

Performing Islam on the International Pitch: Stretching Space and Turning Time in Men's World Football

ASIF MAJID
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

[ABSTRACT] How do performances of Islam in men's football affect the beautiful game's spatiotemporality? This article argues that football is a performative act in conversation with Islam and other social forces. It investigates two examples of spatiotemporal transformations that dislocate viewers' and fans' assumptions of watching football. First, forward Mohamed Salah performs *sujood* (prostration) after scoring a goal for his club team. Second, Tunisian national goalkeeper Mouez Hassan faked injuries in two pre-World Cup friendlies in May 2018 during Ramadan, stopping play and the referee's watch so Hassan's teammates could break their fast. In both cases, Islam and football intersect performatively, altering the pre-existing structure of contemporary football to reveal the sport's spatiotemporal structures as porous, semipermeable, and performative in reference to surrounding social contexts and religious practices.

[KEYWORDS] Islam, football, space, performance, time

As a performance event, men's professional football is definitively demarcated by elements of space and time that are held sacrosanct. Spatially, the rectangular pitch is regulated in terms of size, allowed to be no longer than 120 meters and no wider than 90 meters.¹ Eleven players are allowed per team, with each team fighting for possession of the ball to score goals and using all body parts except their hands and arms. Goalkeepers are the

exception to this rule, for they are allowed use their arms and hands to stop the ball from entering their goal, but only within a certain portion of the field. When the ball runs over the sideline or endline, it returns to the field via a throw-in, goal kick, corner kick, or kickoff, depending on the circumstances of its exit. There is thus a spatial liveness to the ball's movement on the rectangular pitch. Temporally, each match takes 90 minutes, split into two equal halves of 45 minutes.² A referee ensures that this temporality is enforced, stopping and starting play due to injuries, goals, halftime, player discipline, or other events.³ At times when play is stopped, the referee's watch is also paused so that the 90-minute match duration reflects only playing time.⁴ Additional minutes are added at the end of a match to compensate for stoppages. But whistling for play to stop is at the referee's discretion, particularly in terms of injuries. Potential head injuries constitute an immediate stoppage, while others are addressed in terms of perceived severity or the degree to which they disadvantage the attacking team. Goalkeepers, as the only one of their kind on their team, are afforded special protection in this regard.

Despite the perceived firmness of football's rules, context is essential for how space and time manifest in a match. A goal by one team leads to the opposite team restarting play through a kickoff, while a player that simulates being fouled may end up earning a goal-scoring opportunity through deceiving the referee, only to be disciplined later.⁵ External events and discourses are also influential, not least being issues of racism that have marginalized visibly Muslim female footballers in the UK,⁶ and match-fixing that stripped Italian men's champions FC Juventus of their title in 2006.⁷ It is these seemingly marginal moments that I am interested in in this essay. In what follows, I focus on how external Islamic discourses shape specific spatiotemporalities within men's professional football, engaging in momentary transformations of the game. My argument is that footballers, when they embody their personal faith during play, transform and transcend the spatiotemporality of the beautiful game.

Performance, Prostration, and Phoniness

In the English Premier League, Liverpool forward Mohamed Salah is a particularly important case study as regards spatially transforming football.⁸ As a prolific goal scorer, Salah regularly marks his goals in two

ways: hugging his teammates and performing *sujood*, the Islamic act of prostration. *Sujood* normally occurs twice in every section of *salaat*, a word commonly mistranslated as prayer that actually originates from an Arabic root word meaning “to connect.” A Muslim who performs *salaat* the requisite five times daily finds herself in *sujood* thirty-four times each day, a word that is mentioned in the *Qur’an* fifteen times. In Islamic thought, *sujood* is considered the physically lowest, but spiritually highest, position a person can take. Salah’s performance of *sujood* outside of *salaat* is a specific expression of gratitude for goals scored. Numerous other English Premier League players are Muslim, but Salah is the most prominent of those who prostrate on the pitch.

Yet, *sujood* is not normally found in footballing circumstances or other mundane, day-to-day activities. Instead, the act tends to be reserved for the *masjid*, which literally translates in Arabic as “a place for *sujood*.” The *masjid*, or mosque, is often a stand-alone building that serves as a place of congregation and community for Muslims. Its design and demarcation celebrate the act of connecting with God. Spatially, Salah’s *sujood* belongs in the *masjid*. But he does it on the football pitch, giving thanks for a particular sporting achievement. Since they are decontextualized from the overall sequence of *salaat* in which they are normally found, are his prostrations on the pitch a practice run for the more intimate act of connecting with God? Or is the more private moment a rehearsal for the public performance of prostration, heightened by the larger-than-life stakes often ascribed to sport through hero-worship, television viewership, and fandom?

