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# **Spiritual Beliefs, Practices, and Shadows of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at in Fiji**

A thesis  
submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree  
of  
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## ABSTRACT

This doctoral thesis examines the self-perceptions and lived experiences of Fijian Ahmadis - members of a transnational religious minority who self-identify as Muslims under the spiritual leadership of the Khalifa based in London, UK. The global Ahmadiyya Jama'at positions its adherents as divinely appointed bearers of the truest form of Islam, uniquely entrusted with leading others "from darkness to light".

At its core, this thesis poses a central question: how do Fijian Ahmadis pursue and sustain their religious identity and practices in a remote Pacific context, within a pluralistic yet predominantly Christian society? Drawing on six months of ethnographic fieldwork in Fiji, complemented by additional research among Ahmadis in New Zealand, this study explores how Fijian Ahmadis conform to doctrinal orthodoxy, navigate communal authority, articulate theological claims and interact both internally and with other Fijians. In this thesis, I critically examine the tensions Fijian Ahmadis face in balancing their local religious life with the global aspirations of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at - addressing certain contradictions while allowing others to remain obscured in the shadows of rigorous daily practice. A strong sense of communal exclusivity is shown to be sustained through the movement's bureaucratic apparatus, which promotes submission to its centralised hierarchy, religious discipline, and personal sacrifice. I contend that by prioritising religious identity and communal purity, this framework reorients Fijian Ahmadis away from their immediate social environment towards alignment with the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at, thereby limiting their deeper engagement with broader Fijian society. Further, this thesis addresses gendered expressions of religiosity and modesty, illustrating how the practice of *purdah* among Fijian Ahmadis both embodies and reinforces traditional gender roles. Finally, while the community publicly promotes values of tolerance and humanism, these ideals often remain bounded by religious and moral distinctiveness. The tension between rhetorical inclusivity and lived exclusivity becomes especially evident in the Ahmadiyya leadership's controversial response to the ongoing conflict and genocide in Gaza.

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While I recognise that the views conveyed in this thesis may not correspond with the ways some Ahmadiis with whom I interacted intended or preferred to be represented, I remain sincerely appreciative of their time and openness. Engaging with them was a transformative experience for me, facilitating the exploration and integration of my own beliefs and shadows.

I must also thank my friend Numair Ilyas, not only for translating YouTube videos and speeches of the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at leadership from Urdu to English, but also for caring for my dog, Quido, during my time in Fiji. His help made it possible for me to conduct this fieldwork.

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## GLOSSARY

**Abba** – Urdu term meaning “father”; used by Fijian Ahmadis to address the Khalifa.

**Allah** – The Arabic word for God in Islam.

**Amin ceremony** – Marking the completion of a child’s first full reading of the Qur’an.

**Amir** – Arabic title meaning “leader”; used for the president of the Ahmadiyya Jama’at at the national level.

**Ansarullah** – “Helpers of Allah”; the Ahmadiyya auxiliary organisation for male members aged 40 and above.

**Atfal** – Short for Atfal-ul-Ahmadiyya; the Ahmadiyya auxiliary organisation for boys aged 7 to 15.

**Bahishti Maqbarah** – Literally “heavenly graveyard”; a cemetery in Qadian, India, reserved for Musi members of the Ahmadiyya community.

**Bai’at** – Arabic term meaning “pledge”; the oath of allegiance.

**Chanda** – Urdu word for financial contribution or donation within the Ahmadiyya Jama’at.

**Chanda Ai’lan-e-Wasiyyat** – A financial contribution for administrative expenses related to the publication and propagation of the Wasiyyat scheme.

**Chanda Wasiyyat** – A financial contribution explicitly linked to the Wasiyyat scheme within the Ahmadiyya Jama’at.

**Chanda ‘Am** – A compulsory financial contribution, typically calculated as 1/16th of an adult Ahmadi’s monthly income.

**Chanda Hissa Amad** – Portion of Wasiyyat contributions related to the Musi members’ regular income.

**Chanda Hissa Ja’idad** – Portion of Wasiyyat contributions related to the Musi members’ personal assets.

**Chanda Jalsa Salana** – Annual financial contribution to support the Ahmadiyya community’s annual gathering (Jalsa Salana).

**Chanda Shart Awwal** – A financial contribution to cover costs associated with the maintenance of the special cemetery assigned to Musi members.

**Eid al-Fitr** – Major Islamic festival marking the end of Ramadan, the holy month of fasting.

**Fitrana** – Charitable donation given at the end of Ramadan.

**Hazrat** – Honorific Arabic and Urdu title used to denote respect for revered individuals.

**Huzoor** – Urdu term of reverence used by Fijian Ahmadis to address the Khalifa.

**Ijtema** – Annual religious competition and gathering within the Ahmadiyya Jama’at.

**Imam** – Arabic for “leader”; refers to a religious or prayer leader in Islam.

**Jalsa Salana** – Annual convention held by the Ahmadiyya Jama’at.

**Jaami’ah Ahmadiyya** – Theological university of the Ahmadiyya Jama’at.

**Jama’at** – Arabic for “community” or “congregation”; used for the Ahmadiyya Jama’at.

**Jinnah cap** – A traditional woollen hat named after Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan.

**Khalifa** – Arabic for “successor”; the spiritual head of the Ahmadiyya Jama’at.

**Khilafat** – The system of spiritual succession and leadership in the Ahmadiyya Jama’at.

**Khuddam** – “Servants of Allah”; the Ahmadiyya auxiliary organisation for men aged 15 to 40.

**Lajna Ima’illah** – “Maidservants of Allah”; the Ahmadiyya auxiliary organisation for women aged 15 and above.

**Lajna** – Short form referring to Ahmadi women.

**Majlis Karpardaz** – A committee responsible for administering the Wasiyyat scheme within the Ahmadiyya community.

**Mahdi** – Messianic figure in Islamic eschatology.

**Masih Mau’ud** – Urdu/Arabic for “Promised Messiah”; title used for Mirza Ghulam Ahmad.

**Maulana / Murrabi** – Missionary and imam in the Ahmadiyya community.

**Musi** – A member who participates in the Wasiyyat scheme by pledging a portion of wealth and income to the community.

**Nasirat** – members of the Nasirat-ul-Ahmadiyya, the Ahmadiyya auxiliary organisation for girls aged 7 to 15.

**Nazm** – Urdu term for poem or devotional song.

**Nikah** – Islamic marriage contract.

**Non-mahram** – A person who is not closely related by blood or marriage and is thus legally eligible for marriage under Islamic law.

**Pagri** – Traditional South Asian turban worn by the Khalifa.

**Pakol** – Round woollen cap from Afghanistan and northern Pakistan.

**Qur’an** – The holy book of Islam, believed to be the word of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

**Ramadan** – The ninth month of the Islamic calendar, considered by Muslims the holy month and the month of the annual fast.

**Rasul** – Arabic term for “messenger”; used in Islamic theology.

**Rizq** – Arabic term for sustenance or provision from God.

**Sadqa / Sadaqah** – Voluntary charity in Islam.

**Sadar/ Sadr** – President of an Ahmadiyya auxiliary organisation.

**Sahib** – Urdu honorific meaning “sir” or “master.”

**Salat** – Islamic ritual prayer performed five times daily.

**Salwar Kameez** – A traditional outfit originating from South Asia, worn by women, men and children.

**Sherwani** – A traditional South Asian garment for men, a knee-length coat, typically worn for formal occasions.

**Shirk** – Associating partners with God. Considered the gravest doctrinal sin in Islamic theology, which contradicts the fundamental belief in Allah’s uniqueness.

**Tahajjud** – Voluntary late-night prayer performed by devout Muslims.

**Taqwa** – The awareness of God that directs believers to observe divine commandments and avoid prohibitions.

**Tarbiyyat** – Moral and religious training and education.

**Takbeer** – Proclamation of “Allahu Akbar”, meaning “God is the Greatest.”

**Wasiyyat scheme** – Pledge in which Ahmadi members dedicate a portion of their wealth to the community’s religious and spiritual causes, thus becoming so-called Musis.

**Waqf-e-Jadeed** – Scheme for the propagation of Ahmadiyya Islam.

**Waqf-e-Nau** – A scheme in which Ahmadi parents dedicate their children for future service to the Ahmadiyya Jama’at. (i.e., a new(born) endowment)

**Waqf-e-Zindagi** – Lifetime devotion to service of the faith and community within the Ahmadiyya Jama’at.

**Zakat** – Obligatory almsgiving in Islam; one of the Five Pillars.

**Zakat al Fitr** – A special charity given at the end of Ramadan before the Eid al-Fitr prayer.

**Zindabad** – Urdu slogan meaning “long live”; used to express support or celebration.

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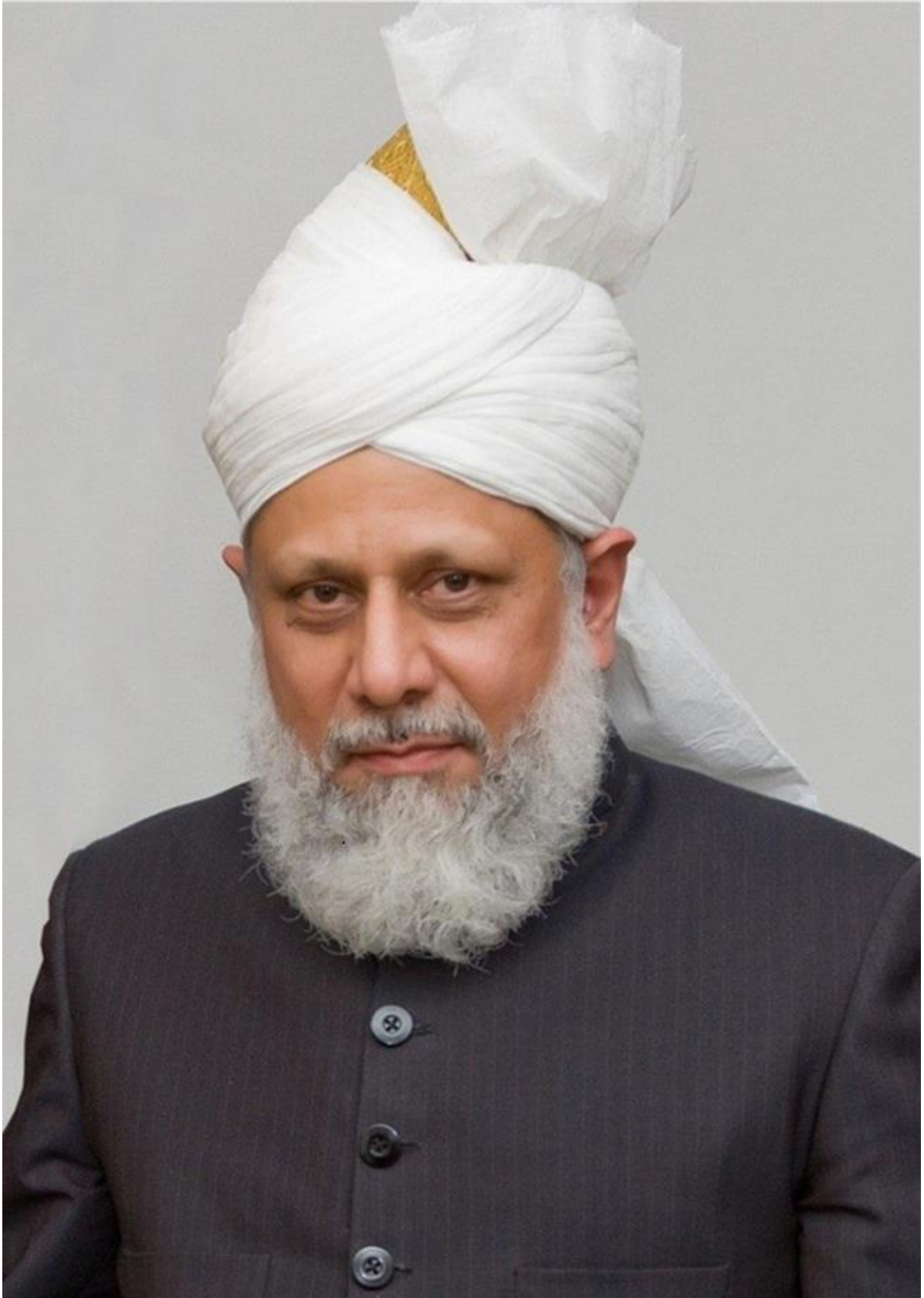
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*Figure 1: The founder and prophet of the Ahmadiyya Islam - Mirza Ghulam Ahmad*



*(Al Islam, 2025)*

*Figure 2: The current Khalifa of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at - Mirza Masroor Ahmad*



*(Al Islam, 2025)*

Figure 3: The former khalifs of the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at



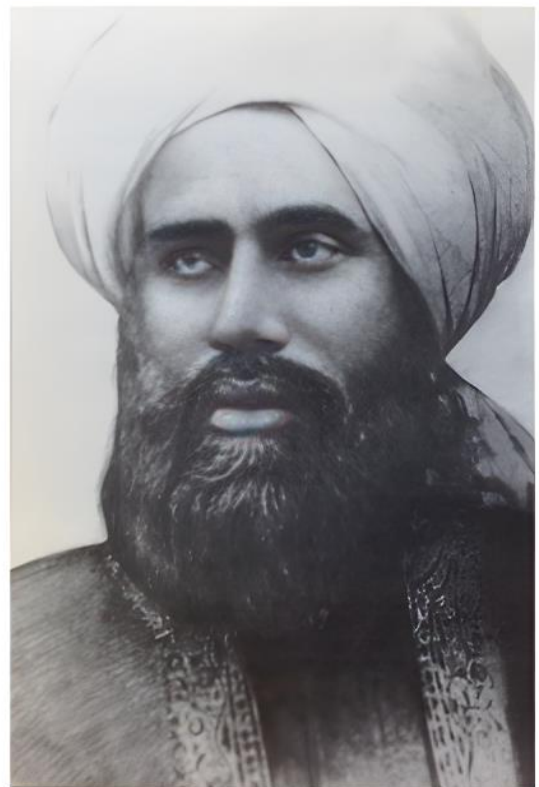
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Mirza Tahir Ahmad (1928-2003)



The Third Khalifa  
Mirza Nasir Ahmad (1909-1982)

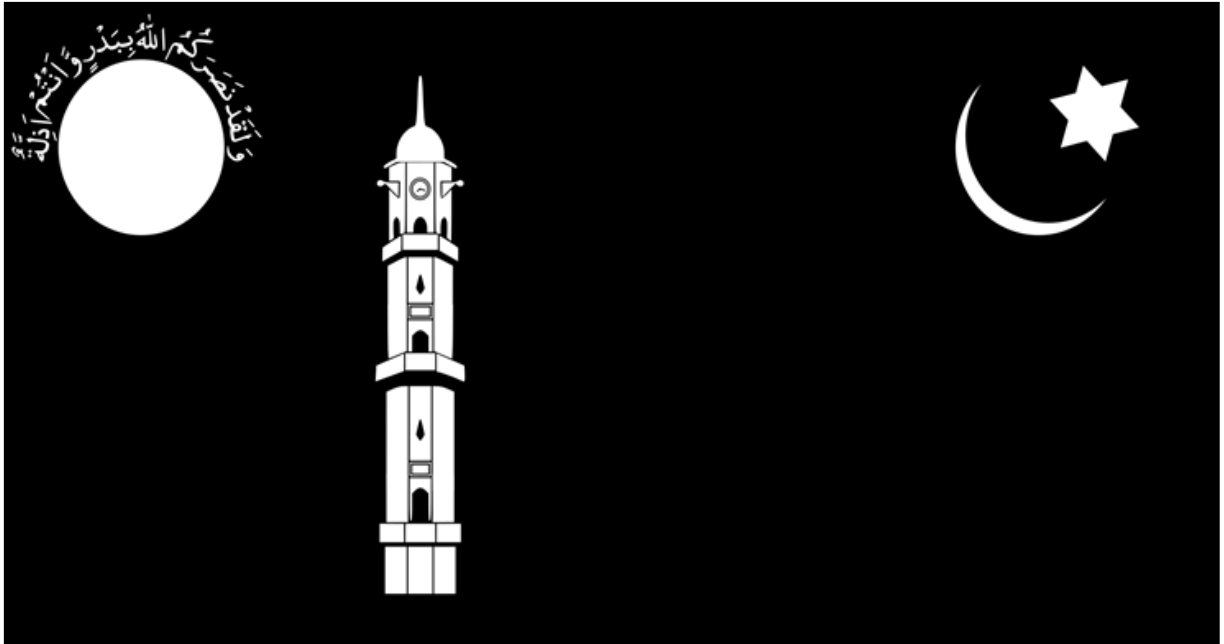


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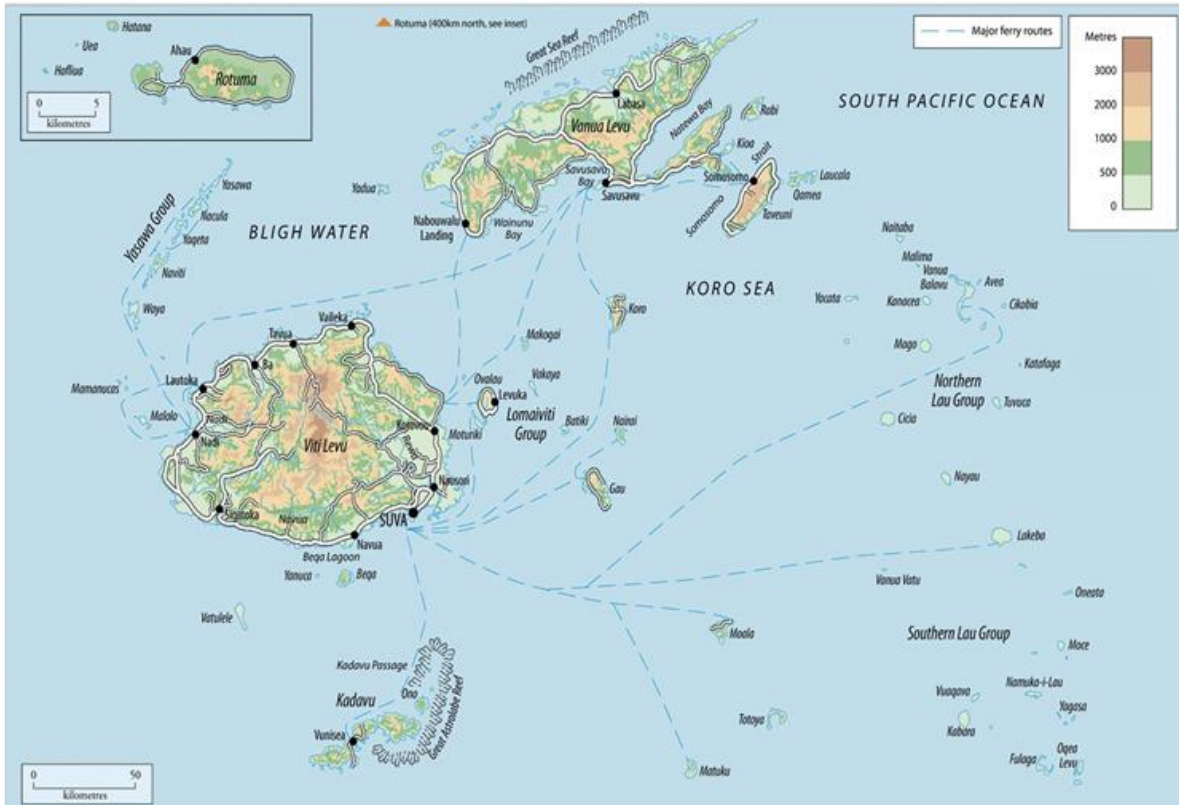
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Figure 4: The flag of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at



