used during *sajdeh*, providing a clean, scented location for the head to descend. Hand-made *janamaz* is predominantly used by women. The *janamaz* used by elite women is made of *termeh*, a precious handmade silk-and-wool fabric often inherited from mothers and grandmothers for generations (Fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> Prior to the advent of mass-produced *janamaz*, most women hand-made their own or had it made by other women using their preferred colors and design.



Fig. 2 Silk janamaz with mohr, tasbih, and flower sachets, early 20th century

Among Iranian Muslims other objects are added to *janamaz* to further adorn the prayer space. This may include the placement of *mohr* (or *turbah* in Arabic, a piece of clay brought from Mecca), *tasbih* (prayer beads, which may be made of wooden, plastic, or precious stones, depending on price, see Fig. 2), *chador-namaz* (*chador* refers to a cloth worn around the head and body, the *chador-namaz* is specific to prayer and differs from other forms of veil as it is usually made of very soft fabrics in bright colors ),<sup>6</sup> and fresh flowers or sachets of dried flowers depending on one's personal taste and desire. Each of these objects—the *janamaz*, *mohr*, *tasbih*, *chador-namaz*, dry flower sachets, fresh jasmine, and rose petals—spatializes and aestheticizes Muslim prayer by using the senses of sight, touch, and smell to invoke affective spatial and temporal memory.<sup>7</sup> The aestheticization of Muslim prayer counters the rigidity of institutional religious practices by opening it up to sensuality and to proximity of touch, smell, and sight. It also allows access to consumerism as these objects and commodities are bought and sold in bazaars or around holy shrines and mosques, especially in Mecca or online. These objects have become common souvenirs offered at a range of prices to individuals returning from pilgrimage or any form of religious tourism.



Fig. 3 A mass-produced prayer rug

Small prayer rugs are used for individual performance of Muslim prayers. Prayer rugs and carpets are the most significant portable objects displaying Muslim architectural design regulating time and space.<sup>8</sup> Larger prayer carpets are employed in mosques or other holy places for collective usage by many individuals praying together. Prayer carpets are not, however, used exclusively for religious or spiritual purposes but are also consumed as decorative objects. The dimensions of prayer carpets vary depending on their intended usage. Although prayer rugs are most frequently employed in namaz, smaller prayer carpets, especially those made of silk, may also be used in prayer. However, due to their more significant monetary value as well as their greater physical weight, when they are used for prayer it is primarily in the home. Larger prayer carpets are used in homes, mosques, shrines, and museums to furnish floors or as decorative and exhibited objects. Small prayer rugs are used individually to spatialize prayer and have been massively commercialized as cheap commodities, available for purchase in many colors and designs (Fig. 3).

Carpet designs vary, but a number of symbols are repeatedly represented on these objects. What distinguishes the design of a prayer rug from other rug designs is the use of an arched doorway or prayer niche (*mihrab*) as a central organizing compositional motif. Often, the *mihrab* replicates the direction to Mecca, *ghebleh*, or *qibla* in Arabic, which channels and guides believers in the direction of Mecca as they engage in the performance of prayer (Fig. 4). Some *mihrab* designs on prayer rugs resemble the arch of a door or a window that opens to a garden, perhaps the garden of paradise (Fig. 5) or the Garden of Eden, while others depict various versions of the tree of life (Fig. 4). Both themes combine the pre-Islamic and the Islamic with real, imaginary, or abstract elements of the natural environment from different geographic locations (stylized trees, birds, flowers, and non-figurative symbols).<sup>9</sup> The *mihrab* design replicates Islamic architecture while the tree of life represents pre-Islamic Persian mythology.<sup>10</sup> Many carpet designs bring the tree of life and the *mihrab* together in the same carpet.

The prayer rug territorializes prayer by creating a material boundary between the sacred and the profane, or that with the potential to corrupt.<sup>11</sup> One could argue that, while prayer carpets and prayer rugs alike depict recurring imaginary spatial motifs such as the tree of life and the Garden of Eden, prayer rugs incorporate spatiality into everyday modes of being in the world. They channel individual moments in time and space towards the universalist impulses of Islamic practices.<sup>12</sup> They also mediate between the material and the spiritual, linking the embodied presence in the “here” and now to the virtual and heterotopia of “there” through the spatial purification of space and perpetuity of time.<sup>13</sup>

With the heightened politicization of religion, religion’s sensual aspects are often overlooked and undermined. In today’s world, Islam and Islamic practices are primarily represented in their political and ideological manifestations, and are characterized as modernity’s “Other.” Subjected to the disciplinary gaze of Western art historians and anthropologists, the sensual, aesthetic, and everyday cultures of Islam and of Muslims are often museumized or Orientalized, and subordinated to the realm of political ideologies.<sup>14</sup> As such, it is crucial to turn a scholarly gaze to the material objects



Fig. 4 Prayer rug showing Tree of Life design, 1880s

of Islam and Islamic practice in their cultural, sensual, and affective specificities as artworks, crafts, commodities, or simply as objects of everyday life, connecting the material with the virtual, the ideal, and the spiritual. The prayer carpet and prayer rug, along with other objects and commodities that are used for Muslim prayer (chador-namaz, mohr, tasbih, janamaz) raise important questions about what constitutes the sensual, the pleasurable, and aesthetic cultures of religion, and how these interact with other dimensions, including the ethical and the political.<sup>15</sup> Bringing these elements of experience into the realm of the aesthetic, of politics and economics, reveals the function of capital beyond modernist binaries of secular versus religion; material versus spiritual and rational versus irrational.



