Building Presence
Scenes of Religious Diversity in Berlin

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Working her way through overgrown foliage in order to reveal a tombstone, Feride G.-Gençaslan tells us about the "*wahrhaftige Lebendigkeit*" (veritable liveliness) of the deceased. Feride is a member of the Sufi-Center Rabbaniyya, one of Berlin's most vivid Sufi communities belonging to the Naqshbandiyya Order with followers of diverse social and national backgrounds.

We are standing at the grave of Dr. Salah Eid, a Turkish man who in the early 1980s was laid to rest in Berlin's historic Islamic graveyard in Neukölln. Today, the impressive Şehitlik Mosque stands right next to it. It is a matter of fact, Feride explains, that this deceased man's extraordinary spiritual energy, attested by the community's Grand Sheikh himself, has a great impact on the lives of Sufis in Berlin. Some regularly visit his grave, take respite from the hectic city life, and offer a prayer for the deceased, while also savoring the cemetery's peace and stillness.

Feride G.-Gençaslan reciting a prayer at the historical Islamic graveyard, Berlin Neukölln, 2023, © Dominik Mattes/Thomas John

Feride G.-Gençaslan and Dominik Mattes in conversation, Berlin Mitte, 2023, © Dominik Mattes/ Thomas John

The scene in the graveyard features in the documentary film *Building Presence. Scenes of Religious Diversity in Berlin* (Mattes/ John 2025) that illustrates how minoritized religious groups in Berlin seek, establish, aspire to, and sense various forms of affective (co)presence and conviviality in the German capital.[1] Once "regarded as the world's most a-religious city" (Lanz 2013: 20), Berlin has long hosted a wide range of religious and spiritual communities, all of which in one way or another strive to find and maintain their place and role in the postsecular metropolis (Becci et al. 2017; Baker 2018; Selim 2024).

Aside from Feride and the Naqshbandi Sufis, the film features female protagonists from the predominantly Tamil Hindu community of the Sri Mayurapathy Murugan Temple in Neukölln (Brintha Puvaneswaran, Santhy Manikavasagar), the Vietnamese Buddhist community of the Pho-Da pagoda in Lichtenberg (Ha Hausmann), and a more loosely organized Neo-Pagan group practicing different traditions in public and private places in the city and its surroundings (Gudrun Pannier).

In accompanying these protagonists to their places of religious gathering, witnessing their ritual and secular engagements in and with their natural and social environments, and conversing with them about their historical trajectories and personal aspirations within and beyond the cityscape of Berlin, the film aims to convey a sense of how religious communities build and sustain affective presence and how they co-shape and partake in diverse forms of urban conviviality.

Affective presence, in this context, may be understood in a territorial and material sense. Still, it is no less important to account for social and political manifestations, or as Feride's explanations at the cemetery suggest, for temporal connections that while profoundly determining the groups' sense of being in the here and now transcend the confines of contemporary Berlin.

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1   The images in this photo essay are stills from the documentary film, which derives from and is informed by the conceptual work developed in the research project "Governing Religious Diversity in Berlin: Affective Dynamics of In- and Exclusion in Urban Space" (conducted by Hansjörg Dilger, Dominik Mattes, and Omar Kasmani at the Collaborative Research Center Affective Societies, Freie Universität Berlin, funded by the German Research Foundation from 2019–2023).

Re/Connecting

Brintha Puvaneswaran, 2023, © Dominik Mattes/Thomas John

Sri Mayurapathy Murugan Temple, Berlin-Neukölln, 2023, © Dominik Mattes/Thomas John

Gudrun Pannier (second from right) and fellow believers conducting a ritual at *Blanke Helle*, Berlin-Tempelhof, 2022, © Dominik Mattes/Thomas John

As diverse as the religious groups in question, manifold are their histories of arriving and establishing their presence in Berlin. And yet, in our film we trace a commonality in the groups' aspirations and practices of building presence with the notion of re/connecting.

For members of the diasporic communities of the Pho-Da pagoda and the Sri Mayurapathy Murugan temple, for instance, their gathering places serve as indispensable sites of re/connecting to fellow believers from Vietnam and Sri Lanka. While communal religious practice in these places provides some with a feeling "a little bit like *Heimat* [home]," or "where you leave the feeling of being a refugee behind," as Santhy and Brintha noted, the communities are also essential in helping newcomers arrive and navigate the geographic, affective, and political terrain of their migration destination (Karagiannis/Glick-Schiller 2006; Lauser/Weißköppel 2008).