(Al Islam, 2025)

Figure 5: Map of Fiji Islands



(Mapland, 2025)

## INTRODUCTION

### The Origins of the Ahmadiyya Faith

In one of his dreams, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (hereinafter referred to as Ghulam Ahmad), the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement established in 1882, recorded and described himself as appearing in a splendid robe and his face aglow with light, when he reportedly received the following divine message: “God, Who is Gracious, will manifest something to manifest your truth... This is a glad tiding which is conveyed to Prophets” (Ahmad, 2009, p. 579). Inspired by his visions, Ghulam Ahmad professed a spiritual connection with revered figures across multiple religious traditions, presenting himself as both a prophet and the Promised Messiah for Muslims and Christians (Friedmann, 2003; Khan, 2015).<sup>1</sup> These assertions remain central to the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at, which continues to uphold literalist interpretations of Ghulam Ahmad’s claims under the leadership of his fifth spiritual successor - the Khalifa. Consequently, the Ahmadiyya community remains theologically contentious, particularly regarding its reception within mainstream Islamic thought.<sup>2</sup>

Prevalent anti-Ahmadi sentiment among many Muslim communities internationally involves persistent state discrimination, including acts of violence against Ahmadis in several countries, most notably in Pakistan, where Ahmadis have been constitutionally declared non-Muslims since 1974 (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021; Friedmann, 2003; Khan, 2015; Qasmi, 2023).<sup>3</sup> However, opposition to the Ahmadiyya community is not solely rooted in doctrinal differences. As Professor of Religious Studies Adil Hussain Khan (2015) contended, the primary source of anti-Ahmadi sentiment lies less in theological differences and more in the community’s pursuit of spiritual authority and political recognition within the Muslim world. Beyond the Khalifa’s self-presentation as a global Muslim leader of a model community of Muslims, the Ahmadiyya Jama’at also claims

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<sup>1</sup> Ghulam Ahmad positioned himself as “the fulfilment of all previous divine prophecies... and the culmination of every true religious tradition”; and among those he claimed to embody as a spiritual manifestation were Jesus, Adam, Seth, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, and Muhammad (Khan, 2015, p. 50).

<sup>2</sup> According to the Qur’an, the Prophet Mohammad is considered the Seal of the Prophets (*Khatam-e-Nabuwwat*), i.e., the last prophet of the Abrahamic tradition (Friedmann, 2003; Khan, 2015; Qasmi, 2015). While Ghulam Ahmad claimed a form of prophethood that he characterised as non-legislative and subordinate to that of the Prophet Mohammad (Friedmann, 2003), his theological assertions are nevertheless unaccepted by the wider Muslim community.

<sup>3</sup> The contemporary legal procedures require Muslims in Pakistan seeking national identity documents to go beyond affirming their belief in the Oneness of Allah and the Prophethood of Muhammad to explicitly repudiate the prophethood claims of Ghulam Ahmad and Ahmadiyya doctrine (Qasmi, 2023).

to hold interpretive authority over some Islamic scriptures, demonstrated by its extensive translation of the Qur'an, now available in over 70 languages (Al Islam, 2024, "Ahmadiyya Muslim Community"). The copy of the Qur'an that I was given by the Ahmadiyya Jama'at in New Zealand is in Arabic with an English translation, issued by Islam International Publications Ltd - the publishing division of the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at - and includes alternative translations and footnotes to some verses, authored by the fourth Khalifa. Through translation and interpretation of the Qur'an, the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at actively promotes its theological perspective and asserts its claim to religious legitimacy within Islam. Further, to communicate its position within the broader Islamic tradition, the global Ahmadiyya community's official website states that the name "Ahmadiyya" is not derived from the movement's founder, Ghulam Ahmad, but from Ahmad - an alternative name for the Prophet Muhammad (Al Islam, 2024, "Ahmadiyya Muslim Community").<sup>4</sup> Among some Muslims, this approach has prompted accusations that Ahmadis are "hijacking Islam" (Khan, 2015, p. 302) and "posing" as Muslims (Evans, 2020, p. 43).

In Fiji, the religious freedom and rights of Ahmadis are formally protected by the constitution, creating a context where their everyday practices, values, and beliefs can be openly expressed. Within this setting, Fijian Ahmadis cultivate a distinct spiritual and social identity, often distinguishing themselves from what they perceive as less virtuous expressions of Islam, and constructing their self-image as remarkably disciplined, morally guided, and religiously knowledgeable to contribute to the spiritual understanding of other Fijians. In line with this self-presentation, I observed, for example, how Fijian Ahmadis assert that Jesus survived the crucifixion and died in Kashmir at the age of 120, using this belief to challenge local Christian expectations of a future Messiah by arguing that he has already appeared in the person of Ghulam Ahmad.

This study examines the ways Fijian Ahmadis articulate and uphold their distinct religious identity and practices within the transnational structure of their community, which they refer to as the Jama'at, while simultaneously navigating the sociocultural and political-economic landscape of the Fiji Islands. Ahmadis in Fiji, often of Pakistani background, negotiate their practices and values in relation to local indigenous traditions as well as their broader positioning as part of the Indo-Fijian community. Meanwhile, the Ahmadis I

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<sup>4</sup> Fijian Ahmadis I spoke with shared with me that they are often referred to by local Muslims as "Qadianis" - a label derived from Ghulam Ahmad's birthplace, Qadian or "Mirzais" - in reference to Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's name. While they did not seem particularly uncomfortable with those labels, they did not appear to embrace them either.

encountered in Fiji sustain their distinct religious identity through active participation in the global Jama'at's bureaucratic apparatus and loyalty to the Khalifa's centralised authority, fostering doctrinal uniformity and transnational cohesion.

Nonetheless, this very attachment to institutional hierarchy and leadership does not necessarily secure the community's continuity in Fiji. The normative expectation of endogamous marriage, combined with the scarcity of local Ahmadi partners, prompts many Fijian Ahmadis to migrate through marriage abroad. While this trend may signal a sombre future for those who remain within a demographically diminishing community in the Fiji Islands, the belief that Ahmadiyya Islam will ultimately achieve worldwide expansion reassures Fijian Ahmadis that this trajectory does not constitute an existential concern for members of the community that understands itself as part of a transnational religious mission that will endure with or without Fiji.

### **Establishment of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at in Fiji**

Based on the account provided in the official Ahmadiyya Jama'at publication, *Ahmadiyyat in Fiji* (2000), the formal establishment of the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at occurred in the early 1960s. However, academics (Ali-Chand et al., 2016; Ali, 2004) situated the arrival of the first Ahmadiyya missionaries in Fiji as early as the 1930s, noting that their presence at that time led to strong resistance from mainstream Muslims, who issued a *fatwa* (Islamic legal ruling) banning Ahmadis from the mosque in Suva. Upon questioning this almost 30-year discrepancy, Imam Naeem of the Ahmadiyya Aqsa Mosque in Nadi clarified to me that the first Ahmadis in Fiji were affiliated with the Ahmadiyya Lahori branch. This reflects a 1914 split into the Qadiani and Lahori branches of the movement, the latter rejecting Ghulam Ahmad's prophetic status and the Khalifa's leadership and gradually declining in prominence (Khan, 2015). Consequently, many of the middle-aged and elderly Fijian Ahmadis with whom I interacted were initially members of the Lahori branch (so-called Lahoris) or Sunni Muslims, before joining the mainstream (Qadiani) Ahmadiyya Jama'at. Many of those members revealed to me memories of how their own conversions (or those of their parents) to the Qadiani branch often led to emotionally distressing separations from their original families. One member recounted how one of his relatives placed a sign at the entrance of his property stating, "Dogs and Ahmadis not allowed", revealing the fraught relationship between Fijian Ahmadis and local Muslims at that time.

According to some Fijian Ahmadis that I interviewed, the earliest known follower of the “true” Qadiani branch of the Ahmadiyya Jama’at in Fiji was Choudhary A. H. Khan, a Pakistani immigrant who worked as a shopkeeper at Khan’s Grocery store in Nadi in the 1950s. Reportedly, he maintained a low profile, praying alongside Lahoris while keeping his Qadiani affiliation discreet. His allegiance was apparently discovered when a hidden copy of *Al Fazl*, the Urdu-language newspaper of the Qadiani Ahmadiyya Jama’at, published at the time from its headquarters in Rabwah, Pakistan, was found in the shop where he was employed. One of the oldest Fijian Ahmadis shared with me how his father, who was initially a Lahori Ahmadi, recognised that the Qadiani branch was a “true Jama’at” after gaining insight through reading *Al Fazl*. According to the community’s report *Ahmadiyyat in Fiji* (2000), a pivotal moment occurred when Mohammed Ramzan Khan, a prominent Lahori from Fiji, travelled to Qadian in India and Rabwah, and Lahore in Pakistan to discover the truth about the movement’s split. Following his audience with the second Khalifa, he reportedly converted to the Qadiani branch and requested that a missionary be sent to Fiji. As documented in *Ahmadiyyat in Fiji* (2000), Ramzan Khan’s conversion prompted additional conversions among Fijian Lahoris, particularly in Nadi and the nearby village of Navaka.

The first Qadiani Ahmadiyya missionary, Sheikh Abdul Wahid Fazil, arrived in Nadi, Fiji, in October 1960. By 1963, the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama’at had begun translating the Qur’an into the iTaukei language and in December 1965, the construction of the first Ahmadiyya mosque, Masjid Mubarak at Valoca, Vanua Levu, marked the formal establishment of the Jama’at and its growing presence in Fiji (*Ahmadiyyat in Fiji*, 2000). As Imam Naeem confirmed to me, presently, there are ten Ahmadiyya mosques across Fiji, located on Vanua Levu, Viti Levu, Taveuni Island, and Rabi Island, as well as four Ahmadiyya-owned schools.<sup>5</sup> The number of mosques and schools nonetheless reflects a nostalgic view of the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s former prominence. As one Fijian Ahmadi now residing in Auckland, New Zealand, recalled, the community in Fiji was once referred to as the “mother Jama’at” of the Pacific, owing to its establishment before the formation of Ahmadiyya communities in Australia and New Zealand, which only emerged in the 1980s. At its peak, before most of its members began

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<sup>5</sup> Ahmadiyya mosques in Fiji: *Fazle Umar Mosque* - Headquarters of the Community in Samabula, Suva; *Mahmood Mosque* in Maro, Sigatoka; *Aqsa Mosque* in Nadi; *Rizwan Mosque* in Lautoka; *Nasir Mosque* in Tuatua, Labasa; *Noor Mosque* in Seaqaqa; *Mubarak Mosque* in Valoca; *Bilal Mosque* in Nasarwaqa, Bua; *Jame Mosque* in Naqara at Taveuni island; *Baitul Mehdi Mosque* at Rabi island.

Ahmadiyya schools in Fiji: Ahmadiyya Muslim Primary School in Narere, Nasinu, Suva; Ahmadiyya Muslim College in Narere, Nasinu, Suva; Ahmadiyya Muslim Primary School and Talimul Islam Kindergarten in Lautoka; Ahmadiyya Muslim Secondary School in Voloca.

migrating to New Zealand and Australia, the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at reportedly had around 3,500 members. Current estimates from remaining community members indicate that there are approximately 400 Ahmadis in Fiji, with fewer than 100 actively involved.

### **Fijian Ahmadis - The Khan Family**

During my fieldwork with Ahmadis in Fiji, I stayed with the family of Nasreen, the national president of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's women's auxiliary organisation, *Lajna Ima'illah*, in their house in Nadi. Every two to three days, Nasreen's husband drove his wife approximately 15 minutes to Navaka village to visit her widowed mother, who lived there with Nasreen's brother Azhar, his wife Hanya, and their two children. These visits, frequently accompanied by other close family relatives, typically occurred in the evening and often extended well past midnight.

On my first visit to Navaka, the family chose to go specifically because Azhar had recently purchased a new car, which generated considerable interest and excitement within our household. We reached the house through the quietly sleeping, dark village along a dusty unpaved road occasionally bordered by aged wooden buildings. Upon arriving, the tall automatic steel gate slid open, and a watchman welcomed us to what was to me a markedly different, hidden world. As we entered the property, I noticed three latest models of Jaguar and Land Cruiser, featuring customised plates stating the family's company name. However, my main attention was drawn to the residence's environment. I was instantly taken aback by the generous illumination of the entire space: various-sized spotlights decorating a single-story house and a garage with a gym; solar lamps surrounding a meticulously groomed garden that features a French-style altan and a tandoori oven with a motorised lid; and lanterns planted among banana trees and blooming periwinkle flowers. Perhaps the sight of so many lighting fixtures wouldn't have surprised me so much then had I known that the house owners were the descendants of the entrepreneurs who claim to have brought electricity to Nadi.

Nasreen's brother Azhar welcomed us with the relaxed smile of a confident, successful businessman. He explained to me that he imports lighting and office furniture from China. He praised the Chinese for their discipline and precision and also shared his own trade mantra, *"I want to be first, not the best"*. Azhar also enthusiastically conveyed to us his anticipation of an LED fireplace he had ordered from China, intended as a modern addition to

the living room - indeed, possibly one of the first of its kind imported into a tropical country like Fiji.

Inside the house, we sat on large, custom-made sofas made locally from palm tree wood, bolstered with dark brown leather accessories and carvings. Later, I was invited to use one of the two massage armchairs placed nearby. On the wall, I noticed a familiar image - the golden-framed photograph of the current and fifth Khalifa of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at - prominently displayed in every Ahmadi household I had visited in both Fiji and New Zealand, irrespective of the residents' socioeconomic status. In contrast, I have never encountered images of any prophet being showcased in the homes of mainstream Muslims I have visited in the Middle East and South Asia, making the prominent placement of the Khalifa's portrait in Ahmadi households particularly striking.

In a bright, spacious, thoroughly modern kitchen with a white-marbled kitchen island and a vase of artificial roses, I spotted a different framed picture of another white-bearded man. The dense text below the faded portrait, headlined "Khan Family's links to the Girit Era"<sup>6</sup>, conveyed the story of the family's ancestor, Rahmatullah Khan, a Sunni Muslim from the Pathan caste, from Saleem Khan Village in the Attock district of Punjab (then Afghanistan), who, in 1883, migrated to Fiji. The text narrated how Rahmatullah boarded the ship Poonah from Calcutta, India and 75 days later, he reached Fiji, where he was posted to Wilson Farm in Navua. After serving his girit (indentured service), Rahmatullah reportedly established a sugar cane farming community and a school, and his sons continued to make substantial contributions to Fiji's development. The text further noted, that in 1933, the Khan family in Nadi set up M.E. Khan & Company, a diverse business that included a rice mill, a soft drink plant, and a butchery; and between 1953 and 1969 started and operated a 24-hour electricity supply in Nadi, after which it was integrated into the Fiji Electricity Authority. As the text highlighted, the initial electricity supply in Nadi served the hospital and facilitated the shift from ice chests to refrigerators in local households, emphasising how the Khan family's influence played a role in Nadi's economy and tourism, particularly through the establishment of Nadi International Airport. This thoughtfully curated text served as both a reminder to family members and a statement to visitors - commemorating the Khan family's legacy and positioned their narrative as indispensable to the making of modern Fiji.

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<sup>6</sup> The Girit era refers to the period between 1879 and 1920 when indentured labourers from Indian Subcontinent were brought to Fiji under the British colonial system to work primarily on sugarcane plantations (Ali, 2004; Thornley, 2008).

Upon our departure, Azhar jokingly asked whether I could determine if the Rolex watches on his wrist were genuine. I couldn't. Whereas I had no reason to doubt that he could afford authentic ones, in my experience, such questions are typically posed by individuals wearing imitation products. Azhar's light-hearted question nonetheless stayed with me throughout the course of my research. It subtly revealed the underlying tensions between the projection of an outward, almost branded community image and the lived complexities within a religious minority that places strong emphasis on moral integrity, righteousness, self-sacrifice and public representation - themes that would increasingly surface in my ethnographic encounters.

### **Data Collection**

This research draws on six months of intensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Fiji from July 2023, as well as additional, intermittent fieldwork in New Zealand between December 2022 and March 2025. My fieldwork in Fiji was primarily among members of the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at residing in Nadi, as well as in Lautoka, Maro, and Suva. This fieldwork was expanded and sits within the larger framework of sporadic fieldwork experiences with Ahmadis in New Zealand, mainly in Auckland and Hamilton. Places that I visited and photographically documented include Ahmadiyya mosques in Fiji, in Nadi (Aqsa Mosque), Lautoka (Rizwan Mosque), Maro (Mahmood Mosque), and Suva (Fazle Umar Mosque), as well as the Fijian national community headquarters in Samabula, Suva. In New Zealand, I visited the Ahmadiyya mosque in Auckland (Baitul Muqet Mosque). During 2023 and 2024, I participated in major community events organised by the Fijian and New Zealand Ahmadiyya Jama'at. These included:

- The *Ijtema* (national religious competition), held in Maro, Fiji in 2023 (discussed in Chapter 3).
- Centenary celebrations of the Ahmadiyya women's auxiliary organisation, *Lajna Ima'illah*, in 2023, in both Suva, Fiji and Auckland, New Zealand (women-only events).
- The annual congregation *Jalsa Salana* in Auckland in both 2023 and 2024 (discussed in Chapter 1).
- The *Meena Bazaar*, a community gathering in Auckland in 2023 (women-only event).