Fig. 5 Prayer carpet depicting the gateway to a flower-filled paradise, 18th century

## Citation Guide

1. Mino0 Moallem, "Praying through the senses: The Prayer Rug/Carpet and the Converging Territories of the Material and the Spiritual," Essay, in *Conversations: An Online Journal of the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion* (2014), doi:10.22332/con.ess.2015.1

Moallem, Mino0. "Praying through the senses: The Prayer Rug/Carpet and the Converging Territories of the Material and the Spiritual." Essay. In *Conversations: An Online Journal of the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion* (2014). doi:10.22332/con.ess.2015.1

## Notes

1. Embodiment refers to the materiality of body and its active presence in the constitution of subjectivity and identity. A central concept in feminist theory, it refers to the body as a site of power relations and the locus of cultural and historical constructions and transformations. See Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, eds. Katie Conboy, et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). Also see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. R. Hurley (Penguin Books, 1978).
2. Unless otherwise noted, italicized terms are in Farsi.
3. Small prayer rugs are also called *sadjadeh*, which refers to the location of prostration.
4. Namaz poses are very similar to yoga poses. Each prayer session includes sequences of dynamic movements and flows.
5. Depending on cost, termeh may incorporate gold and silver threads and embroidery. The background colors are mostly dark and light red, green, and orange. Termeh is used as a decorative cloth for ceremonial events including weddings and funerals. In the past, a number of objects made with termeh, including janamaz, were part of women's dowries. With the advent of mass-produced and mechanized weaving, termeh is available in bazaars, shopping malls, and on the internet in a variety of shapes and colors, including anything from clothing items to tablecloths to cushion covers, etc. Things made with termeh are popular commodities among Iranian diasporic communities.
6. After the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Islamic state required women to cover their hair and body. Although most Iranian women wear a headscarf and an Islamic manteaux (a long tunic) to comply with the state rule, more conservative women wear a black chador that covers their whole body from head to toe. The imposed veiling has been gradually transformed into Islamic fashion, turning the veiling practices into a fashion industry; recent fashion shows in Tehran have provoked controversy among the



Islamic elite. Additionally, since the imposition of veiling by the state, women have used veiling as a site of political and cultural negotiation. The most conservative tendencies of the Islamic Republic are constantly pushing for the reinforcement of the morality police's mandate to discipline urban upper and middle class women for "bad *hijabi*," or unapproved practices of veiling. In response urban women have pushed to legitimize brighter colors and less conventional modes of veiling. On the other hand, for rural women who used to wear more colorful local clothing and a light white headscarf, the black chador has become fashionable. For a history of the establishment of the modern nation-state in Iran and forced unveiling, the practices of self-veiling during the time of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, and the state imposed veiling since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, see Minoo Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Cultural Politics of Patriarchy* (University of California Press, 2005).

7. I agree with Doreen Massey that "The imagination of space as a surface on which we are placed, the turning of space into time, the sharp separation of local place from the space out there; these are all ways of taming the challenge that the inherent spatiality of the world presents," Massey, *For Space* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2005), 7.

8. While small "prayer rugs" are used for prayer, "prayer carpets" are larger and are mostly used as decorative objects. The term "prayer carpet" is applied to these carpets by Western carpet connoisseurs as there is no good translation into English for the Farsi term for these carpets. In Farsi, as these carpets are generally smaller than wall-to-wall carpets (termed *quali*), they are called *qualiche*, roughly "little carpet."

9. Floral and tree patterns representing eternity and immortal life are as diverse as the carpet designers who make them and the location where the carpets are produced. Pattern names include, "armlet," "fish," "cashmere," "Afshari," "Mir," etc.

10. As a symbol, the tree of life has been represented by a number of religious and cultural traditions including Armenian, Assyrian, Egyptian, etc.

11. Some Arab feminist scholars have argued that the notion of fitna or disorder/chaos in Islam refers to women. See Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987); Fatna Ait Sabbah, *La femme dans l'inconscient musulman* (Paris: Le Sycomore, 1982).

12. Kajri Jain calls this process "the vernacularization of capitalism," Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economics of Indian Calendar Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 21.

13. Foucault refers to heterotopia as enacted utopia, a mirror or a "placeless place" linking the real to the virtual. He argues, "The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible." He gives the example of the patterns of a Persian rug depicting a sacred garden as a

microcosm of the world both mythical and real. He writes, “As for carpets, they were originally reproductions of gardens (the garden is a rug onto which the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection, and the rug is a sort of garden that can move across space).” See “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” in Michel Foucault, *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, ed. Neil Leach (New York: Routledge, 1997), 334.

14. The genealogy of these carpet designs, their historical transformation, their depiction as prayer carpets, and their circulation both as luxury objects and as cheap commodities needs careful inquiry beyond the scope of this short essay. My new book manuscript, “Nation as Transnational Commodity: The Mobile World of the Persian Carpet,” examines the entanglement of discourses, institutions, and agents in the production, circulation, and consumption of Oriental carpets in general and Persian carpets in particular.

15. For a careful study of material and visual cultures of religion see Sally Pomey, ed., *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).