The religious centers, especially the widely visibly built, material presence in the form of the temple and the pagoda, further constitute an important means of claiming belonging in the multicultural urban society (Beekers/Tamimi Arab 2016). They help transform experiences of racialized discrimination into self-consciousness and pride in being part of a flourishing diasporic religious community.

This is closely related to ideas of transferring and enhancing "correct" knowledge about the religious tradition in question both within the respective communities and among the interested wider public. The religious centers are viewed as prominent sources of well-established information that is to be harnessed against derogatory public discourse and representations of (minority) religions in the media. In fact, as per the Grand Sheikh of the Naqshbandi Sufis, connecting to the German society by educating the public on the "true, lived Islam" and countering stereotypical perceptions of the religion was the main aim of the Sufi center he asked his followers to found in Berlin when he visited the city in the early 1990s.

Re/connecting in a temporal rather than a spatial sense became particularly salient in the narratives of our Neo-Pagan protagonist Gudrun. Our conversations revolved repeatedly around her and her fellow believers' continuous struggles against the hegemony of Christian mainline churches. This reflected, for instance, in church representatives' recurrent sense of amazement when encountering people who practiced European Pagan traditions presumed to be long extinct. Here, re/connecting means, first, to demonstrate that a wide variety of Pagan religious traditions are much more alive than the public discourse on incorporating religious diversity in society would suggest and, second, to actively shape dynamics of conviviality in the city by assuming an active role in municipal networks and projects of interreligious dialogue (Mattes/Kasmani/Dilger 2021). Finally, re/connection in the Neo-Pagan context means to reappropriate and revive cultic sites in the urban geography such as the *Blanke Helle*, a small pond in a public park surrounded by residential buildings in Berlin-Tempelhof that is said to be a site with a centuries-long yet intermittently buried history of ritual practice.

Placemaking

Procession of Sri Mayurapathy Murugan temple community, Berlin-Neukölln, 2023, © Dominik Mattes/Thomas John

Monk in front of altar, Pho-Da pagoda, Berlin-Lichtenberg, 2023, © Dominik Mattes/Thomas John

"When I go to the pagoda, if it is very beautiful, reasonable and neatly built, in a central place, then it is (a sense of) pride, a symbol of our faith. But it doesn't have to be like that. The center (of Berlin) is for business, for the important things. The pagoda is for faith, it can be built on the periphery, in insignificant places (in the city), that is not a problem either" (Ha Hausmann, Interview on 23 March 2023).[2]

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2   "Wenn ich die Pagode besuche, wenn sie sehr schön, vernünftig und ordentlich gebaut ist, an einem zentralen Ort, dann ist das (ein Gefühl von) Stolz, ein Symbol für unseren Glauben. Aber es muss nicht so sein. Das Zentrum (von Berlin) ist für Geschäfte, für die wichtigen Dinge. Die Pagode ist für den Glauben, sie kann an der Peripherie gebaut werden, an unbedeutenden Orten (in der Stadt), das ist auch kein Problem."

Establishing and maintaining a presence in Berlin's religiously and socially diverse cityscape is inextricably linked to the dynamics of placemaking – and the necessary condition for developing a sense of conviviality within an environment that is experienced as both welcoming and hostile. Building a temple or pagoda for one's community, renting a space for Sufi prayers and *zikr*, or finding appropriate places to perform Pagan rituals mirror and establish multiple affective connections within and beyond the city.

As Ha of the Vietnamese Buddhist community told us, having a building in the city center can be associated with pride; it reinforces a sense of visibility and recognition – of being with the city – for a religious minority. She compared this to Hanoi, where there are many pagodas in the city center. The daily sight of these buildings reassured her that her religion holds a firmly established place in society; much like the sight of the lights of the television tower in the city center of former East Berlin, which gave her a sense of belonging on her way home every evening.

At the same time, the experiences of the religious groups we work with showed that structural forces determine how religious "newcomers" have (not) found a place in Berlin's cityscape, especially after reunification in the early 1990s (Dilger/Kasmani/Mattes 2018; Krause 2008). Our interlocutors emphasized that capitalist forces and power relations shape their struggle for their material presence in the city – which has become embedded in processes of urban segregation and the unequal recognition of religious actors that make their access to places within the city unstable and uncertain (Kasmani 2021). They face bureaucratic and legal challenges that structure the religious-spatial topographies of Berlin's cityscape at both the national and municipal levels (Burchardt 2019).