- Community *Iftar* evening meal during Ramadan in Auckland in both 2023 and 2024.
- The *Peace Symposium* in Auckland in 2024.

### Participants

Upon my arrival in Fiji, I formally introduced myself during one of the initial community gatherings I attended - a monthly meeting of *Lajna Ima'illah*, the women's auxiliary organisation of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at in Nadi. I ensured that members were aware of my identity, the purpose of my presence, and that the data collection process and research approach involved my intention to conduct participant observation during community events and other private settings. I explained that any participant's interaction with me might contribute to the research and invited those who did not wish to take part in both the study and the participant observation to inform me. No such requests were made.

Although participant observation inevitably involved incidental contact with young children, the research was not focused on them and I did not actively collect data on children. Community members were informed that children were excluded from the scope of the study.

I recruited interview participants through in-person interactions. Additionally, I sought support from Imam Naeem of the Aqsa Mosque in Nadi, who assisted me in inviting Fijian Ahmadis to participate in the study and also helped me establish connections with Imam Asad in Lautoka and members of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at there.

While in Fiji, I conducted and recorded semi-structured interviews with 32 Fijian Ahmadis, 16 women and 15 men. Of these, three members regularly divided their time between Fiji (Nadi) and Australia (Sydney) or New Zealand (Auckland). The 29 remaining participants were permanently residing in Fiji. This study draws on data from 31 interviews, as one was excluded due to poor audio quality. Interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 79 and included three community imams based in Nadi, Lautoka, and Taveuni Island. While the names of all participants were anonymised, the names of the imams have been retained with their informed consent.

Before recording the interviews, I shared the interview questions several days in advance and provided participants with the consent form. The interviews followed a semi-structured format with open-ended questions. They were conducted in English, lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, and I manually transcribed them verbatim. I invited participants

to contact me after the interview, should they wish to amend or withdraw any of their responses; however, none of them made such requests.

I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the primary method to analyse the interview data and identify emergent themes. IPA involves the participants' self-perceptions and the researcher's interpretations of their accounts, resulting in a flexible, two-fold hermeneutic process (Smith et al., 2009). Given IPA's strength in addressing subjective experiences related to self, identity, and meaning-making, it was particularly suitable for investigating Fijian Ahmadi's understandings of complex, personal and context-specific religious experiences.

Using inductive and phenomenological coding, I examined the transcripts qualitatively to understand how Fijian Ahmadis perceive, experience, and interpret their spirituality, identity, social positioning, and interactions within their own community and the broader Fijian society. I continually revised, modified, and challenged the preliminary themes until I identified four clear superordinate themes, each corresponding to one chapter of this study. Throughout this process, I regularly referred to my fieldwork diary, which included descriptive and reflective entries, as well as the notes I took during interviews.

### **Guided by the Dreams**

My decision to research the Ahmadiyya Jama'at in Fiji was initially influenced by my broader interest in studying topics related to Islam and my exploration of dream interpretation, grounded in analytical psychology and sustained by years of recording my own dreams.

I have been particularly inspired by the ethnographies of Nicholas Evans (2020), Marzia Balzani (2020), and Simon Ross Valentine (2008) on the Ahmadiyya community in the UK and India, which are grounded in long-term fieldwork and participant observation, employing both single-site and multi-sited approaches. Drawing on reflexive methodologies, these studies detail how the everyday lives of Ahmadis are shaped by broader institutional frameworks, while also examining how the community consciously pursues ethical selfhood and self-presentation. Collectively, those ethnographies present the Ahmadiyya community as highly organised, intellectually engaged, and deeply invested in a modern, transnational project of moral and spiritual cultivation.

Notably, the studies by Balzani (2020) and Valentine (2008) highlighted the centrality of dreams and oneiromancy (i.e., dream interpretation) in Ahmadiyya theology and practice among Ahmadis in the UK, suggesting that this is one of the distinguishing features from mainstream Muslim traditions. My meeting with Imam Shafiq at the Baitul Muqeed Ahmadiyya Mosque in Auckland, in December 2022, reinforced this impression. He gave me a copy of *Tadhkirah* – a thousand-page compilation of dreams, visions and revelations of the community founder and prophet, Ghulam Ahmad and emphasised the foundational role of dreams in Ahmadiyya theology and practice.

Consequently, I travelled to Fiji expecting to find a community deeply engaged with the spiritual meaning of dreams. However, when I inquired about the role of dreams among Fijian Ahmadis, except for two elderly members, this topic was approached with relative insignificance. Some Fijian Ahmadis assumed that my initial curiosity about their dreams was metaphorical and related to their life aspirations, and after one member jokingly remarked, “Dreams - that’s *your* favourite topic”, it became evident that regular practice of oneiromancy was not a substantial focus in the Fijian Ahmadis’ context.

Upon returning to Auckland and sharing this aspect of my fieldwork findings with Imam Shafiq, he challenged my observations, suggesting they did not fully capture the reality and affirming that dreams remain foundational to Ahmadis globally. When I insisted on the validity of my findings, and after we both repeatedly stood by our differing views, Imam Shafiq finally concluded that Fijian Ahmadis likely didn’t understand this aspect of Ahmadiyya belief correctly. To me, this interaction with Imam Shafiq exemplified what anthropologist Kathleen Musante (2014, p. 261) described as a moment during participant observation when “the ‘scales fall from our eyes’ and a new understanding or hypothesis presents itself.”

This is because, despite the exchange revealing less about dreams, it instead illuminated the community’s internal dynamics and nuanced hierarchical power structures. While Fijian Ahmadis largely align with the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s teachings, dream interpretation appears to diverge from central guidance. This became especially evident when Imam Shafiq initially contested my field findings on dreams, highlighting how the community’s hierarchy regulates alternative practices in peripheral contexts such as Fiji, through an authoritative framework.

## Ethnographic Challenges

A few days after I arrived in Fiji, a young Ahmadi woman welcomed me, remarking, “You have seen so much that we haven’t”. It made me slightly apprehensive, prompting reflection on what aspects of my life journey might be appropriate or meaningful to share with this young woman, who was born in and had never travelled outside of the Fiji Islands, and was a member of a religious minority. However, contrary to my anticipation, that young woman never followed up with any further interest in my experiences. Despite many subsequent personal interactions, neither she nor most of the other Fijian Ahmadis with whom I interacted (and, for that matter, Ahmadis in New Zealand) generally expressed much sustained curiosity about me or my personal background.

Over time, I came to understand that the Fijian Ahmadis’ lack of deeper inquisitiveness about me was somewhat reflective of the general community’s inward orientation. I observed Fijian Ahmadis to be primarily focused on their internal spiritual life, communal goals, and ideals, which were shared almost exclusively among their own members.

One of the Fijian Jama’at members framed my research as part of a prophetic fulfilment, suggesting that it contributed to the dissemination of the Ahmadiyya message to the world and the reaffirmation of the community’s self-affiliation with “true Islam”. Although such expectations were uneasy for me to navigate, they provided a clearer understanding of the underlying assumptions and beliefs of Fijian Ahmadis. My presence among them was being almost indulgently granted permission in order that I might observe and document a presumed model of communal and spiritual virtue.

My ethnographic encounters and the subsequent research and writing process were marked by more realisations that challenged and shifted some of my prior assumptions. For instance, although I initially perceived Ahmadis as Muslims, throughout my research, I felt an increasing need to adopt a neutral stance on their theological classification. Objectivity, nonetheless, proved problematic. Referring to Ahmadis as Muslims risks offending many mainstream Muslims who view such identification as theologically incorrect, whereas recognising Ahmadis as non-Muslims is offensive to Ahmadis themselves.

This tension is not unique to the Ahmadiyya context. Scholars such as Ali Jafar (2018) or Garth Jones (1986) have drawn parallels between the contested position of Ahmadis within Islam and that of Mormons within Christianity. In both cases, these movements assert a

normative claim to religious truth that is rejected by mainstream traditions, resulting in their marginalisation. Consequently, in each case, what has emerged is a distinct spiritual movement that has become a new global religion in its own right, rather than a heterodox variation of Islam, for Ahmadis, and Christianity, for Mormons.

I acknowledge that the question of who is considered a Muslim is primarily a matter of internal debate within the broader Muslim community, which, as per the outcomes of the Amman conference in 2005 (Browsers, 2011), currently excludes Ahmadiyya theology from the accepted boundaries of Islam. However, even if I were to ignore the mainstream Muslim consensus (as I did in the early stages of my research project), during my ethnographic encounters, the Fijian Ahmadis' insistent self-distinction from *other* Muslims shaped my inclination to view the Ahmadiyya faith as a separate religious tradition - one that nonetheless remains deeply committed to its own interpretations of Islam. Whereas I recognise Fijian Ahmadis' personal sincerity in their commitment to Ahmadiyya Islam's beliefs and practices, the community's public assertion of its Muslim identity remains, for me, a contested claim. Understanding that this position was unlikely to be accepted by the Fijian Ahmadis with whom I interacted added a layer of complexity to my ethnography. It prompted critical self-reflection on my own ethical positioning, especially as my perspectives evolved gradually throughout my fieldwork, and, by then, many community members seemed to have come to trust me.

Having rented a separate unit within the household of the family of the national president of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's women's auxiliary organisation, *Lajna Ima'illah*, my initial aim was to pursue the traditional method of participant observation, whereby the ethnographer engages with and observes the everyday lives and practices of participants to understand and convey their point of view. In this, I found, as many anthropologists do, that maintaining a sense of objectivity became increasingly challenging as differences between my values and the worldviews of many Fijian Ahmadis I engaged with became more pronounced. Consequently, my methodological approach, data analyses and research writing evolved to reflect some degree of Barbara Tedlock's (1991) concept of observation and participation, also known as narrative ethnography. This approach moves beyond the role of the ethnographer as a detached bystander, emphasising the inclusion of the researcher's voice within the ethnographic account and acknowledging that the researcher's positionality, interactions, and lived experiences shape the ethnographic interpretation. While elements of

my own reflexive engagement are embedded within the narrative, this study nevertheless remains grounded primarily in the perspectives of Fijian Ahmadis.

This narrative ethnographic method also captured the tension inherent in fieldnote writing as described by Robert Emerson et al. (2011), who argued that the act of writing during fieldwork can position the ethnographer as marginal and separate from the social world under observation. However, while such practices can reinforce a sense of distance, I found that my fieldnote-taking generally supported, rather than hindered, my interpretive stance. Writing enabled me to attempt, in Emerson et al.'s (2011, p. 34) words, "...to see colours, shapes, textures, and spatial relations as a painter or photographer; and to sense moods, rhythms, and tone of voice like a poet". Simultaneously, fieldnote writing became a way for me to navigate the isolation I felt as an outsider, unable to participate in spiritual practices that held no personal religious meaning for me and were contingent on a sincere intention to embrace the Ahmadiyya faith.

Anthropologists McLean and Leibing (2007) describe how ethnographers' willingness to engage with moments of perceived failure, dissonance, visceral reactions, uneasy feedback, or silence from their interlocutors can allow them to move beyond the polished surface of conventionally "successful" ethnographic accounts. An example of this reflective stance is found in Professor of Anthropology Thomas Csordas's (2007) discussion of ethnographic moments that stand in contrast to instances of comfort, fluency, or authentic relationship with participants. As Csordas (2007) describes, reflective writing can engage in unsettling yet significant encounters that reveal the complex, often ambiguous, positionality of the ethnographer. I found this perspective particularly resonant with my own fieldwork, where such feelings of uneasiness and ambiguity were a recurring part of my ethnographic experience.

### **Positionality**

As a woman and an outsider, I could engage with both female and male members of the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at, which is typically unavailable to male researchers. The global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's strict gender segregation norms confine male ethnographers to exclusively male domains, as reflected, for example, in Nicolas Evans' (2020) study of Ahmadis in Qadian, India, which draws solely on male interlocutors. However, my broader access to male exchanges should not be overstated, as the Fijian Ahmadis' rigorous adherence to

*purdah* (discussed in Chapter 2) created a noticeable social distance that men consistently maintained in interactions with me.

Being neither Ahmadi nor Fijian, lacking proficiency in Fijian Hindi and with limited prior knowledge of the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at and Fijian contexts, I approached the community with the distance characteristic of outside non-native researchers. As psychologists Dwyer and Buckle (2009) suggest, outsiders may be better positioned to perceive particular dynamics and patterns, including omissions that participants themselves might obscure, and to detect broader connections and relationships that might otherwise be normalised or overlooked by insiders. In this context, my position provided the opportunity to observe the field research with a more critically aware perspective. Meanwhile, however, unlike "native" ethnographers, I may have missed subtleties related to Fijian and the Ahmadiyya community's local and linguistic expressions, implicit cultural codes, or forms of familiarity shaped by lived experiences and shared histories that are difficult to fully access through relatively limited time and observation alone.

Simultaneously, I did not view myself as entirely external to some cultural, social, and political aspects of South Asian societies, from which the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at emerged. My long-standing interest in this region's artistic and intellectual traditions, such as Mughal architecture, *qawwali* and Pakistani folk music, South Asian novelists, as well as modern political history, means that I had a pre-existing degree of cultural familiarity, which sustained me in interpretive insights but also facilitated my connection with the community members. While many Fijian Ahmadis were born in Fiji and had never travelled to Pakistan or India, my own repeated visits to both countries provided me with direct exposure to these settings, and situated me in a unique position - an outsider to the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at, yet one with a comparatively deeper experiential familiarity with the geographic and cultural origins of the community.

My positioning was also shaped by ethnographic experience in the early 2000s, during which I lived among Bedouin tribes in Wadi Mousa and Petra, southern Jordan, for three years, engaging with practices such as *purdah* within a traditional, rural Muslim community. While the religious norms and practices of Fijian Ahmadis differ from those of the Jordanian Bedouins with whom I lived, this background nonetheless enhanced my ability to recognise and interpret gendered cultural norms that may be otherwise less accessible to outsiders. Meanwhile, I remained conscious of the potential risk of drawing assumptions,

which may be more typical of insider perspectives. Furthermore, having lived and worked in the United Arab Emirates and the Gulf countries for eleven years, where I daily interacted with members of South Asian communities, also expanded my understanding of religiosity across varied cultural settings.

Unexpectedly, in addition to cultural engagement, my interactions with Fijian Ahmadis emerged to be shaped by my personal history of growing up under the former totalitarian Czechoslovakia. Having witnessed how the communist regime curtailed both public discourse and private individual expression, I developed a heightened sensitivity to systems that demand broad conformity to centralised authority. This background influenced my response to the Fijian Ahmadiyya community's collective adherence to hierarchical directives, which many members embraced as personally reassuring. Although I can intellectually grasp the seeming appeal of such frameworks, I find it difficult to relate to this orientation, remaining predisposed toward ideological forms of collectivism shaped by externally imposed and unquestioned top-down structures. Anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2009) cautioned that reflexivity becomes analytically unproductive when it privileges the anthropologist's emotional responses over sustained engagement with others, since reflection on emotion is valuable only insofar as it enhances ethnographic understanding rather than displacing it. In this regard, my positionality entails both limitations and analytical advantages. It may predispose me to interpret institutional authority primarily through a lens of control, thereby risking an overemphasis on coercion and a misrecognition of participants' agency and experiences of comfort. At the same time, it may sensitise me to subtle, internalised, and socially mediated forms of regulation that researchers without direct exposure to totalitarian systems might otherwise normalise or interpret as benevolent, voluntary, or protective.

Meanwhile, my nationality, unburdened by colonial legacies, as found in countries such as Fiji, Pakistan or New Zealand and my personal spiritual orientation, unaffiliated with any religious tradition, also facilitated my involvement in the research. I believe this positioning allowed me to engage with the Fijian Ahmadis without the defensiveness that a Muslim researcher might experience when navigating theological tensions or exclusions, or without a sense of historical responsibility that may shape the perspectives of some British researchers, particularly in relation to Britain's colonial legacy and its entanglement in the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's post-Partition persecution and migration. Consequently, I sought to

draw on my outsider status in terms of religiosity and geopolitics to help me engage with Fijian Ahmadis with reduced preconceptions, entanglements, or affective burdens.

Although I did not receive any major financial scholarship, I nonetheless chose to pursue and self-finance this research project. While this decision brought greater financial strain than I had anticipated, the absence of institutional obligations afforded me a sense of personal independence. On the other hand, during my fieldwork in Fiji, limited financial resources coupled with the scarcity of public transport in certain areas made me increasingly reliant on Fijian Ahmadis who had access to vehicles. This dependence was at times uncomfortable, as it limited my autonomy to arrive and depart at my own discretion or visit, for instance, local non-Ahmadi communities. Nevertheless, it also enriched my understanding of Fijian Ahmadis' experience as my situation mirrored the circumstances of many women, whose mobility is similarly shaped by dependence on male relatives for transportation.

While undertaking this research, I was aware that, particularly in postcolonial contexts like Fiji, my white racial identity can reproduce certain power dynamics within researcher-participant relationships. Nonetheless, in my engagement with Fijian Ahmadis, I did not find that my white skin and my status as a European Union national greatly impacted the research process. My Czech background was generally met with neutrality, indicating that these identity markers were not central to how I was perceived or received by the community members. My experience might have differed had I been, for instance, a white British, Australian, US or Canadian citizen, given that these Anglo-Saxon, white-majority countries appear to occupy a more prominent position in the strategic expansion of the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at and have more influence on Fiji's national concerns. Lastly, my background in political science and psychology also informed my approach to this study, providing an opportunity to connect the personal narratives of Fijian Ahmadis to deeper individual emotional experiences and broader socio-political influences.

Anthropologist Raymond Madden (2010, p. 81) suggested that the ideal ethnographic relationship is "close, but not too close". I find this dynamic aptly describes the bonds that developed between me and Fijian Ahmadis. While many of them extended politeness and hospitality, welcoming me to observe and participate in both public and private aspects of their community life, few pursued more personal connections; an approach that I gradually came to adopt in my own interactions. This sense of distance was, in part, shaped by differences in our daily routines and interests. Many Fijian Ahmadi women I

encountered were primarily engaged in domestic and community responsibilities and tended to limit their outings to purposeful, structured activities. Consequently, my interactions with Fijian Ahmadis appeared to reflect broader patterns of social engagement within the community, rooted in a strong sense of duty, yet marked by a relative absence of impulsive enjoyment, exploratory adventures or creativity for its own sake.