In either case, Salah’s use of *sujood* as a celebration spatially transforms the football pitch into a *masjid*. For a brief moment, *sujood* shifts the pitch from being a place of play to a place of worship. If the Arabic origin of the word *masjid* is any indication, then—in line with excerpts from prophetic tradition—Salah’s *sujood* confirms that “the entire Earth [is] a *masjid* for Muslims.”⁹ Salah’s particularly Islamic expression of gratitude infuses the football pitch with *tawhid*, a fundamental recognition of the oneness of God. The act of submitting oneself manifests physically, in the move of Salah’s forehead to the earth, where the purportedly highest element of humanity—the intellectual capacity to think as embodied by the human brain—is humbled, as its housing becomes as low as possible. In keeping with the ethos of Islam as a religion for all humanity, the faith can

spatially manifest anywhere, including within the sacredly demarcated football pitch. Its borders are more porous than they first appear.

If the space of the pitch is fuzzier than its white chalk lines imply, then what of the 90-minute period marked out for its sporting efforts? There, too, transformation is possible. Take, for instance, the actions of Tunisian national goalkeeper Mouez Hassen in 2018. During pre-World Cup friendlies in late May and early June, Hassen faked injuries at pre-determined points during the match.¹⁰ These moments stopped the referee's watch and paused the game. Since these matches were played during Ramadan, the Islamic holy month of fasting, Hassen's fakery had an underlying purpose. The break in the action lined up with the time to break the fast on those days, landing on minute 58 of one match and minute 49 of the other.¹¹ Hassen's teammates took the opportunity to have some water and dates, running to the sideline in an event that was clearly prestaged. Medical staff that ran to assist Hassen also brought dates with them, fully aware of their dual role. In both cases, the national team was losing before Hassen's fake injury, and went on to tie the match afterward.

For my purposes, the match result is less important than the deployment of an outside discourse. In this moment, Hassen brought together two temporalities. On the pitch, the special protection afforded to a goalkeeper manifested in terms of extra care being taken when that player possibly sustained an injury. The referee's whistle and watch paused the match, moving outside the 90-minute framework. Off the pitch, the tempo of the days of Ramadan, in which activity levels are framed by engagement with the religious commitment to abstain from food and drink during daylight hours, took over. The sacrosanct 90 minutes of a football match played second fiddle to a religious temporality that was not troubled by a sports performance. This temporality drew from a faith-based standard that is to be applied in universal and consistent terms, regardless of professional or footballing obligations.

In Hassen's performative actions, the socioreligious outweighed the sporting. Ordinarily an obstacle to the general desire for football to be played with as few interruptions as possible, the referee's whistle was, in this case, leveraged to meet the Tunisian team's religious needs. For the players, stopping the match was preferred to continuing it. Time was transformed, with a marginal event becoming central as players rushed

to the sideline to break their fast. The choreography of it all—Hassen faking his injury, teammates knowing that this was the moment to break their fast, and medical staff assisting in the mirage while also providing vital sustenance—demonstrates a type of communal performance that leveraged football's temporal constraints as a way of invoking another temporality. On the fringes of the supposed mainstage performance of the match, breaking one's fast was, for all intents and purposes, the more important temporal event.

Conclusion

In both Salah's and Hassen's cases, Islam is drawn upon as a spatial and temporal discourse, bringing to mind anthropologist Talal Asad's description of the faith as a "discursive tradition."¹² That "tradition" itself, in terms of where and when it is practiced, carries with it a range of discourses and narratives that can be leveraged in particular circumstances. In Salah's and Hassen's deployment of Islamic practice, the faith is taken as the primary spatiotemporality of the moment, rather than the spatial tempo of football's rules. The sport thus becomes just another vector for Islam's manifestation. Islam is not limited to a particular space, nor is it beholden to alternate structures of time. It transcends both, offering a spatiotemporal logic all its own. That logic, for Salah and Hassen as Muslims, infuses everyday practice of the faith, humbling the heightened and larger-than-life world of men's professional football to the simple act of putting one's forehead on earth or eating dates and drinking water after a long day of fasting. Indeed, the players' on-pitch performances of faith demonstrate their own allegiances to something higher than the sport that constitutes their livelihood. Through that allegiance, a single message becomes clear: football is not as sacred as it may first appear.

ASIF MAJID is a scholar-artist-educator who works at the intersection of Islam, media, marginality, and politics, particularly through community-based participatory theatre. He has a PhD in Anthropology, Media, and Performance from The University of Manchester, an MA in Conflict Resolution from Georgetown University, and a self-designed BA in Interdisciplinary Studies from the University of Maryland,

Baltimore County. Asif has published in multiple peer-reviewed theatre journals, as well as numerous books and media outlets. His performance credits include work with the Kennedy Center (US), Convergence Theatre (US), the Royal Exchange Theatre (UK), Action Transport Theatre (UK), and Unity Theatre (UK). From 2017 to 2019, Asif was a Lab Fellow with The Laboratory for Global Performance and Performance. Currently, he is a Mellon/ACLS Public Fellow with the San Francisco Arts Commission, and can be found online at www.asifmajid.com.

NOTES

1. Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), *Laws of the Game* (Zurich: International Football Association Board, 2015), 7.

2. FIFA, *Laws*, 30.

3. FIFA, *Laws*, 25–29.

4. At certain stages of certain competitions, added time can extend match duration beyond the standard 90 minutes. However, those structurally sanctioned transformations of time are not relevant for my argument here.