Against this background, many religious minorities have found their place on the urban margins of the city. In the urban periphery, their sense of belonging does not result from increased urban visibility, but often from their *in*visibility. To know that the spaces in which they are gathering are explicitly *not* exposed to the gaze of the public gives them a sense of intimacy and security – from urban bustle and hostility as well as from the fear of outright attacks on their places. The latter concern was underlined painfully by Feride's memories of the incendiary attack on one of her community's first gathering places in Berlin-Wedding in the early 1990s, from where they have since moved to their current location in Berlin-Tempelhof. At the same time, the location of a place of worship in the (formerly) peripheral parts of Berlin is no guarantee of security, either, because the pagoda, for whose continued existence the Vietnamese Buddhist community is fighting, is also endangered at its *current* location.[3]

Last but not least, the examples from our film demonstrate that processes of religious placemaking are shaped by the groups' continuous and multi-layered spatial interactions with the city. The emergent "affective trajectories" (Dilger et al. 2020) of these interactions materialize in different places and spaces within and outside the city and are shaped by different forms of (trans)temporality and (trans)locality. Thus, as Santhy and Brintha from the Hindu community emphasize, Sri Lanka has become a "vacation

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3   As Max Müller reports in a research blog, https://affective-societies.de/2021/aus-der-forschung/noch-sechs-monate-vom-kampf-vietnamesischer-berlinerinnen-gegen-buerokratische-windmuehlen/ (accessed November 4, 2024).

spot" for many of them, as the long history of the civil war has made return migration impossible. For them, their newly established temple in Berlin "has taken away the sense of being in exile"; it gives them "hope for their future existence."

Furthermore, religious groups are also longing for connection with spatial religious "elsewheres" (Kasmani et al. 2020) *beyond* the current cityscape of Berlin, and expressions and practices of faith establish a connection to saints, gods, and other spiritual entities that are not by definition tied to a particular place. In the case of the Neo-Pagan group, such carefully orchestrated material interactions with urban space aim to establish a connection with the group's deities in Berlin's city parks; for example, by offering special cookies to ensure a deceased member's "reception at the table of Hel." For the Naqshbandi group, this includes both the close relationship with the Grand Sheikh in Istanbul and holy sites such as Mecca, as well as the connection to *Sufiland*, where a significant part of the group resides in southern Germany. Thus, while Berlin is valued by the group as "the spiritual center" of Europe – with all its possibilities for building religious and interreligious presence – Sufiland has become a communal space for living in a spiritual atmosphere "far from the big city" – "in harmony with nature" and the possibility to live and practice "the ancient methods of Sufism."[4]

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4   https://www.sufiland.de/ (September 22, 2023).

Engaging

Neo-Pagan ritual, Tempelhofer Feld, Berlin-Tempelhof, Lange Nacht der Religionen 2022, © Dominik Mattes/Thomas John

Feride G.-Gençaslan and the Grand Sheikh Mehmed Adil An-Naqshbandi at Humboldt Forum, Berlin-Mitte, 2022, © Dominik Mattes/Thomas John

As part of the Humboldt Forum's exhibition "Aspects of Islam," the Naqshbandi Sufis were one among several Muslim communities invited to curate two vitrines displaying objects that illustrate and embody their beliefs and ritual practice. To attend the opening of the exhibition, the group's Grand Sheikh arrived from Istanbul, Turkey. His presence drew a large group of Sufi followers from Berlin and beyond. A collective prayer and meditation followed on the museum premises.

Another central aspect of building and sustaining presence and a sense of conviviality within and beyond one's own community consists of the ways in which the religious groups engage with their immediate and wider social environments. How do they open up and relate to other religious and secular actors and institutions and to the public at large?

Ha's narrative is particularly striking in this regard. She serves as an indispensable source of information for Vietnamese people newly arriving in Berlin who need assistance in navigating intricate immigration-related legal-bureaucratic processes. But more than that, together with fellow believers from her Buddhist community and some of her 50,000 plus followers on Facebook, she has repeatedly raised significant amounts of money that were donated to people in need well beyond the confines of the Vietnamese Buddhist community in Berlin. In 2021, for instance, they donated 33,000 Euro to the victims of the floods in the German states of Rheinland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia. Ha considered such fundraising activities as a duty and a small token of gratitude and reciprocity in the face of the financial assistance she and her fellow believers received from the German state in the form of child-care allowance. She also emphasized such commitment as important reminders to the public of the Vietnamese community's presence and readiness to take on social responsibility. Such actions, she stated with a smile on her face, demonstrated that: "Hey, we are there too!"

The Sufi and Pagan groups we worked with found other ways of politically and spiritually engaging with the urban social surroundings. Both have been involved in the manifold activities of the Berlin Forum of Religions,[5] the city's largest state-supported network of interreligious dialogue, for several years. And despite the substantial differences in their spiritual practice and formal organization, both groups derive their motivation for such public engagement not only from their conviction that in this way they can make a valuable contribution to peaceful conviviality in the city. They also, just as importantly, have the hope to finally be acknowledged as proper religions – each an equal collaboration partner – by the other religious groups and institutions involved.