This somewhat not-so-close relationship proved convenient for the duration of the research, as it permitted me to join activities Fijian Ahmadis engage in, while also affording me much-valued personal space. Regular exposure to values and perspectives that diverged significantly from my own was occasionally emotionally challenging, and I came to appreciate the boundaries maintained by the Fijian Ahmadis, as well as some members' sense of humour, both of which contributed to a more manageable fieldwork experience. Following my departure, I have maintained irregular contact with four community members via WhatsApp.

### **Thesis Contributions**

As the first ethnographic study of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at in Fiji and the Pacific region, this research project offers insight into the experiences of a religious minority adhering to Islam within a predominantly Christian Fijian society. It also contributes new evidence to religious studies by highlighting the diversity of practices and beliefs among communities that self-identify as Muslim, including how they maintain and pursue a distinct spiritual identity, organise themselves, and manage financial, personal, and educational affairs in accordance with certain Islamic principles. Additionally, this research provides anthropological insights into interfaith relations, particularly examining how minority religious communities coexist and integrate in multicultural democracies such as Fiji.

This thesis reveals that Fijian Ahmadis primarily focus on maintaining their own community's practices and norms, strengthening their community's cohesion and orthodoxy rather than assimilating extensively into wider Fijian society. As Fijian citizens, Ahmadis partake in the local, typically professional and economic exchanges. However, in parallel, they pursue a dual - and, for them, primary - existence as members of a global religious community that relies on a self-sustaining bureaucratic and monetary system, a moral code, and spiritual education. Due to this community's centralised governing framework that transcends geographical borders, Fijian Ahmadis follow the directives of their overseas Jama'at's headquarters and the supreme leadership of the Khalifa, who, despite residing in the UK,

plays the most influential leadership role in their lives - significantly higher than, for example, the Fijian prime minister.

The independent, globally transmittable organisational structure of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at, financed and operated by its own community members, allows Ahmadis in Fiji to minimise their dependence on many aspects of the Fijian state, which is essentially expected to ensure law, order, and religious freedom. Consequently, most Fijian Ahmadis remain socially, emotionally, and politically detached from deeper and broader Fijian communal and cultural engagements. As such, this thesis argues that for many Fijian Ahmadis, their religious identity assumes greater importance than their national identity, which they approach comparatively more formally and professionally. The identity perspective of Fijian Ahmadis is distinctive in that, while they engage with the Fijian state and meet its normative expectations, their principal and affective sense of belonging is more deeply anchored in their religious affiliation.

Furthermore, this study reveals a notable uniformity in the religious practices and beliefs of Fijian Ahmadis, indicating their strong alignment with the guidelines of the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at, and with other Ahmadiyya communities worldwide. Despite Fiji's apparent socio-economic and political specificity, which differs from some of the world's most developed, affluent, and stable Christian-majority democracies, the religious and public behaviours of Fijian Ahmadis closely resemble patterns observed among Ahmadiyya communities in the UK, Switzerland, Sweden, Canada, and California. This correlation highlights the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's bureaucratic effectiveness in replicating the community's ideological and organisational framework, thereby maintaining the engagement of its members, even in geographically isolated and shrinking communities, such as Fiji. The Ahmadiyya Jama'at in Fiji, already a minority, faces challenges to its size, owing not only to an almost complete absence of local conversions but more significantly to the steady migration of its members to more developed countries. This trend is further reinforced by the community's strict endogamy, intended to preserve doctrinal purity, and concurrently often functioning as a strategic means for relocation to the West. Among those Ahmadis who remain in Fiji, many consider themselves living proof of Ahmadiyya Islam's outreach, as prophesied by Ghulam Ahmad, who reportedly stated, "I shall carry thy message to the ends of the earth" (*Ahmadiyyat in Fiji*, 2000, p. 14). Hence, many Fijian Ahmadis remain firmly

committed to upholding their non-syncretic religious adherence, endogamy and firm moral standards, as per the community's directives.

The title of this thesis highlights a focus on spiritual belief as an inner, personal experience that may sometimes diverge from the formal boundaries of institutional religion. This distinction reflects anthropologist Fiona Bowie's (2003) argument that religious life operates on two levels: an observable, social dimension and a spiritual one, noting that while the outward appearance of religion is relatively easy to describe, its internal dimension is more personal and less accessible to external scrutiny. While Fijian Ahmadi's beliefs are shaped by the authority of the Jama'at, this study shows that, despite strong uniformity, these beliefs are nevertheless individually interpreted and practised in ways not always and fully determined by religious doctrine.

While anthropologist Talal Asad (2009) challenged Ernest Gellner's (1981) portrayal of Islam as inherently totalitarian, highlighting instead its dynamic and discursive orthodoxy, my ethnographic engagement with Fijian Ahmadi's suggest a form of religious movement characterised by centralised authority, that enforces conformity in both public and private spheres, regulates belief, and limits space for dissent, thus reflecting tendencies commonly associated with totalitarian systems.

Some researchers may analyse the Ahmadiyya Jama'at through sociologist Erving Goffman's concept of the total institution, which describes organisations that bring all domains of life under a single authority, such as psychiatric hospitals, religious convents, or prisons (Goffman, 1961). Goffman demonstrated how total institutions dismantle individuals' prior identities and reconstitute them through institutional routines. Similarly, the globally centralised Ahmadiyya Jama'at directs its members through standardised practices. However, while Goffman conceptualises total institutions as spaces into which individuals enter after prior social lives, and that are marked by substantial separation from wider society, the Ahmadiyya Jama'at exhibits a distinct configuration of "totality." Most Fijian Ahmadi's are born into the community, and in addition, some members are committed to the Jama'at by their parents through the Waqf-e-Nau scheme before birth (as discussed in Chapter Three). Consequently, members' sense of self is not dismantled and then remade, as Goffman suggests, but is instead formed and sustained within the Jama'at from the outset. For Fijian Ahmadi's raised within the community, the self is largely identified with the Jama'at's norms and codified obligations, understood as divinely sanctioned and collectively enforced.

Professor of Sociology Mikaela Sundberg (2020), who studied Catholic monasteries, views total institutions as totalitarian, also because of the complexity of exit, which, she observed, is available only in principle yet not intended to be exercised in practice. Meanwhile, Sundberg (2020) argues that totalitarianism doesn't need to be authoritarian, as full monastic membership entails participation in decision-making.

Viewed through the lens of this body of research, I suggest that among Fijian Ahmadis, internalised discipline, moral pressure, and expectations of conformity are widely accepted as forms of regulation that operate through peer surveillance, education, and marriage arrangements. These practices, combined with the complex nature of “voluntary” commitment among members born into the Ahmadiyya Jama'at and the high costs associated with exit, support my argument with a totalitarian framework of the community that aims to direct members' public as well as private lives, defining how they think, act, and understand themselves.

This ethnography also reveals that Fijian Ahmadis, while upholding conservative moral and gender values, see themselves as part of a modern Islamic revivalist movement. They sustain a distinct communal identity, shaped by what they view as unique responsibilities linked to the perceived spiritual and moral superiority of Ahmadiyya interpretations of Islam. While typically portraying other Fijians as morally and spiritually backward by comparison, this awareness reinforces Fijian Ahmadis' self-image as enlightened reformers, inspiring some members to pursue personal growth to set their own virtuous example. Fijian Ahmadis often shared deep fulfilment in their perceived mission to lead others “from darkness to light”, as symbolised by the Ahmadiyya Jama'at flag.<sup>7</sup> This research suggests that such a heightened self-perception may also function as a defensive response and a coping mechanism to underlying insecurities, particularly in view of the broader disinterest in Ahmadiyya teachings and governance among the wider Fijian population.

### **Summaries of Main Chapters**

Chapter One contributes to the concepts of religious charisma and authority by examining the leadership of the current fifth Khalifa of Ahmadiyya Jama'at, Mirza Masroor Ahmad, illustrating how this traditional religious guidance plays a central role in shaping the

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<sup>7</sup> As explained to me by Fijian Ahmadis, the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's flag black-coloured emblem denotes spiritual ignorance, and the white minaret in the centre epitomizes the guidance of Ahmadiyya Islam, suggesting its alignment with enlightened principles.

community's identity. This leadership is especially significant for diasporas like the Ahmadiyya Jama'at in Fiji, which, despite its geographical remoteness and small membership, maintains strong cohesion and dependency on the Khalifa's directives. This chapter also reveals the exclusive, intimate relationships that Fijian Ahmadis cultivate with their Khalifa through handwritten letters, highlighting the interactions between a charismatic leader and his followers within the global religious movement. Engaging with key scholarship on charisma in religious contexts, drawing on Weber (1978), Lindholm (2013), and Lambek (1990), this section explores how personal authority becomes institutionalised, shaping legitimacy, devotion, and leadership within faith communities. These theoretical discussions intersect with broader debates on orthodoxy (Asad, 2003; Soares, 2020; Geertz, 1971), the role of media in mediating religious authority (Hirschkind, 2001a; Anderson, 2003; Slama, 2017), and the emotional internalisation of leadership (Jung, 1969; von Franz, 1980; Campbell, 2008).

Chapter Two contributes to the anthropology of religion, specifically the gendered aspects of Ahmadiyya faith, by demonstrating how the practice of *purdah* among Fijian Ahmadis integrates spiritual, cultural, and gender dynamics, influencing members' interactions within the community as well as with other Fijians. While the concept of *purdah* is rooted in Islamic teachings, this research offers a nuanced understanding of how it is upheld by Ahmadis in Fiji and influenced by the local socio-cultural environment. This chapter highlights that *purdah* is deeply embedded in the Ahmadiyya community's identity, reinforcing a sense of belonging and moral integrity among Fijian Ahmadis. It influences daily practices such as dress, self-expression, communication, interpersonal relationships, as well as perceptions of self-worth. Building on academic literature that explores how gendered roles are constituted through institutional frameworks and everyday religious practices, this section engages studies of women's religious subjectivities and embodied piety (Papanek, 1973; Mernissi, 1985; El Guindi, 1999; Kandiyoti, 1991; Mahmood, 2001; Abu-Lughod, 2002, 2016; Sehlkoglou, 2018), which highlight how modesty, seclusion, and disciplinary practices shape gendered expressions of faith. Within the context of religious minorities, scholars examining Ahmadiyya communities (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2006; Beyeler, 2012; Mahmood, 2023) have detailed how communal expressions of gendered expectations contribute to the preservation of religious identity.

Chapter Three adds to academic discussions on the role of bureaucracy and structured administration within religious communities, demonstrating how organisational

hierarchies and designated roles shape authority, participation, and internal community processes. The Ahmadiyya bureaucracy extends beyond administrative functions, serving as a deeply ideological mechanism for doctrinal continuation, social regulation, and the reinforcement of traditional gender norms. Focusing on the community's ideals of duty, obedience, self-sacrifice and righteousness, this chapter demonstrates how these values are enacted through the Ahmadiyya bureaucratic framework. By ensuring members' involvement, regardless of whether they actively engage or not, the community's centralised bureaucracy pursues its organisational cohesion and governance efficiency. In smaller communities, such as Fiji, this is seen as contributing to communal stability and continuity, albeit often at the expense of individual flexibility and, to a large extent, adaptation to local societal changes. Informed by scholarship on the role of bureaucratic structures in shaping religious hierarchies and mediating authority (Metcalf, 2002; Müller & Steiner, 2018; Balzani, 2020, 2024; Evans, 2017, 2020; Valentine, 2008; Mahmood, 2023), this chapter explores how Fijian Ahmadis integrate Jama'at teachings into everyday life through administrative and financial obligations, and religious education, aligning personal commitments with communal expectations.

Chapter Four contributes to scholarship on interfaith relations, diasporic identity, minority religion dynamics, and the limits of pluralism. By examining how Fijian Ahmadis' theological boundaries and self-understanding shape their interactions with local Muslims and indigenous iTaukei Christians, this chapter reveals tensions between doctrinal exclusivity and religious tolerance in a setting where religious freedom is constitutionally guaranteed. Fijian Ahmadis are uniquely engaged in friction with local Muslims, and despite the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's rhetoric of Muslim unity, they exhibit limited interest in pursuing active cooperation with mainstream Muslim communities in Fiji. Meanwhile, they also navigate substantial contrasting beliefs with some of the indigenous polytheistic Fijian traditions. This chapter highlights how pluralistic ideals are often shaped, and at times limited, by theological boundaries and the strategic self-positioning of marginalised communities seeking both recognition and differentiation. The findings of this chapter reveal that, although Fijian Ahmadis place strong emphasis on ideals of humanity and tolerance, their understanding of these principles, guided by the teachings of Ahmadiyya interpretations of Islam, does not extend to equal acceptance of other faiths. Instead, it can reinforce boundaries that complicate Fijian Ahmadi's interfaith engagement and limit deeper integration within broader

Fijian society. This section draws on academic literature addressing the identity and power relations of religious minorities, situating these within debates on exclusion and marginalisation in postcolonial contexts (Saeed, 2017; Khan, 2015; Qasmi, 2023) and transnational belonging (Maira, 2008; Harpaz, 2019; Ong, 1999; Balzani, 2020, 2024). Additionally, concerning interfaith relations, the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at is examined in comparison with other small global religious minorities in Fiji, including the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Bahá'ís (Chryssides, 2022; Gordon & Williams, 2012; Rajtar, 2009; Davies, 2008).

Given the limited scholarly attention to the Ahmadiyya Jama'at in the Global South, this ethnography provided an opportunity for Fijian Ahmadis to share their perspectives and experiences within an academic framework. In doing so, this study contributes to the small body of ethnographic research on Ahmadiyya communities situated at the periphery of the movement's central leadership in the UK. Positioned at one of the farthest geographical locations from the global Jama'at's headquarters, the Fijian Ahmadiyya community offers insights shaped by both its local context and physical remoteness. Fijian Ahmadis like to refer to Fiji as "the corner of the earth", invoking prophetic expectations of the Ahmadiyya message reaching even the most remote parts of the world, and underlining their meaningful role in that spiritual mission.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at has attracted attention from multiple academic disciplines, including theology, anthropology, history, and political science, each offering distinct analytical perspectives. This research builds on these diverse approaches, with particular emphasis on anthropological and theological sources, complemented by socio-historical and political studies to develop a nuanced understanding of the movement and its community in Fiji. The first section of this literature review analyses the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's own theological and foundational sources. The second and main section of this review then examines external scholarly accounts of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at and relevant studies of mainstream Muslim communities. Additionally, this review contextualises the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at within the academic literature on Islam in Melanesia. These scholarships situate the movement within broader academic debates on Muslim communities, addressing major themes such as charismatic religious authority, media and orthodoxy, religious administration and hierarchy, traditional gender norms, moral education and piety, minority diasporic status, and transnational belonging.

### **The Critical Analysis of Ahmadiyya Jama'at's Sources**

The global Ahmadiyya Jama'at is an extensively self-documented movement, with its own published literary, audio and video sources accessible from the community's official website, [www.alislam.org](http://www.alislam.org). Available monographs, pamphlets, lectures, audiobooks, sermons, correspondence, reviews, and poems can be downloaded in 44 languages, including, for example, Kurdish, Swahili, Hebrew, Telugu, and Maltese. While comprehensively articulating the movement's core beliefs and self-perception, the proselytising genre of those materials lacks critical and objective analysis.

The global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's website also makes available most of the original texts of its founder and prophet, Ghulam Ahmad, consisting of around a thousand pages written in Urdu, Arabic, Punjabi, and Persian. Initially published in 1880 in Qadian in India, Ghulam Ahmad outlined his central ideas in his first significant work, *The Proofs of Islam (Barahin-e-Ahmadiyya)*. His subsequent 91 books are summarised and compiled in *An Introduction to the Hidden Treasures of Islam* (2010) in English. Ghulam Ahmad's writings are characterised by a multi-layered structure, somewhat loosely organised ideas, and recurring,

frequently overlapping themes, which are often supported by extensive footnotes. His final and incomplete book, *Divine Manifestations (Tajalliyat-e-Ilahiyyah)*, written in 1906 and published posthumously, contains his predictions of impending disasters and earthquakes, as well as his foretelling of the global spread and victory of Ahmadiyya Islam.

### **The Academic Study of Ahmadiyya Jama'at**

Anthropologists, scholars of religion, historians, and political scientists who have researched Ahmadiyya communities have examined how its members construct a distinct spiritual identity, uphold the community's practices and values through its bureaucratic framework, navigate public self-presentation, and negotiate a marginal position in diverse socio-political and national contexts. There has been substantial interdisciplinary focus on the community's exclusion and marginalisation (Saeed, 2017; Qasmi, 2023; Balzani, 2020, 2024; Evans, 2016, 2017, 2020; Valentine, 2008), alongside studies exploring Ahmadiyya's controversial theology (Friedmann, 2003; Khan, 2015), religious authority and centralised bureaucratic organisation (Mahmood, 2023; Valentine, 2008; Balzani, 2020), diaspora and migration (Balzani 2020), media strategies and public representation (Evans, 2017; Balzani, 2020) and gender roles and moral agency (Beyeler, 2012; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2006; Balzani, 2020). The main methodological approaches employed in these scholarships included long-term ethnographic fieldwork, patchwork and event ethnography, interviews, comparative anthropology, and theological interpretations, as well as socio-historical and discourse analyses. Using these methods, researchers examine the movement's origins, developments, doctrinal claims, and the lived religious practices of its adherents.

Influential theological works in Islamic studies and tradition, focusing on the Ahmadiyya Jama'at, such as those by Professor of Islamic Studies Yohanan Friedmann (2003) and Professor of Religious Studies Adil Hussain Khan (2015), have explored the community's distinct interpretations of Islam's texts, prophethood, and eschatology. These analyses situated Ahmadiyya religiosity within the Sufi tradition, highlighting Ghulam Ahmad's use of established Sufi concepts, such as mystical sainthood, divine inspiration, and spiritual hierarchy, as an effort to legitimise his claims and align otherwise heterodox beliefs with accepted Islamic frameworks. Key concerns in this literature include the doctrinal boundaries of Islam's orthodoxy, the theological premises and implications of Ghulam Ahmad's claim to prophecy and its socio-political consequences.