5. Natalie Alvarez, “Foul Play: Soccer’s ‘Infamous Thespians’ and the Cultural Politics of Diving,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 60, no. 1 (March 2016): 10.

6. Aisha Ahmad, “British Muslim Female Experiences in Football: Islam, Identity, and the Hijab,” in *Race, Ethnicity, and Football: Persisting Debates and Emergent Issues*, ed. Daniel Burdsey (New York: Routledge, 2011), 101–15.

7. Sean Hamil, Stephen Morrow, Catharine Idle, Giambattista Rossi, and Stefano Faccendini, “The Governance and Regulation of Italian Football,” *Soccer & Society* 11, no. 4 (July 2010): 382–83.

8. Asif Majid, “Liverpool FC’s Mohamed Salah’s Goal Celebrations: A Guide to British Muslimness,” *The Conversation*, March 12, 2018, <http://theconversation.com/liverpool-fcs-mohamed-salahs-goal-celebrations-a-guide-to-british-muslimness-93084>.

9. Nuha N. N. Khoury, “The Mihrab: From Text to Form,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30, no. 1 (February 1998): 23, italics in original.

10. For more, see Akan Anwankwo, “Tunisia Goalkeeper, Hassen, Reportedly Fakes Injuries in Two Matches to Break Ramadan Fast,” *Legit*, June 4, 2018, <https://www.legit.ng/1173335-hassen-fakes-injury-teammates-break-ramadan-fast.html>; Footballskillz Unleashed, “Tunisia Goalkeeper ‘Fakes Injury’ to Break Ramadan Fast,” YouTube, June 4, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=100altRX33s>; Souhail Khmira, “Fun Fact,” Twitter, June 2, 2018, <https://twitter.com/skhmira/status/1003045915274330112>; and Samiksha Pattanaik, “How Tunisian Goalkeeper Faked ‘Injury’ to Help Teammates Break Ramzan Fast,” *Hindustan Times*, June 5, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/football/how-tunisian-goalkeeper-faked-injury-to-help-teammates-break-ramzan-fast/story-5HMkjEYojRSkKftPN1DnkM.html>.

11. Al Jazeera, "Tunisia Keeper 'Fakes' Injury to Help Players Break Ramadan Fast," *Al Jazeera*, June 3, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/tunisia-keeper-fakes-injury-players-break-ramadan-fast-180603174439967.html>.

12. Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Qui Parle* 17, no. 2 (2009): 20.

WORKS CONSULTED

Ahmad, Aisha. "British Muslim Female Experiences in Football: Islam, Identity, and the Hijab." In *Race, Ethnicity, and Football: Persisting Debates and Emergent Issues*, edited by Daniel Burdsey, 101-15. New York: Routledge, 2011.

Al Jazeera. "Tunisia Keeper 'Fakes' Injury to Help Players Break Ramadan Fast." *Al Jazeera*, June 3, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/tunisia-keeper-fakes-injury-players-break-ramadan-fast-180603174439967.html>.

Alvarez, Natalie. "Foul Play: Soccer's 'Infamous Thespians' and the Cultural Politics of Diving." *TDR: The Drama Review* 60, no. 1 (March 2016): 10-24.

Anwankwo, Akan. "Tunisia Goalkeeper, Hassen, Reportedly Fakes Injuries in Two Matches to Break Ramadan Fast." *Legit*, June 4, 2018. <https://www.legit.ng/1173335-hassen-fakes-injury-teammates-break-ramadan-fast.html>.

Asad, Talal. "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam." *Qui Parle* 17, no. 2 (2009): 1-30.

Fédération Internationale de Football Association. *Laws of the Game*. Zurich: International Football Association Board, 2015.

Footballskillz Unleashed. "Tunisia Goalkeeper 'Fakes Injury' to Break Ramadan Fast." YouTube, June 4, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=100altRX33s>.

Hamil, Sean, Stephen Morrow, Catharine Idle, Giambattista Rossi, and Stefano Faccendini. "The Governance and Regulation of Italian Football." *Soccer & Society* 11, no. 4 (July 2010): 373-413.

Khmira, Souhail. "Fun Fact." Twitter, June 2, 2018. <https://twitter.com/skhmira/status/1003045915274330112>.

Khoury, Nuha N. N. "The Mihrab: From Text to Form." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30, no. 1 (February 1998): 1-27.

Majid, Asif. "Liverpool FC's Mohamed Salah's Goal Celebrations: A Guide to British Muslimness." *The Conversation*, March 12, 2018. <http://theconversation.com/liverpool-fcs-mohamed-salahs-goal-celebrations-a-guide-to-british-muslimness-93084>.

Pattanaik, Samiksha. "How Tunisian Goalkeeper Faked 'Injury' to Help Teammates Break Ramzan Fast." *Hindustan Times*, June 5, 2018. <https://www.hindustan-times.com/football/how-tunisian-goalkeeper-faked-injury-to-help-teammates-break-ramzan-fast/story-5HMkjEYojRSkKftPN1DnkM.html>.