An interesting contrast between the groups emerges in applying a temporal perspective to their engagement with the public. For instance, Feride expressed her delight at the opportunity to perform a Sufi ritual alongside exhibiting religious objects in the Humboldt Forum in the very heart of the city; she enthusiastically looked forward to the collaborative projects to follow and envisioned the Sufi group's opening to the public as a process of permanent growth. When it came to the Pagans, Gudrun emphasized many groups' seasonally fluctuating movements of opening and closure. During the bright spring and summer months of the year, they regularly conduct rituals in well-accessible public places that are open to all manner of interested outsiders, including researchers and media representatives. The darker and colder fall and winter months, in turn, are reserved for more intimate and familial rituals in private spaces away from the public gaze.

The practice of the Tamil Hindu community features yet other, i.e. political, spiritual, and educational registers of engagement. First, as the invitations to and active participation of government officials such as Martin Hikel (currently mayor of the district of

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5   https://www.berliner-forum-religionen.de/ (September 29, 2023).

Neukölln) in their ritual festivities demonstrates, the community successfully seeks and nurtures good relations with local politics (Dick and Nagel 2017). Second, the annual two-day procession of the temple's deities along main roads of the area not only created much welcome visibility for the community in its immediate neighborhood but also served the purpose of blessing the same area. And third, the community was highly involved in educational activities, be this in the form of welcoming school classes to the temple in order to introduce them to the basics of Hindu religious practice or functioning as research partners, if not subjects, for local university students not least of all in social and cultural anthropology.

Futuring

From left to right: Ha Hausmann, monk leading rituals at Pho-Da pagoda, Keven Hönicke (Baustadtrat, Berlin-Lichtenberg), Gerry Woop (Staatssekretär für Europa, Senate of Berlin), Pho-Da pagoda, 2023, © Dominik Mattes/Thomas John

Since 2019, the Buddhist community of the Pho-Da pagoda has been involved in a dispute with the building department of the Lichtenberg District. This has to do with the legal status of the pagoda in a designated industrial zone culminating in the district authorities' demand that the community give up the building. Not least due to the attention the case gained in the local media, representatives from the district government and the Senate of Berlin pledged to find a solution that would ensure the pagoda's permanent existence. The case is not yet settled and the community continues to live with great uncertainty about the future of their place of worship and gathering.

Religious presence, especially when combined with migrant or minority populations, can be a highly affective matter: European debates on Islamic dress and religious architecture reveal how certain modes of becoming present can be particularly anxiety-provoking and even stand for non-belonging, if not also regarded as a hindrance to cultural conviviality and social progress (Amir-Moazami 2018). So long as arriving in Europe also signals an arriving from outside modernity (El Tayeb 2011), migrant communities are assigned an elsewhere, understood to be torn between homes, suspended in time and place.

Though not all four communities we engage with in the film are migrant, such thinking helps broach the broader idea that being an outsider is more than a matter of geography. Crossing temporal borders, being allowed into territories and projects of futurity, is no easy feat either (Kasmani 2023: 227). In that sense, what affects them all, despite their differences, is the politics of minoritization. Put another way, these groups find themselves in a specific relation to official and dominant forms of religious presence in the German capital. Whether religious and cultural outsiders, migrant or otherwise, the groups in the film are acutely aware that their efforts of building presence must persevere in a context where their own histories are either not materially present or have been removed from cultural view and historical significance. Becoming visible in the public sphere hence requires that minority religious groups navigate feelings of outsiderness in the present but also overcome forms of otherness over time through practices of affective engagement in the city.

Our query, how diverse religious communities build their presence in Berlin, thus takes into consideration the ways their efforts to belong also involve the work of future-making. After all, the religious labors of becoming present in the city, as we have filmed and encountered in Berlin, are temporally coded: German Neo-Pagans awaken Europe's old-world deities otherwise lost to a Christian present; Vietnamese Buddhists strive to secure the Pagoda's future; Tamil Hindus maintain their historical ties to memories of war and fleeing through prayer and procession; and Sufis seek continuity and presence through manifold acts of remembrance as well as representation in a national museum setting.

To strive for a permanent place of worship; to have a community to pray or remember with; to have grounds to re-sacralize or bury loved ones in the city; to visit the holy dead; to have one's histories told, shared, represented in the public sphere – these are all pieces of the puzzle of affective presence that reveal how Berlin's religious minorities find grounding and continuity not just in place but also in time.

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