Friedmann (2003) and Khan (2015) offer complementary perspectives on how the movement's theology has contributed to both its internal coherence and external controversy. Friedmann, in his work, *Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Aḥmadī religious thought and its medieval background* (2003), maintains that Ghulam Ahmad's claims of prophethood drew upon 12th-century Sufi master Ibn al-Arabi's distinction between legislative prophets (*anbiyā tashrī*) and subservient non-legislative prophets (*anbiyā lā tashrī'a lahum*). In such classification, legislative prophets brought sacred scriptures and legal codes, while non-legislative prophets, as Ghulam Ahmad saw himself, strengthened what was previously revealed (Friedmann 2003). Hence, according to Friedmann, although the Ahmadiyya doctrine offers a reinterpretation of prophethood, it does maintain recognition of Prophet Muhammad as the final and supreme judicial authority in Islam.

Khan's analyses highlighted the complex interplay between theology, religious authority, and political recognition. In his book, *From Sufism to Ahmadiyya: A Muslim Minority Movement in South Asia* (2015), Khan argued that Ghulam Ahmad purposely blurred the boundaries between sainthood and prophethood, maintaining deliberate ambiguity around his revelations by presenting contradictory spiritual claims to distinguish his own infallible prophetic status. In line with Friedmann (2003), Khan interpreted Ghulam Ahmad's claim that Jesus did not die on the cross but instead passed away naturally in Kashmir as a strategic effort to legitimise his own messianic identity and present himself as the spiritual successor to Jesus. Khan (2015) suggested that although this approach has potentially reinforced Ghulam Ahmad's religious legitimacy among his followers, the movement has nonetheless evolved into a less intellectual and more politically oriented entity than its Sufi predecessors. Meanwhile, Khan (2015) critiqued the earlier scholarly interpretations that attributed anti-Ahmadi sentiment among many Muslims primarily to Ahmadiyya theology. Instead, he contended that a key factor in the growing opposition to the Ahmadiyya movement was its long-standing quest for religious authority and political recognition within the Muslim world, which began with the movement's emergence in 1882. Consequently, Khan's work underscores the persistent tensions between belief, power, and socio-political recognition of spiritual communities, which have significantly influenced the emergence of a politicised and transnational Ahmadi identity.

Other historians and scholars of religious studies have examined the Ahmadiyya movement within broader patterns of Islamic revival and messianic reform, shaped by the

pressures of Christian missionary activity and the transformation of Muslim socio-religious identity during British colonial rule in India. Like Khan (2015), historians Ali Usman Qasmi (2015) and Iqbal Singh Sevea (2012) agree that the emergence of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at was driven less by Ghulam Ahmad's charisma or doctrinal originality, and more by broader socio-political changes unfolding in late 19th-century South Asia. Those analyses parallel some anthropological studies of Islam. For example, in Clifford Geertz's (1971) work on Muslim societies in Morocco and Indonesia, he observed that colonial domination triggered movements of religious renewal and moral reform in those communities. In both national contexts, Geertz highlighted how the erosion of traditional authority and the disruptive influence of colonialism prompted local Muslims to reassert religious consistency through new forms of spiritual leadership and reformist discourse. Other anthropological examples of the study of Islam and colonialism include Talal Asad (1973, 1993), Benjamin Soares (2020) and Filippo Osella (2009). These scholars highlight how Muslim communities have experienced their religion within wider geopolitical paradigms marked by legacies of colonialism. Debates on Islamic authority and the formation of Muslim identity in imperial and post-independence settings provide a framework for understanding how the Ahmadiyya movement emerged and continues to form its subjectivity at the intersection of calls for moral and spiritual renewal, political uncertainty and eschatological hope.

### **The Research on Charisma, Authority and Media in Islam**

The question of how the Ahmadiyya movement preserved and institutionalised charismatic authority after the death of Ghulam Ahmad engages with broader theoretical themes about charisma and bureaucracy explored in this thesis. This research project draws on sociological and anthropological theories that examine how religious movements manage the transition from charismatic leadership to formalised bureaucratic organisation. Key themes in this literature include Max Weber's (1978 [1921]) concept of the routinisation of charisma, which has subsequently been applied to the study of Islamic societies. In particular, anthropologists have explored how religious authority extends beyond formal roles and doctrines, being performed and maintained through everyday practices (e.g., Michael Lambek, 1990), while also observing the tensions between charismatic and institutional power (e.g., Charles Lindholm, 2013).

According to Lambek (1990), authority in Islam is not simply held but is continually reproduced through disciplined acts of piety and devotion. As he wrote, “the core of Islam is not a statement of ‘belief’ but an act... of submission” (p. 27). This resonates with the practices of Fijian Ahmadis, whose obedience to the Khalifa’s directives is systematically reinforced through the Jama’at’s bureaucratic structure. Accordingly, the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at fosters a form of submission directed not only toward the Khalifa as a spiritual figure but also toward its own institutional system that embodies and channels his authority.

Lindholm (2013), meanwhile, offered a nuanced perspective on how religious movements navigate the interplay between charismatic and bureaucratic authority, noting that these modes can coexist in tension and lead to internal contradictions within institutional structures. In contrast, the Ahmadiyya Jama’at illustrates how charismatic and institutional forms of authority can operate in a mutually reinforcing manner, with administrative continuity and ritual practice working together to sustain and legitimise the leadership of the Khalifa.

The study of Islamic orthodoxy has led scholars, such as Asad (2003) and Soares (2020), to examine how religious authority is constituted, contested, and disseminated - and critically - who has the power to define it. Building on Asad’s (2003) conceptualisation of Islam as a discursive tradition, Soares (2020) argued that orthodoxy should not be understood as a fixed set of doctrines but as what is authorised and recognised as correct practice. From this perspective, Soares contends that Islamic orthodoxy is shaped not only by religious texts but also through media, state institutions, and global narratives, emphasising the discursive power that legitimises particular religious claims.

This theoretical framework has both internal and external implications for understanding the practices and position of the Ahmadiyya communities. Internally, the Ahmadiyya orthodoxy highlights the Khalifa’s dual role as spiritual leader and moral authority, whose uncontested legitimacy is reinforced through ritual obedience, daily practice, and the shaping of ethical subjectivity across the Jama’at’s transnational network. Additionally, Asad’s (2003) and Soares’s (2020) frameworks also help to explain why the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s emphasis on its rigorous adherence to Islam’s tenets has been insufficient for gaining the community’s recognition within the broader Islamic community. Despite the Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s emphasis on aligning with Islamic teachings, global Islamic discourses and authorities do not recognise Ahmadiyya theology as a legitimate part of Islam.

The study of Islamic authority in contemporary times is inevitably closely linked to media scholarship, as academics examine how modern communication tools are employed by Muslims to shape, disseminate, and uphold forms of religious authority (e.g., Hirschkind, 2001; Anderson, 2003; Slama, 2017). This field of study explores how media technologies facilitate new modes of participation, ethical self-formation, and the negotiation of power within Muslim communities. Central to the debate of this scholarship is whether media consolidate existing religious hierarchies by centralising authority and shaping the affective and symbolic dimensions of leadership, or whether digital communication promotes more decentralised interpretive pluralism.

Anthropologists Charles Hirschkind (2001b) and Jon Anderson (2003) highlighted media as a space for interactive and dialogical religious engagement, perceiving multimedia channels as instruments that disrupt conventional religious authority and enable more diverse forms of religious interaction and interpretation. Hirschkind's concept of an Islamic *counterpublic*, developed through his ethnographic work on cassette-sermon listening in Egypt, framed media as a vehicle for ethical self-cultivation and civic participation outside the formal state structures and religious institutions. Similarly, Anderson (2003) examined how Muslims in the Middle East utilise digital platforms to engage more independently with Islamic teachings. This theoretical framework is especially relevant to the Ahmadiyya Jama'at, whose centralised official media strategy contrasts with decentralised models and prioritises uniform doctrinal control and disciplined loyalty to the Khalifa, while limiting interpretive plurality and non-hierarchical debate.

Notably, Martin Slama's (2017) study among Indonesian preachers reveals that religious authority need not be diminished by media democratisation; instead, it can be reinforced through responsiveness and relational engagement in digital spaces. Slama's (2017) research discusses how those preachers maintain and strengthen their authority by embracing the interactive nature of social media and cultivating personalised and emotionally resonant exchanges with followers on online platforms. This illustrates an approach among preachers in Indonesia in which media functions less as a means of top-down moral and spiritual control and more as a tool for fostering relational engagement. While preachers in Slama's research adopt a grassroots model of media use, in contrast, the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at relies on a unified, authoritative structure. Yet, despite these contrasting approaches - grassroots versus institutional - both groups demonstrate that media can support rather

than undermine religious authority. This complicates the prevailing assumption that media challenge spiritual leadership.

To examine religious authority from a wider lens, this research project also engages with psychological and mythological theoretical frameworks, exploring how religious leadership is emotionally internalised (Jung, 1969; von Franz, 1980; Campbell, 2008). From these scholarly perspectives, the authority of spiritual leaders like the Khalifa resonates with his followers on a symbolic level and is often sustained through processes of projection, idealisation, and affective kinship. Even among followers who emphasise the rationality of their faith, such as Fijian Ahmadis, their deep emotional connection to the Khalifa highlights how religious leadership transcends formal institutional roles into a realm of intimate, numinous and spiritually infused attachments.

Together, approaches to the study of Islam and spiritual leadership are applied in this thesis to explore how Islamic authority is shaped in the globalised and digital age through complex interactions between doctrine, media, and emotional investment. While some religious communities decentralise authority through participatory media, the Ahmadiyya Jama'at exemplifies a case in which media reinforces uniformity and hierarchical authority, yet still facilitates deep affective bonds.

### **Religious Identity: Minority Exclusion and Transnationalism**

Scholars of political sociology and history have explored the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's legal and social marginalisation in Pakistan through broader themes of identity, minority exclusion, and state power. Sadia Saeed (2017) and Ali Usman Qasmi (2015, 2023), for example, analysed how Ahmadis in Pakistan became entangled in the contested debates over national identity (Saeed, 2017) and the fraught question of defining who qualifies as a Muslim (Qasmi, 2015, 2023).

Such socio-political dynamics also appear to substantially shape the focus of some key ethnographic studies on the Ahmadiyya Jama'at by Marzia Balzani (2006, 2020, 2024), Nicholas Evans (2016, 2017, 2020), and, to some extent, that of Simon Ross Valentine (2008). These works explore topics such as marginalisation, diaspora experience, identity formation and self-representation within the predominantly British host society. The authors illustrate how social exclusion has informed the community's moral and theological self-understanding. The aforementioned anthropologists demonstrate that the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at

strategically crafts a public image emphasising its identity as a humanistic, rational, and modern Muslim movement, with particular focus on this self-positioning in Western and specifically UK contexts.

Balzani, in her monograph, *Ahmadiyya Islam and the Muslim Diaspora: Living at the End of Days* (2020), focuses on the community's institutional structure, leadership and diaspora politics, highlighting how marginalisation has become a central narrative within the Jama'at's headquarters. She demonstrates that the community articulates its experience of persecution within a broader eschatological and moral framework, using this discourse to support asylum claims and organise public peace events. In her 2024 article, "*Diaspora as Home: The Global Community of Ahmadiyya Muslims*", Balzani extends this analysis by conceptualising the Ahmadiyya diaspora not as a condition of exile but as a divinely guided process of global expansion. Through appeals to prophecy, history, and ritual, the community constructs a spiritually mobile idea of "home", where persecution is reinterpreted as proof of divine favour and resilience.

Similar to Balzani (2020, 2024), Evans examines the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's efforts to project a public image of exemplary Muslims. Nonetheless, his work differs in that it focuses more specifically on how this identity is performed through ethical conduct, visual culture, and ritual aesthetics. Grounded in his fieldwork among Ahmadis in the UK and Qadian, in India, Evans's monography, *Far from the Caliph's Gaze: Being Ahmadi Muslim in the Holy City of Qadian* (2020) and his article "*Beyond cultural intimacy: The tensions that make truth for India's Ahmadi Muslims*" (2017), analyse the efforts Ahmadis make "to prove to a suspicious world that they are Muslim" (Evans, 2020, p. 185). His work highlights how religious minorities navigate contested inclusion and belonging, seek recognition within dominant religious and cultural frameworks, and employ visibility strategies to assert legitimacy amid exclusion.

Both Balzani and Evans depict the Ahmadiyya Jama'at in a sympathetic manner, presenting it as an elitist yet egalitarian community, drawing attention to Ahmadis' experiences of victimhood and organisational resilience. This perspective is evident in Balzani's (2024, p. 337) description of the community's bureaucracy as "formidable", alongside her acknowledgment of the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's declared commitment to peace, law-abiding citizenship in diaspora contexts, and support for some leadership roles for women - factors that led her to characterise the movement as "simultaneously religiously conservative but also in some respects socially progressive" (Balzani, 2020, p. 23). Balzani

(2024) shared that for several years, she authored expert reports for the UK's Asylum and Immigration Tribunal in cases involving Ahmadi asylum-seekers who were appealing the rejection of their refugee claims. Additionally, she co-organised an exhibition in the United Arab Emirates on the Ahmadiyya movement, showcasing digitised archival material she had helped preserve. This exhibition, which she believed to be the first of its kind in the UAE, was held in 2023. This reflects not only her academic interest in documenting marginalised religious communities, but also a humanitarian concern and a political commitment to promoting the visibility of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at within Muslim contexts.

Much like Balzani (2024), Evans (2017, 2020) also demonstrated solidarity with Ahmadi's struggle for recognition within Islam. Despite stating that he does not seek to address the question of Ahmadi Muslim identity, he nevertheless consistently uses the term "Ahmadi Muslims", thereby effectively acknowledging Ahmadi's internal claim to Muslimness. Additionally, Evans (2020) advocates for taking Ahmadiyya "truth" seriously; not by affirming its theological validity, but by challenging scholars to attend to the internal logic and affective power underlying Ahmadiyya "truth" claims. This approach is valuable, yet, to my mind, it risks diverting attention from the significance of truth itself. Even if perceptions of truth vary culturally and contextually, relativising truth as an object of study does not eliminate its importance.

While rich in ethnographic detail, these studies are frequently based on settings such as London and the Jama'at's headquarters (in London and formally in Qadian), which may be shaped by their proximity to centres of social, educational, and financial affluence. Moreover, often relying on Ahmadi interlocutors, who are specifically designated by the community's bureaucracy for their skills in public outreach, these accounts may lean toward affirming the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's own narrative - as a marginalised cosmopolitan Muslim group championing peace and serving humanity while victoriously suffering in exile.

The issue of idealised representations was touched upon by Balzani (2008), who admitted that the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at has garnered inter-faith commendation, particularly from Western observers, due to its persuasive articulation of "universal" values in ways that align with Western cultural expectations and messaging techniques. While this may, in part, explain why some Western scholars adopt a supportive portrayal of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at, it also highlights the community's bureaucratic efficiency and strategic communication, which successfully projects its narratives to external audiences. In doing so,

the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at effectively redirects focus from some internal norms and everyday practices - especially those less compatible with liberal ideals - which seem often communicated more discreetly by both the Ahmadiyya community's leaders and some of its academic interpreters.

Scholar of Religious and Islamic Studies Simon Ross Valentine's (2008) ethnography, grounded in fieldwork in Bradford, UK and informed by sociological perspectives, draws attention to themes such as internal hierarchies, elite self-perception, and claims of theological preeminence in the Ahmadiyya community. He identifies a tension between the Bradford Ahmadiyya community's outward message of tolerance and its internal conviction of possessing exclusive access to divine truth, often coupled with a sense of superiority over both Muslims and non-Muslims. Narratives included in Valentine's (2008, p. 145) ethnography from some UK Ahmadi leaders expressing confidence in the divine punishment, death and "utter disgrace" of the community's opponents suggest an underlying theological hostility beneath the public rhetoric of humanism and slogans of love for all. Subsequently, Valentine's study complicates the community's own narrative of minority victimhood by showing how this posture can also be bound up with an implicit claim to spiritual, moral and doctrinal dominance.

Together, these comparative anthropological perspectives highlight the complexity of identity formation within marginalised religious communities, revealing it as both a response to marginalisation and a carefully constructed public project. Such scholarship invites further inquiry into how these movements balance between external self-presentation and internal regulation, and how academics might critically engage with, rather than simply reproduce, the community's narratives of exclusion, legitimacy, and distinction.

The identity construction and strategic self-representation also operate at the transnational level, where marginalised communities use tools such as citizenship to assert recognition and enhance mobility. Situated within a global diaspora, members of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at often pursue foreign citizenship, contributing to the expansion of the community's international presence. Scholarship from wider anthropological studies on diaspora, transnationalism, and political identity has revealed how citizenship is increasingly used as a flexible resource rather than a fixed marker of national belonging, serving as a tool for navigating (and reinforcing) global inequalities. Professor of Asian American Studies Sunaina Maira (2008, p. 715) described how the desire for US residency and citizenship among

young South Asian Muslims was embedded in mobility and migration. However, she argues that this “flexible citizenship” operates within a broader framework of “flexible empire”, which she defined as imperial systems, shaped by colonial legacies, that regulate belonging by excluding some “deemed undeserving of rights” and increasingly cast transnational Muslim networks as suspicious in national security discourse. In this context, Maira highlights how citizenship flexibility is frequently racialised and politicised when applied to Muslim communities.

This paradox of “flexible citizenship” being unevenly granted in the case of US Muslim communities (Maira, 2008), yet regarded as advantageous in other contexts, is explored further by sociologist Yossi Harpaz (2019). Harpaz’s (2019) research on Israelis acquiring EU passports demonstrates how strategies of mobility are not perceived as threats, but rather as legitimate and even prestigious practices. Harpaz’s (2019, p. 166) concept of “passport citizenship” shows that for Israelis, EU passports function as “economic opportunity”, “insurance policy”, “intergenerational gift”, and a marker of “elitist status”, illustrating how citizenship can be leveraged for pragmatic rather than patriotic purposes. Similarly, Aihwa Ong (1999, p. 446), who famously coined the concept of “flexible citizenship”, noted that the Hong Kong elite have “a weakness for foreign passports” and suggested that holding one was a “matter of confidence”, allowing individuals to navigate shifting political landscapes but also changing opportunities in global trade. Despite the different contexts of their research, all three scholars (Maira, 2008; Harpaz, 2019; Ong, 1999) show how “flexible citizenship” serves not only as a means to mitigate insecurity but also, and often perhaps more prominently, as a way to enhance opportunities and accumulate power across borders.

The scholarship of “flexible citizenship” is relevant to the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at, whose members are encouraged by the Khalifa to engage in transnational endogamous marriages. Consequently, for single Ahmadis in diasporas like Fiji, “flexible citizenship” becomes a readily accessible means of overcoming immigration barriers while preserving their religious identity.<sup>8</sup> As Ahmadiyya eschatology anticipates the worldwide dissemination of its spiritual message and humanity’s eventual conversion to its interpretation of Islam, marriage migration plays a crucial role in the community’s transnational expansion. Meanwhile, Fijian Ahmadis utilise citizenship and mobility not only to secure religious

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<sup>8</sup> These marriage practices are not unique to the Ahmadiyya Jama’at but are common across South Asian communities of various religious traditions, reflecting both cultural and religious considerations.

belonging and spiritual mission, but also, like the individuals in Maira's (2008), Harpaz's (2019), and Ong's (1999) studies, to access opportunities in current global power centres.

### **Gender Roles in Muslim Societies**

Scholars interested in the experience and politics of gender who examined Ahmadiyya communities (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2006; Beyeler, 2012; Mahmood, 2023) have explored how religious minorities sustain their faith and identity through moral education and collective practices. For these researchers, gender dynamics are explored as situated between transnational connections and local belonging. These scholarships examine how conservative religious groups interact with modernity and navigate the often-conflicting values of Western host societies in relation to their own traditional communal norms. Across these studies, the Ahmadiyya community's strict moral discipline and conventional gender roles are interpreted not merely as individual preferences but as embedded within communal frameworks that are sustained through mechanisms of oversight and social expectation.

Sarah Beyeler (2012) and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh (2006) both examined how Ahmadi women navigate identity and moral subjectivity within Western secular societies. Beyeler's (2012) research in Switzerland analysed how women's modesty and domestic roles are used by Swiss Ahmadi women to differentiate themselves from both mainstream Muslims and liberal Western norms, portraying Ahmadi women as the embodiment of piety and guardians of moral boundaries. Similarly, Ahmed-Ghosh (2006), researching Ahmadi women in Southern California, focused on religious education as a source of empowerment and communal continuity, showing how Ahmadi women reconcile religious duties with migration and Islamophobia. Both studies highlight the key role that women play in upholding communal values in diaspora settings, demonstrating how religious norms are closely tied to everyday family life, community involvement, and gender expectations.

Similar patterns of gendered conservatism emerged in Amna Mahmood's (2023) research on Scandinavian Ahmadi men and institutional religious education, where spiritual authority is understood as being cultivated through a hierarchical community system and promotion of normative conduct. Emphasising broader themes of moral upbringing (*tarbiyyat*) and preaching (*tabligh*) in community life, Mahmood highlights the gendered dimensions of religious education and the exclusion of women from Ahmadiyya formal religious leadership. This underscores ongoing constraints on gender equity within the

movement and complicates other more favourable assessments of Ahmadi women's leadership, such as Balzani's (2020) work drawn from her observations within the UK Jama'at context.

Wider anthropological and feminist research in Muslim societies has explored how seclusion, modesty, and embodied piety inform and structure gendered forms of religious expression and experience (e.g., Papanek, 1973; Mernissi, 1985; El Guindi, 1999; Kandiyoti, 1991; Mahmood, 2001; Abu-Lughod, 2002, 2016; Sehlkoglou, 2018). Anthropologists such as Lila Abu-Lughod and Saba Mahmood have been especially influential in challenging Western academic and public assumptions that view Muslim women's religious observance as purely oppressive or patriarchal. Abu-Lughod (2016) has called for critical reflection on the asymmetrical demands placed on scholars of Islam to condemn certain religious practices, while those studying secular liberalism are rarely held to comparable standards. Similarly, Mahmood (2001) argued for an analysis that sees modesty and piety as potential sources of women's moral agency, rather than as indicators of gendered submission.

Practices like veiling, obedience, and religious education are understood by many scholars as manifestations of ethical self-cultivation and personal agency (Papanek, 1973; Mernissi, 1985; El Guindi, 1999; Kandiyoti, 1991; Mahmood, 2001; Abu-Lughod, 2002, 2016; Sehlkoglou, 2018). However, alternative sociological perspectives on Muslim identity (Meer, 2008; Cheng, 2015) point to how such subjectivities are produced within established communal settings that emphasise conformity over individual expression, often limiting the space for alternative practices.

These studies underscore the importance of considering both the agency and the structural constraints that shape women's experiences in religious movements, acknowledging the dual nature of piety as both a potentially empowering and limiting aspect of their daily lives. Rather than reducing pious practices to either oppression or agency alone, this body of scholarship allows for approaching it as a dynamic experience situated within broader social, moral, and institutional contexts.

### **Ethnographic Research on Islam in Melanesia and Fiji**

The study of Muslim communities in predominantly Christian Melanesia is a relatively small field, which presumably reflects Islam's relatively late and marginal presence in the Pacific, where it remained largely unknown before the 1970s. The lack of interest in

regional Islam is evident in publications such as Garry Trompf's (1994) *Melanesian Religion* or an edited volume by Hirsch and Rollason (2019), *The Melanesian World*, that make almost no mention of local Muslims.

The limited anthropological and sociological studies on Melanesian Muslims have employed ethnographic and historical methods to examine how Islamic beliefs and practices are adapted, contested, and locally reinterpreted. The research of Deborah McDougall in Salamone Islands (2009), Scott Flower in Papua New Guinea (2008, 2012), Marc Tabani in Vanuatu (2020, 2021) and Jan Ali's analyses of Fijian Islam (2004) address key topics of religious conversion, syncretism, moral renewal, indigenous reinterpretations of Islam, and the entanglement of religion with local power dynamics and social hierarchies. The Ahmadiyya community is briefly acknowledged in the work of McDougall (2009) and Ali (2004).

These existing ethnographies on Melanesian Islam revealed several distinctive scholarly areas of conversation and interest. In their studies, McDougall (2009), Flower (2008, 2012), and Tabani (2020, 2021) have examined the appeal of Islam and conversion in the Pacific. They traced the rise of Islam's adherence among indigenous communities, often in response to disillusionment with Christianity, an attraction to a clear moral code, and assumed consistency with traditional Melanesian authority structures. For instance, in his article, "*Muslims in Melanesia: putting security issues in perspective*" (2008, p. 421), Flower observed that moral authority and gender segregation resonated with local converts, with polygamy, acceptable in Islam, aligning with local ideals of tribal leadership and associated with the status of "highlands big-men". Similarly, McDougall's ethnography, "*Becoming Sinless: Converting to Islam in the Christian Solomon Islands*" (2009, p. 486) based on her fieldwork with Muslims around the capital Honiara and the island of Malaita, suggested that local converts often blamed the supposed moral indecencies of their wider communities on Christianity, perceived to have brought "rubbish, dishonesty, and darkness instead of light", abandoning *kastom*, and alleged proper inter-sex relations. Malaitan Muslims expressed admiration for Islam as a source of discipline, regarding it as the only faith wholly committed to the Oneness of God. Additionally, McDougall (2009) noted that Islam offered converts in the Solomon Islands a means of spiritual renewal, allowing them to redefine themselves as "sinless" in contrast to what they view as the moral failings of Christianity. Across these

studies, the scholars emphasise the moral resonance of Islam as a motivating factor for religious transformation and conversion.

Syncretic religiosity is another key theme in this scholarship. In Vanuatu, Tabani's study "*L'islam Des Musulmans de Tanna (Vanuatu)*" (2020) revealed themes of syncretic spirituality and beliefs in primordial Islamic legacy. He highlighted how ni-Vanuatu Muslims incorporate elements of regional cultural practices, *kastom*, into Islamic life. Offering creative theological justifications for practices such as drinking *kava* or raising pigs, converts negotiated contradictions in ways that prioritise local identity over doctrinal uniformity. Further, according to Tabani (2020), some Muslims on the island of Tanna see Islam as the first religion in the history of humanity and claim that it originated in Vanuatu and was only later adopted by Arabs. Hence, they reframe Islam as a return to indigenous roots rather than a foreign faith. Similarly, Flower (2012), in his study "*The Growing Muslim Minority Community in Papua New Guinea*", found that among Muslim converts, Islam was viewed not as a rejection of Christianity but as a continuation of it. In this context, adopting Islam was framed as a return to original spiritual roots and a reversion to the oldest faith rather than a conversion to a new one.

While these ethnographies emphasise local agency and the flexibility of Islamic practice, the researchers also acknowledge the persistent stigma that Muslims face in predominantly Christian societies of Melanesia. Despite the absence of violence, local Muslims are often ostracised, as seen in the derogatory labelling of young Tannese Muslims as "Bin Ladens" or "Rambos" (Tabani, 2020). Nonetheless, McDougall (2009) and Flower (2008, 2012) documented that many Melanesian Muslims respond to such accusations with a counter-narrative of moral superiority, emphasising Islam's global brotherhood and its commitment to action over Christianity's "empty talk" (McDougall, 2009, p. 486). Consequently, the mentioned ethnographies agree that across these Melanesian contexts, Islam is not merely embraced as a religious tradition by its followers but also seen by them as a powerful symbol of cultural renewal. It serves as a means of resisting the dominance of Western and Christian norms, while also offering adherents a way to assert a morally authoritative and globally recognised religious identity.

In contrast to indigenous-led conversions in the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu, the emergence of Islam in Fiji, as noted by sociologist of religion Jan Ali (2004), was a consequence of economic migration and the cultural legacy of colonial labour systems.

Employing a historical-sociological approach and drawing on archival records, census data, and community narratives, in his study *“Islam and Muslims in Fiji”* (2004), Ali examined the development of the Fijian Muslim community. He explored the evolution of Indo-Fijian Muslim religious life, addressing broader themes of migration, religious transformation, diaspora identity, and the development of Islamic institutions in minority, non-Muslim settings. Ali traced the shift from early syncretic, private expression of religiosity, emerging from survival strategies under the British colonial indentured system between 1879 and 1916, to the unfolding of sectarian divisions and the rise of revivalist movements between 1920 and the mid-1970s, and the demands for autonomy and institutionalisation of Islam from the mid-1970s until the early 2000s.

Ali’s (2004) description of the early religious syncretism of Fijian Muslims, marked by significant ritual cultural overlap with Hinduism, emphasised interfaith relations and the maintenance of religious boundaries in diasporic contexts. He argues that sectarian identities, shaped by South Asian politics and transnational revivalist movements, were imported to Fiji and embedded within local minority Muslim communities. The development from initial Muslim-Hindu political cooperation to rising claims for separate Fijian Muslim recognition underscores broader postcolonial discussions surrounding minority identity and modes of political engagement.

Ali’s studies illustrate how local Muslims in Fiji have negotiated their minority status within a pluralistic society shaped by racially structured institutions. Through practices of ritual discipline, proselytisation, and the symbolic rejection of syncretic cultural and spiritual elements, revivalist movements have significantly contributed to reshaping Muslims’ identity and Islam’s public presence in Fiji. In his article *“The Tabligh Jama’at and Islamic Revivalism in Fiji”*, Ali (2018) explored the role of transnational missionary networks and the negotiation of Muslim minority identity informed by ethnic pluralism and secular modernity. He framed Islamic revivalism in Fiji as a response to the perceived moral decline, particularly in response to the influences of Westernisation and religious syncretism and examined how adherents to *Tabligh Jama’at* promoted scripturalist rigour, gender segregation, and visible piety as tools for spiritual and communal renewal.

Ali’s research demonstrates how the interaction between local religious expressions and global Islamic influences informs the identities of Muslim minority communities in the

Pacific, enabling new ways of belonging. His research thus offers valuable historical context relevant to understanding the Ahmadiyya community's position in Fiji in the 2020s.

### **Conclusion**

This thesis engages with scholarly debates concerning major themes such as (1) the Ahmadiyya movement's theology, prophethood claims, and engagement with Islamic orthodoxy; (2) the institutionalisation and routinisation of charismatic authority; (3) the role of hierarchical bureaucracy in standardising religious authority in diasporas; (4) the use of media in spiritual leadership; (5) minority status, public visibility, and strategic representation; (6) the intersection of gender roles, moral education, and piety; and (7) the role of flexible citizenship. These conversations reveal how the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's theological claims and centralised authority uphold a distinct, coherent identity through its own bureaucratic framework, media, traditional gender norms and moral discipline, shaping both the internal identity and external perception of Fijian Ahmadis. This scholarship is further enriched by comparative perspectives from Melanesia and Fiji, where Islam has served as a moral and spiritual alternative to the dominant Christian tradition in these regions. Together, these studies provide a foundation for understanding how the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at manages its religious practices and articulates its identity within its minority diasporic status and complex realities of contemporary Fiji.

## CHAPTER ONE: Spiritual Father

The Khalifa is the spiritual and administrative leader of the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at, who officially refer to him as "His Holiness". In doing so, the Jama'at acknowledges that to Ahmadis, he is God's representative on Earth. Responsible for shaping and promoting the Jama'at's distinct identity, fostering cohesion and ensuring continuation, the Khalifa, with unrestricted power answerable to God only, provides centralised spiritual and moral guidance and demands obedience to his directives from the community's globally scattered members.

This chapter analyses the Khalifa's charisma, linked to the prophetic allure of Ahmadiyya Islam's founder and prophet, Ghulam Ahmad. I examine the influence of the Khalifa's persona and role in the lives of Fijian Ahmadis, which extends beyond administrative duties and encompasses maintaining an intense, emotional, and intimate bond with his followers. I argue that the Khalifa's charisma as a divinely appointed leader is primarily rooted in the authority of his role, which integrates governance-related and spiritual functions and is also shaped by his perceived extraordinary personal attributes. His charisma is further strengthened by the Khalifa's deliberate cultivation of close relationships with the Jama'at members, characterised by direct personal connection and mutual letter exchange. Accordingly, the community's recognition of the Khalifa's personality and role complements and amplifies one another, reinforcing his uncontested authority among Fijian Ahmadis.

First, drawing on the works of religious scholars and historians, I analyse the historical emergence of Ahmadiyya Islam driven by visions of its founder, Ghulam Ahmad and sustained by the turbulent socio-political conditions prevailing in the Indian subcontinent during the late 19th century, which provided suitable conditions for his unconventional concepts. I contend that by institutionalising Ghulam Ahmad's charisma through the succession of khilafat, the Khalifa's spiritual leadership is grounded in the community's founding values and ideals that the Khalifa continues to advocate. Additionally, by linking the Khalifa's charisma primarily to the role rather than the individual, I argue that the Jama'at effectively mitigates the potential for challenges to the Khalifa's authority from revolutionary figures like its own founder, Ghulam Ahmad. This framework helps to maintain a strong, unified community's orthodoxy, which is represented by the Khalifa's sole leadership.

Secondly, I explore how the Khalifa's close in-person interactions with his followers impact Fijian Ahmadis' spiritual and emotional lives. Ahmadis globally are encouraged to

share private concerns and events with the Khalifa regularly through handwritten letters. Many Fijian Ahmadis diligently uphold this practice, viewing it as an essential personalised channel to the divine wisdom that provides them with deep emotional comfort and a sense of protection. The impact of this practice is deepened by the Khalifa's responses to letters and the conviction among many Fijian Ahmadis that he personally corresponds with them, thus fostering a perception of individualised, reciprocal exchange. I maintain that by intentionally nurturing those close-knit, family-like bonds with the community members, the Khalifa reinforces his influence and encourages Ahmadis' active engagement with their faith. This is especially significant in geographically remote Jama'at like Fiji. I suggest that the Fijian Ahmadis' intense focus on the Khalifa - by which I mean their prioritisation of his guidance over other influences, almost absolute obedience to his directives, and the substantial time they devote to engaging and aligning themselves with his authority - promotes uniformity in their beliefs and religious practices. Consequently, their firm adherence to the Khalifa's commands contributes to their separation from the wider Fijian community.

Thirdly, I analyse how the Khalifa's ritual and media practices, conducted remotely from his London headquarters, facilitate and enhance connections across the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at. This is particularly reflected in the televised ritual of the faith initiation and renewal, *Bai'at*, conducted by the Khalifa during the Jama'at's foremost annual event - *Jalsa Salana*. Through the *Bai'at* ceremony, which symbolically links Ahmadis to their community's founder, the Khalifa, and one another, the Khalifa not just contributes to nurturing and sustaining a collective sense of global unity and belonging among Ahmadis; he also plays a role in affirming Ahmadiyya Islam's distinct and separate spiritual identity. Facilitated by modern media in real-time, the *Bai'at* ceremony enables Fijian Ahmadis to participate actively despite their geographical isolation.

Additionally, I analyse the Khalifa's active engagements with political spheres and his ambiguous public rhetoric, which complicate the community's apolitical claims. Focused mainly on Western audiences, the Khalifa strives to consolidate his authority as a "global Muslim leader" by projecting a humanistic image of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at. This integrational self-presentation is strengthened by the community's firm and explicitly showcased pro-establishment stance as a defining aspect of its identity. I argue that the Jama'at's outward loyalty to existing power structures and ruling elites is echoed within its internal dynamics. Reinforced and extended through its own media strategy, the Jama'at amplifies the Khalifa's

doctrinal authority, limits internal debate, and promotes socially conservative values that sometimes conflict with pluralistic principles - thus reflecting a community's broader orientation of alignment with established forms of authority.

This chapter contributes to the academic discussion on religious charisma and leadership by illustrating how the Khalifa's authority within the Ahmadiyya Jama'at exemplifies the interplay between spiritual authority as expressed in a divine mandate, institutional power and personal appeal. It engages with literature on spiritual leadership as it intersects with the institutionalisation of charisma (Weber, 1968; Lindholm, 2013), emotional bonding between leaders and followers in globally dispersed religious communities (Balzani, 2020; Asad, 2003) and affective subjective and collective resonance with religious symbols and leadership (Geertz, 1971; Durkheim, 1912; Jung, 1969), including idealisations of spiritual leaders (Jung, 1969; von France, 1980). This chapter also contributes to discussions on the roles of media and technology in religious guidance (Hirschkind, 2001b; Anderson, 2003; Slama, 2017) and the nature of traditional Islamic orthodoxy defined by spiritual leaders (Asad, 2003; Soares, 2020; Becker, 1997) as they engage with varying degrees of communal involvement in shaping religious practice (Lambek, 1990; Hirschkind, 2001a). By connecting these themes, the chapter demonstrates how the Khalifa's authority is sustained in physically distant Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at through intimate, emotionally charged practices.

Unlike the followers of other global religious leaders, who may often remain anonymous within large congregations, Fijian Ahmadis perceive their connection with the Khalifa as personal and reciprocal, reinforcing their sense of individual recognition. Many are convinced that the Khalifa remembers and recognises them, cultivating a sense of deep trust and devotion that extends beyond traditional kinship structures and resembles more familial bonds. These intimate emotional relationships, sustained within the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's framework, set the Khalifa's authority apart from that of other world spiritual figures and enable him to have a profound influence on the religious practices and perspectives of Fijian Ahmadis.

### **The Khalifa's Visit to Fiji in 2006**

It is hard to imagine what went through the minds of surfers ready to sunbathe in a tropical paradise when, instead of Fijian musicians in vibrant floral-patterned shirts, shell necklaces and pink frangipanis behind their ears, humming light-hearted welcome tempos on

ukulele nylons, the official loudspeakers of Nadi International airport resonated with Islamic call-response chant:

*“Naraeeee Takbeer... Allah-o-Akbar!  
Islam Ahmadiyyat... Zindabad!  
Hazrat Muhammad Mustapha... Zindabad!  
Khilafat-e-Ahmadiyya... Zindabad!  
Hazrat Khalifatul Mirza Ahmad... Zindabad!  
Naraeeee Takbeer... Allah-o-Akbar!”<sup>9</sup>*

The airport sound system transmitted the unwavering voice of an Ahmadiyya missionary, echoed by the passionate expressions of faith from a celebratory choir of hundreds of Fijian Ahmadis that filled the arrival hall. Dressed in their best *salwar kameez*, wearing *Jinnah caps* and *pakols*<sup>10</sup>, they fervently awaited their Khalifa, whom they held in daily prayers, whose guidance, they said, they trusted unconditionally and with whom they regularly shared handwritten letters of their worries, struggles, achievements and joys.

This is how members of the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama’at recalled and narrated to me the festive and public display of reverence that marked the arrival of the current fifth Khalifa, Mirza Masroor Ahmad, who lives in exile in London<sup>11</sup>, when he landed in Fiji in April 2006. On that visit, the Khalifa came with around 12 team members, including his private secretary, security personnel, the Ahmadiyya TV (MTA) channel crew, and his wife. According to many Fijian Ahmadis, the Khalifa’s visit was an indicator of the prophecy of Ahmadiyya Islam’s founder, who foretold, “I will cause thy message to reach the corners of the earth” (Al Islam, 2004, “I Shall Cause Thy Message”), which encapsulates the community’s missionary zeal. Most Fijian Ahmadis I have met clearly remember details of the Khalifa’s visit, whom they often refer to as Huzoor, i.e., Holiness or Huzoor *Sahib*, with an added honorific title as a mark of respect. While the Khalifa’s face had long gazed at them from framed photographs in their

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<sup>9</sup> Who is the Greatest - God is the Greatest!  
Long live Islam Ahmadiyyat  
Long live Hazrat Muhammad Mustapha (refers to the Prophet Muhammad)  
Long live Ahmadiyya Khilafat  
Long live Khalifa Mirza Masroor Ahmad  
Who is the Greatest - God is the Greatest!

<sup>10</sup> These are some of traditional Pakistani and South Asian garments worn by Ahmadis in Fiji.

<sup>11</sup> Changes to the Pakistani constitution under general Zia ul Haq and the introduction of a blasphemy Ordinance in 1984 made fourth Khalifa Mirza Tahir Ahmad, to flee from Rabwah in Punjab, Pakistan and re-establish the Ahmadiyyat Jama’at’s headquarters in London (Khan, 2015).

living rooms and kitchens, many who awaited him at Nadi airport in April 2006 anticipated encountering him in person for the first time.

Upon the aeroplane's arrival, just five local Jama'at members were granted special passes authorised to greet the Khalifa at the air bridge; among them, the Ahmadiyya national president (*Amir*), the national president of the Ahmadiyya women's auxiliary organisation (*Sadar Lajna*), the Nadi missionary in charge and a member of the Fijian branch of the MTA. Zakaria, who was tasked with capturing the camera footage of the Khalifa's disembarkation, described that moment to me, *"When I saw Huzoor on the screen... you know, seeing him for the first time... my hands started shaking, and it's visible in that video... and then I could feel brightness in space"*. After having passed through immigration, the Khalifa was greeted by Fijian Ahmadi children singing Urdu *nazms*. Many Fijian Jama'at members told me how they were instantly captivated by the Khalifa's charm and presence, including Nasreen, who emotively described her impressions, *"I felt that light was coming from his face and body... And I was so mesmerised by his presence that I couldn't feel anything else around me"*.

Chosen for life, the Khalifa undertakes the responsibilities of spiritual guidance and leads the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's efforts in propagating its interpretations of Islam. Before he was elected the fifth Khalifa in April 2003, Mirza Masroor Ahmad, father of two who is known for enjoying gardening, reading and photography, served as the Chief Executive of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at in Pakistan (Al Islam, 2004, "Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad"). With a master's degree in Agricultural Economics, he previously devoted seven years to public welfare in Ghana, where he was involved in various development projects. His accomplishments, such as being credited within the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at for successfully growing wheat in Ghana for the first time, despite Jama'at claims that prior experiments indicated wheat could not thrive there (Al Islam, 2024, "Who Were the Khalifas"), together with his personal qualities, built him a strong reputation within his community. As I will go on to discuss, for Fijian Ahmadis, the Khalifa's leadership is not just about authority but also about embodying moral integrity, compassion, and commitment to their well-being - qualities they consider essential to a trustworthy leader. This perception aligns with the broader understanding that a spiritual leader's credibility is built not only on their position but also on the personal attributes that inspire loyalty and confidence among followers.

The vivid accounts of the Khalifa's arrival in Fiji in 2006 depict Fijian Ahmadis' deep attachment to the spiritual leader and also point to underlying sources of his authority and

the nature of his leadership. As I explore in the next section, the Khalifa's charisma that inspired such reverence among Fijian Ahmadis is part of a broader system of authority that binds Ahmadis worldwide. I discuss how the Khalifa's role is reinforced by both divine charisma and structured institutional power, which together sustain his position within the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at.

## I. THE AUTHORITY OF MEN WITH TIES TO GOD

Fijian Ahmadis treat the Khalifa as a sacred figure who maintains a spiritual bond with the divine. Anthropologists who have studied Ahmadiyya communities worldwide agree that the current Khalifa's leadership is rooted in personal charisma, moral example and his ability to guide his community through religious teachings (Evans, 2020; Balzani, 2020; Valentine, 2008). The Khalifa's authority is multifaceted, stemming not only from perceived divine support but also from his role's deep integration within the Jama'at structures that he governs and that both validate and strengthen his influence over time (Balzani, 2020). Whereas within Islamic traditions, there exist other spiritual figures who hold similar "unquestionable" authority to that of the Khalifa, such as the Supreme Leader of Iran<sup>12</sup>, Sultan of Brunei<sup>13</sup>, spiritual leader of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS)<sup>14</sup>, or the Aga Khan, the Imam of the Shi'a Imami Ismailia sect<sup>15</sup> (Habibi et al., 2017; Müller & Steiner, 2018; Amir & Rahman, 2024; Morris, 1958), the Khalifa's interactions with his followers are notable because they frequently extend beyond a formal clerical role, nurturing a sense of private individual recognition (as discussed in the next part of this Chapter).

Charisma is central to the Khalifa's authority among Ahmadis worldwide. Within the Jama'at, the Khalifa is recognised as the successor of Ghulam Ahmad, the founder and

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<sup>12</sup> The Supreme Leader in Iran, known as the *Rahbar* or "Leader", who is the highest spiritual authority in the country, is believed to exemplify the qualities of the infallible Imams and has the ultimate say in the interpretation of religious texts. His authority, rooted in the Shi'a Islamic tradition also gives him expansive executive, legislative, and judicial power as well as military and foreign affair influence, impacting nearly every aspect of life in Iran (Habibi et al., 2017).

<sup>13</sup> In Sunni Islam, the Sultan of Brunei is the supreme authority in the state, combining legal, executive, and spiritual roles. Positioned above the law, he is considered infallible and unaccountable under Bruneian law. As the highest religious authority, he has the final say in matters of Islamic law and its interpretation (Müller & Steiner, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> The spiritual leader of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party PAS, known as the *Mursyidul Am*, holds authoritative and guiding role within the party, akin to the highest spiritual authority within PAS, overseeing religious guidance and influencing the party's ideological direction. The leader's influence extends to both the spiritual and political spheres, committed to implementing Islamic principles in governance and public life (Amir & Rahman, 2024).

<sup>15</sup> The position of the Aga Khan as the living Imam within the sect is grounded in his status as a hereditary, infallible, and impeccable leader. He possesses interpretive authority over the Qur'an and offers guidance to his followers on matters of education, career choice, and business (Morris, 1958).

prophet of Ahmadiyya Islam and perceived by Ahmadis as a bridge to God due to his believed spiritual connection with the divine. Consequently, the Khalifa is not merely an administrative leader but a sacred figure. This perception aligns with sociological and anthropological theories of leadership that emphasise the role of personal qualities and spiritual authority in shaping followers' devotion. Max Weber's (1968) concept of charisma outlined a type of leadership based on the remarkable personal attributes of an individual and on the belief among followers that this person possessed unique, supernatural talents or exemplary characteristics. Further, Weber theorised that charismatic authority differed from traditional authority based on established customs and was also distinguished from the legal-rational authority, where governance was carried out through a bureaucratic system under a framework of constitutional law and norms (Weber, 1968). Weber's framework helps explain how the Khalifa's charisma extends beyond institutional structures, relying on the deeply held convictions of Ahmadis who see his authority as divinely ordained and uniquely transformative.

The Khalifa's leadership efficiently combines charismatic, traditional and legal-rational powers as identified by Weber. The current Khalifa was elected according to the established standards of Ahmadiyya khilafat, which Ahmadis understand not to be a political but a spiritual institution (Valentine, 2008). Since the passing of the Ahmadiyya community's founder in 1908, there have been five elected successors, i.e., khalifs, out of which four were his relatives, including the current Khalifa.<sup>16</sup> While the Khalifa is voted to lifelong office upon merit by a representative body of the Jama'at's senior males, the election process is understood only as a de facto confirmation of the choice that has already been made by God (Balzani, 2020). When the Khalifa assumes leadership of the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at, his role and responsibilities within the structured hierarchy are already established. The Khalifa's authority within the Jama'at encompasses both the administrative functions of an elected leader and the perceived "out of this world" spiritual attributes believed by Ahmadis to link him to God. That is why the community's regulations do not bind him to obey, and the Khalifa is not accountable to any member of the Jama'at. Upon his election in June 1982, the fourth Khalifa shared his understanding of the duties associated with his office, particularly the

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<sup>16</sup> Four khalifs were related to Mirza Ghulam Ahmad as his son, grandsons and a great-grandson. The first Khalifa Nur-ud-Din was not a relative. The second Khalifa, Bashir ud-Din Mahmud Ahmad was a son of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the third Khalifa, Nasir Ahmad was a son of the second Khalifa. The fourth Khalifa, Tahir Ahmad, was the younger brother of the third Khalifa and the current fifth Khalifa, Masroor Ahmad is the great-grandson of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (Balzani, 2020).

importance of receiving divine guidance. “But this is no freedom because I am now answerable directly to God, my Lord” (Al Islam, 2024, “Is a Khalifa infallible?”). Convinced that he was governed by divine expectations and principles, the fourth Khalifa conveyed a sense of spiritual duty.

The relationship between bureaucracy and charisma in spiritual leadership can be marked by both coexistence and potential conflict. Anthropologist Charles Lindholm (2013) explored the complex interplay between charisma, authority, and leadership, perceiving both charisma and authority as two distinct spheres of influence crucial in religious leadership. Whereas Lindholm (2013) recognised charisma as a personal innate magnetic charm, he depicted authority as a more structured power, often institutionalised and recognised within certain boundaries. Further, Lindholm (2013) saw potential tension between the charismatic and the bureaucratic authority, as he suggested that charisma can surpass the rational-legal frameworks and destabilise its impartiality; describing this dynamic in an ambitious Avá-Guaraní shaman, Pedro, from Paraguay. Pedro, renowned for his ecstatic musical performances, which earned him the reputation of a “rock star” among shamans, effectively contested bureaucratic authority through creative improvisation and strategic collaboration with the widow of a deceased leader and esteemed shamans (Lindholm, 2013, p. 22). Lindholm’s argument highlights the potential friction between charismatic and bureaucratic authority, demonstrating how spiritual leadership navigates both personal influence and institutional structure. On the other hand, the leadership of the Khalifa exemplifies how charismatic and bureaucratic authority can coexist and even strengthen one another, rather than creating conflict. By integrating personal charisma within an established institutional framework, the Khalifa’s governance solidifies enduring legitimacy of his position.

As I will subsequently discuss, for the Fijian Ahmadis, the multi-layered transcendence of the Khalifa’s sovereignty is regarded as a much-welcomed stabilising element within the Jama’at. To them, the divine aspect of the Khalifa’s charisma elevated his status, making his decisions carry weight beyond bureaucratic leadership and instilling his role with a sacred significance.

### **The Transfer of Charisma**

Fijian Ahmadis with whom I interacted emphasised that the Khalifa’s authority lies in the seamless transfer of his charisma to his successor upon his passing, thus ensuring that

the position, not the person, remains the central source of guidance and reverence. Consequently, Fijian Ahmadis did not differentiate between the tenures of individual khalifs; instead, they perceived them as equally significant in a spiritual context. I suggest that this mechanism of charisma transfer preserves the global Jama'at's consistency and persistence, including mitigating the potential for internal opposition.

Fijian Ahmadis' devotion to the Khalifa transcended his individual traits, encompassing reverence for the spiritual office he embodies. Hina, who met the fifth Khalifa during his visit to Fiji in 2006 when she was around ten years old, now, apart from her full-time job as a doctor in Lautoka Hospital, serves in the Fijian Jama'at as the national general secretary of *Lajna Ima'illah*.<sup>17</sup> Each month, Hina collected reports from all the branches of *Lajna Ima'illah* in Fiji, compiled them into her own report, and sent them to the Khalifa at the London headquarters. Hina described how the Khalifa's influence could be deeply personal despite the absence of direct encounters, *"You don't know that person at all, but as soon as they come as a Khalifa in front of you, from the one before him... you have this certain love for him. And when he passes away, you cry for two or three days, and then another Khalifa comes in... and then you are again experiencing the same kind of love and respect for that person. Even though the person has changed. The status they carry, I think, is what bonds us"*. As Hina noted, the charisma of the Khalifa's post evokes an automatic emotional connection to the individual in the role, despite the position being occupied by different leaders over time, suggesting that the Khalifa's charisma is primarily tied to his role and then to his personality. This transfer of charisma was also indicated by my observations among Fijian Ahmadis, who had interacted with multiple khalifs yet did not express any overt preferences or make comparisons regarding their relatability or effectiveness. As I discuss later in this chapter, Fijian Ahmadis also refrained from directly contesting any khalifs, suggesting that challenges to the Khalifa's leadership within the Jama'at remain exceptional.

The Khalifa's charisma, rooted in the stable and predictable authority of the khilafat institution, contrasts with the reformist charisma of the founder of the Ahmadiyya community, Ghulam Ahmad, whose legacy inherently invites reinterpretation of the established order (as explored further). This dichotomy reflects Weber's differentiation of an impulsive, revolutionary - *primary* charisma from the *secondary*, which emerged after society transitioned to a more stable form of authority embedded in institutional structure (Weber,

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<sup>17</sup> An auxiliary organisation within the Ahmadiyya Jama'at, specifically for women. More on *Lajna Ima'illah* in Chapter 3.

1968). According to Weber and others studying charismatic leadership, it was often during times of crisis that the primary charismatic leader emerged, and due to the display of visionary insights and persuasiveness, he or she may have been seen as a “bearer of the specific gifts” (Roth & Wittich, 1978, p. 1112). Their compelling skills and qualities enabled charismatic leaders to break conventional roles and obligations, challenge the status quo, and bring about significant social transformation (Weber, 1968; Lindholm, 2013). Nonetheless, as crises subside, Weber (1968, p. 39) argued that through the “routinization of charisma”, the leader’s original revolutionary authority transmutes into an established institutional framework that continues to benefit those whose authority is secured by that sovereign power and who, in turn, rely on its continued existence.

This transformation is evident in the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at, where the once-revolutionary leadership of Ghulam Ahmad laid the foundation for a distinct religious community with divergent interpretations of Islam. This initial charismatic movement gradually evolved into the enduring organisational framework of the khilafat, which continues to define the community’s governance today. This dynamic illustrates how spiritual movements, initially driven by the spontaneous personal charisma of their leader, can transition through the institutionalisation of charismatic authority into a structured bureaucratic system while maintaining their foundational legitimacy.

### **Historical and Political Background of the Ahmadiyya Movement**

In 1882, Ghulam Ahmad, an Indian Muslim from Qadian in Punjab, India, who asserted Arab ancestry from the Prophet Muhammad, declared himself a *Mujaddid*, a renewer of the (Islam) faith, and in the subsequent years, he announced that God had appointed him as the *Mahdi* and *Masih Mau’ud* (Promised Messiah) and bestowed upon him the title of *Rasul* (Prophet) (Jones, 1989; Friedmann, 2003). Ghulam Ahmad’s declaration that Jesus died a natural death in Srinagar, Kashmir, rather than being resurrected, and thus will not return as the Messiah - a role he claimed for himself - demonstrated not just his efforts to present himself as a guardian of both Muslims and Christians, but also to assert the dominance of Islam over Christianity (Khan, 2015; Friedmann, 2003; Sevea, 2012).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> As Ghulam Ahmad apparently expressed, one of his duties was “killing the swine and breaking the cross” (Khan, 2015, p. 80).

Ghulam Ahmad recorded many of his visions, revelations, and dreams, which he viewed as evidence of his prophetic mission, in *Tadhkirah*. These include recalling a dream voice stating, “God will descend in Qadian, according to his promise” (Ahmad, 2009, p. 562) or allegedly hearing a call declaring, “Victory to Ghulam Ahmad” (Ahmad, 2009, p. 959). His other accounts described Hindus bending down before him, cheering, “He is an Avatar. He is Krishna” (Ahmad, 2009, p. 539) and also revealed his prophecy about the worldwide triumph of the true Ahmadiyya Islam (Ahmad, 2006). Ghulam Ahmad’s response to his professed predestined divine calling, his assertions of direct dialogue with God, a messianic role, and a departure from conventional Islamic views that distinguished him as an innovative leader with the power to attract believers to a new vision based on his “mystical insights, esoteric abstractions, and eclectic metaphysical creativity” (Khan, 2015, p. 125), epitomises Weber’s idea of primary charisma. Ghulam Ahmad’s conviction in his God-ordained mission, reinforced by his extraordinary spiritual claims, served to legitimise his authority among those who found resonance in his message.

However, apart from personal charisma, Ghulam Ahmad’s appeal and the early success of the Ahmadiyya movement were also influenced by the turbulent socio-political context of late nineteenth-century India. According to the historian Iqbal Sevea (2012), this period, marked by the aftermath of the Mughal Empire’s fall and the British-imposed exile of the last Mughal emperor, was a “time of great ferment in the history of Muslims of India” (Sevea, 2012, p. 4). The defeat of Indian Islam’s political dominance left a sense of degradation among local Muslim elites, who, out of fear of falling behind Indian Hindus and Christian missionaries, strived to return to a perceived purer form of Islamic ideas and teachings (Sevea, 2012). This influenced the emergence of new Muslim educational institutions and the growth of Muslim sects that often competed to provide the “true” Islamic perspective on societal issues (Jones, 1989; Sevea, 2012). Sevea (2012) emphasised that the resurgence of Islam then was also facilitated by print technology, which allowed leaders such as Ghulam Ahmad to disseminate their spiritual teachings more effectively through newspapers.

This socio-political environment enabled Ghulam Ahmad to present Ahmadiyya faith as both an alternative and a solution for Indian Muslims perceiving external threats to Islam and internal moral and doctrinal decline. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1971), who explored the multifaceted interaction between colonialism and Islamic thought in Morocco and Indonesia, noted that it provoked diverse Muslim reactions opposing Christianity and the

apparent moral and social decay associated with colonial rule. Geertz (1971) argued that colonialism led Moroccan and Indonesian Muslims to reflect on traditional Islamic values and influenced expressions of Islam's interpretations and rituals. As part of a broader Islamic revival aimed at purifying practices and returning to recognised original teachings, Geertz (1971) observed a notable shift towards scripturalism in Morocco and Indonesia, emphasising strict adherence to the Qur'an and Hadith. Likewise, many Indian Muslim leaders in the late 1800s focused on scriptures to address distortions attributed to foreign interference, aiming for internal consolidation of their communities (Sevea, 2012).

The shared Indian Muslims' objective to restore a sense of empowerment benefited from (but also subsequently contributed to) one of the ill-fated impacts of colonial governance in India - a hardening of sectarian identities. The governing practice under the British Raj of conducting regular censuses ignored the syncretism of Indian society by mandating a rigid classification of social identities based on religion and caste, which resulted in the intensification of public tensions (Sen, 2006; Sevea, 2012). This push for clear communal boundaries particularly manifested in the diverse cultural landscape of Punjab province, where Ghulam Ahmad was born and lived<sup>19</sup>, leading to the deepening of religious sectarianism and the emergence of numerous socio-religious groups, like the Ahmadiyya movement or the Hindu reform organisation Arya Samaj.<sup>20</sup> Historian Kenneth Jones (1981), who studied religious developments in colonial India, noted that Punjabi sects formed acculturative movements whose leaders expressed themselves in symbols based on language and religious scripts, each aggressively defending their ideas as the "absolute, unbending truth" (Jones, 1981, p. 120). Ghulam Ahmad frequently used an oratory style of "powerful" reasoning in public debates to justify his claim of infallible truth. Adopting the tradition of *Mubahala*, he challenged his opponents to a divine judgement by invoking God's curse in the form of death bestowed on the "lying" party (Evans, 2020). Although Fijian Ahmadis do not practise *Mubahala*, my observations indicate that their approach to interfaith dialogue remains influenced by Ghulam Ahmad's tactic, which is focused on asserting the superiority

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<sup>19</sup> The regional influences on the development of Ghulam Ahmad ideas may have been further reinforced by the fact that, as noted by Khan (2015), Ghulam Ahmad never travelled beyond the Indian Subcontinent. This geographical limitation likely shaped his concepts and overall approach.

<sup>20</sup> Arya Samaj - a movement advocating for a return to puritanical Hinduism was founded in 1877 in Lahore, Punjab. Arya Samaj conflicted with orthodox Hindus, and Sikhs as well as Ahmadis. Other significant movements originating in Punjab at that time included Muslim movements of return from the Gangetic basin, aimed at purifying Islam and the Sikh Singh Sabha acculturative movement (Jones, 1989).

of their beliefs through perceived rational arguments and achieving victories in debates (as discussed in Chapter 4).

Ghulam Ahmad's aim to revive authentic Islamic teachings and practices aligned with the aspirations of the Indian Muslim elite of the era. However, Ghulam Ahmad did not seek to consolidate Ahmadiyya faith within the broader Muslim community; instead, he capitalised on the prevailing socio-political conditions to advance his own distinct theology. As Sevea (2012) argued, Ghulam Ahmad directed his proselytisation efforts primarily toward Muslims, inviting them to accept his spiritual authority and interpretation of Islam. This process involved converting new followers from Islam to Ahmadiyya Islam through the pledge of allegiance - *Bai'at* initiation, grounded in established Sufi practice.<sup>21</sup>

The charisma of Ghulam Ahmad and the successful establishment and solidification of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at support Lindholm's (2013) assertion that charisma is a social construct that arises not just from the leader's qualities and interaction with his followers but also from the broader socio-cultural setting. Indeed, Khan's (2015) view that under a less chaotic milieu of late nineteenth-century India, Ahmadiyya Islam may have just blended into mainstream Islam has a point. The emergence of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at highlights the role of external socio-political factors in shaping the course of religious movements, rather than attributing their progress solely to charismatic leadership. Meanwhile, as upon the foundation of Ahmadiyya faith, affirming strict communal boundaries along religious lines within diverse cultural landscapes draws parallels with Fiji's distinct cultural and geographical context, where some Fijian Ahmadis regard their religious identity as a means of addressing perceived moral decline and safeguarding alleged doctrinal purity of Islam (as discussed in Chapter 4).

Apart from his divergent theological interpretations, Ghulam Ahmad also distinguished himself from mainstream Indian Muslims by his loyalty to British rule in India,

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<sup>21</sup> The *Bai'at* initiation might be interpreted as implicitly positioning the Ahmadiyya as a separate religious community, rather than a reform movement within Islam. However, Khan (2015) noted that the original ten conditions of *Bai'at* omitted almost all elements that later came to define contested Ahmadiyya ideology, including explicit references to Ghulam Ahmad's prophetic claims, interpretations of *khātām al-nubuwwa*, the doctrine of non-violent jihad, and narratives concerning Jesus's survival of crucifixion. Accordingly, Khan (2015) suggests that the absence of these features indicates that the early followers of Ghulam Ahmad were more closely aligned with the broader Islamic tradition than with a clearly defined Ahmadi identity. This indicates a gradual transformation in religious identity over time, from the original reform movement to the contemporary Ahmadiyya community, whereby theological positions that were initially less emphasised have become central to Ahmadi distinct self-understanding and separate identity.

which, in his view, was beneficial for the spread of Islam (Friedmann, 2003).<sup>22</sup> If not for this significant deviation, Ghulam Ahmad, who was in the right place at the right time to leverage his persuasive qualities and challenge recognised convention, might have served as a textbook example of Weber's primary charismatic leader. However, though revolutionary, Ghulam Ahmad was not anti-establishment. His unwavering commitment to the established regimes remains a stance that the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at pursues as one of the defining aspects of its identity (as discussed later in this chapter).

After Ghulam Ahmad's death in 1908, his movement, which had around 1200 members at the time (Khan, 2015, p. 64), struggled to sustain its mission without its founder. It was only during the tenure of the second Khalifa, Ghulam Ahmad's son, beginning in 1914, that the Ahmadiyya Jama'at was solidified as a structured institution (Balzani, 2020).<sup>23</sup> This transition aligned with what Lindholm (2013, p. 9) described as converting "the hot primary charisma of the leader into the cool secondary charisma of the institution", thus making the formalisation of the khilafat essential to upholding the continuity of Ghulam Ahmad's legacy with the Jama'at.

The khalifs' role and succession remain central to the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's organisational framework. Although the community's bureaucracy provides stability, its primary source of appeal among Fijian Ahmadis stems from the Khalifa's charismatic leadership. The Khalifa's dominant influence extends beyond his presumed divinely guided authority and role as the legitimate successor to the founder of the Ahmadiyya community to his ability to cultivate deeply personal ties with Ahmadis worldwide (as explored in the next section).

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<sup>22</sup> Pakistani historian Ali Usman Qasmi (2015), noted, that Ghulam Ahmad's stance aligned with British colonial interests, as he discouraged any resistance or rebellion against British rule in India. However, his pro-British position also led Ghulam Ahmad's opponents to accuse him of being a British agent deliberately planted to divide Muslims and weaken efforts to resist colonial dominance in India.

<sup>23</sup> Following the death of the first Khalifa, Hakim Noor-ud-Din, in 1914, Mirza Bashir-ud-Din Mahmud Ahmad, the son of Ghulam Ahmad, was elected as the second Khalifa in Qadian. Nonetheless, his election was met with opposition from some Ahmadi scholars, leading to a division within the Ahmadiyya movement into two factions - the Lahori group and the Qadiani group. The Lahori faction advocated for a more democratic and scholarly leadership rather than a centralised khilafat. Lahoris rejected the absolute authority of the Khalifa and instead proposed governance through a *shura* (consultative council). Additionally, Lahori Ahmadis denied Ghulam Ahmad's status as a prophet, seeing him instead as a reformer (*Mujaddid*) and the Promised Messiah. Consequently, the Lahori Ahmadis adopted a decentralised structure, emphasising academic work and the propagation of Islam without the role of Khalifa. In contrast, the Qadiani faction emerged as the dominant group, maintaining the system of khilafat and representing today's mainstream Ahmadiyya Jama'at (Ali, 1994; Khan 2005; Sevea, 2012).

## II. A DIVINE AND DOMESTIC GUARDIAN

The Khalifa's charismatic authority is marked by private and intimate connections with his followers, nurtured through both his physical visits and long-distance communication, primarily via the exchange of letters that Fijian Ahmadis commonly write by hand and send to him by fax. Among the Fijian Ahmadis I interacted with, meeting the Khalifa in person had a lasting impact. Many expressed that regularly corresponding with him, weekly or monthly, for spiritual guidance, prayer requests, or simply maintaining a connection, was essential to their emotional well-being. Despite the Khalifa holding the highest spiritual and administrative power within the Jama'at, these interactions positioned him almost as a cherished family elder, to whom Fijian Ahmadis write anytime they wish. The practice of Fijian Ahmadis' hand-writing letters to their Khalifa, together with his in-person visits to their geographically distant country, which facilitates planned but also spontaneous face-to-face encounters, strengthens their attachment to him.

In maintaining influence on Ahmadis across distances, the Khalifa also uses Ahmadiyya satellite television - MTA and the community's YouTube channels to broadcast his Friday Sermons or the online *Bai'at* ceremony (discussed later in this chapter). Meanwhile, rather than interacting with individual members through online or digital communication, the Khalifa relies on one-on-one meetings and members' letters. According to the Khalifa's guidance, as Fijian Ahmadis shared with me, they should ideally send their letters to him via fax or post instead of email, demonstrating the preference for traditional communication.

In this section, I examine how Fijian Ahmadis cultivate their relationship with the Khalifa through direct personal encounters and letters, which deepen their emotional closeness to him and reinforce the Khalifa's influence within the Jama'at. As a result, Fijian Ahmadis perceive the Khalifa as both a religious leader and a caring elder, merging spiritual and moral authority with aspects of kinship. I argue that these intimate, heartfelt bonding practices also reveal the Fijian Ahmadis' profound reliance on the Khalifa as a mediator of divine guidance and a source of reassurance. This dynamic demonstrates that orthodoxy and authority within the Ahmadiyya Jama'at are upheld not solely through doctrine but through embodied, affective experiences that construct the Khalifa as a symbol of a divinely guided paternal figure.

### Sacred Encounters with the Khalifa

Many Fijian Ahmadis recounted their memories of the fifth Khalifa's ten-day visit to Fiji in 2006. They remembered what he was curious about, his favourite dishes, or what he laughed at. Proudly, they spoke to me about how he stayed in their homes overnight or how he commented on the traditional low ceiling of the missionary house in Labasa, "*Huzoor smiled and said - It looks like local people made the house themselves*", disclosed Imam Tariq. Zakaria shared with me that the Khalifa performed *nikah*, the traditional Islamic ceremony at his wedding, "*That was truly special... it was an honour having Huzoor there*", and Duryaab recalled how Khalifa modestly sat on the ground alongside the Ahmadi women who prepared his meal, personally handing out curry and rotis to each of them, "*I said Bismillah... and I gave it to my daughter. She was very small then. Then we both ate it and got a blessing from Huzoor*". Similarly, many Fijian Jama'at members disclosed to me a widely held belief among them that if the Khalifa dipped his finger into a jar of honey, those who tasted it would receive blessings. Imam Naeem shared with me how he was particularly struck by the Khalifa's empathy and attentiveness during a tsunami warning for Taveuni Island, which coincided with his visit to Fiji in 2006. Despite his obligations in Nadi, the Khalifa allegedly remained deeply concerned about the situation at Taveuni Island, where the imam's family resided back then and personally urged Imam Naeem to repeatedly phone his family and check on their safety, a gesture that left a lasting impression on him.

Sanam, whom I interviewed at her rental student flat in Suva, which she occupied with her sister, was in her final year at the University. The ground-floor apartment of those two women was secured with two gates and two locks and featured rose-patterned bed sheets and artificial flowers meticulously arranged and stuck on the wall above the bed in the shape of a big heart. Sanam recalled meeting the fifth Khalifa in Fiji when she was just five and how he conducted her *Amin* ceremony, which marks a child's first completion of reading the Qur'an. She reached for her copy of the Qur'an to show me the Khalifa's signature with the date.

The Khalifa's perceived genuine warmth deeply resonated with Fijian Ahmadis, strengthening their emotional bond with him. Amat blushed when her husband encouraged her to share with me how the Khalifa was impressed by her baking skills, "*I made one sweet,*

*laddu*<sup>24</sup>, and Huzoor Sahib's bibi (wife) told us that a whole night, Huzoor was just moving around the house picking the laddu". Amat's reaction conveyed fulfilment at being acknowledged by the Khalifa, highlighting the personal connections Fijian Ahmadis enjoyed in interacting with their leader. To Rahat, the visit of the previous fourth Khalifa to Fiji in the 1980s was also a cherished, meaningful experience. The Khalifa stayed at his father's house for a week, which was a great honour for the family. However, Rahat and his wife Nida appeared to treasure the most when the Khalifa held their then-one-year-old son in his lap. They disclosed to me their conviction that this moment crucially impacted their son's future decision to become an Ahmadiyya missionary, *"This was one of the greatest blessings that was given by Huzoor upon our son, who became a murrabi (imam) as we are witnessing today"*.

Whereas Fijian Ahmadis revere the Khalifa, who celebrates his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2025, as the spiritual authority, they also see him as a beloved, elderly figure. Their narratives about his sweet tooth and unhealthy night-eating habits revealed his relatable human nature, portraying him, apart from a divinely connected leader, like a vulnerable grandpa they worried about. Hina expressed how the Khalifa's fragility occasionally triggered overwhelming feelings for her, *"I have these intrusive thoughts now looking at his old age... Sometimes I will just start crying. What if... naturally, he passes away?"*. She shared what was to her a particularly distressing moment from two years ago during Ramadan when the Fijian Ahmadis learnt that the Khalifa got injured and was unable to deliver his usual live Friday sermon, *"I remember I was just crying because we didn't know how hurt he was!"*.

Another example of the deeply personal relationship between Fijian Ahmadis and the Khalifa was their commitment to travel to see him in person, many flying from Fiji to Australia or New Zealand while he was there. In 2017, 13 Fijian Ahmadis from Nadi applied for UK visas to attend a major community annual event, Jalsa Salana, near London (discussed further in this chapter). Although only Nasreen's younger son, at that time teenage Musawat, received the UK visa from those 13 Fijian Jama'at members who applied, unfazed, he travelled to London alone. During another year, Musawat travelled together with his parents to meet the Khalifa in Australia and told me how touched he was by his approachable demeanour, *"I was surprised that Huzoor, being the head of so many millions of Ahmadis around the world, stood*

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<sup>24</sup> Popular Indian subcontinent sweet, usually made from flour, sugar, ghee and nuts.

*up and walked towards the door to meet us... that was a very moving experience. He met us very lovingly and asked about all the family members and the Fiji Jama'at".*

Despite understanding that the Khalifa maintained close connections with purportedly millions of Ahmadis, many Fijian Ahmadis, due to their regular interactions with him, were confident that the Khalifa knew them personally. Imran disclosed his conviction that during his meeting with the Khalifa in Fiji in 2006, the Khalifa recognised and remembered his family from a prior encounter in Australia, *"He could sort of figure out who we are... He has asked about our daughters. I said they were all married to Ahmadis, and he was very happy"*. This sense of personal recognition by the Khalifa seemed to make Imran feel valued and seen. Consequently, experiencing direct acknowledgement from the Khalifa appeared to reinforce Fijian Ahmadis' emotional and spiritual affiliation with his leadership and their individual significance within the Jama'at.

Fijian Ahmadis also shared how, during their direct interactions with the Khalifa, he instructed them on what they perceived as the correct guidance, such as the importance of obeying authorities. Tahir, who used to drive a truck for a local hardware shop, confessed that because his employer refused to grant him a day off during Khalifa's visit to Nadi, he decided to fake a sick leave to meet him. He explained to me that it was the first time he anticipated meeting the Khalifa in person, and he was too excited to give up on the opportunity, *"Huzoor asked me... What did you tell your boss?! Are you lying?! What is your sickness?... And then he said to me - Make sure to always give the right answer to your boss. If he allows you, it is good for you; if he doesn't allow you, it is also good for you"*. The Khalifa offered Tahir easily understood guidance, encouraging truthful behaviour, respect for authority, and submission to the divine will. By interacting with his followers in a familiar and approachable manner, the Khalifa fosters in-person emotional bonds with them, building trust and a sense of inclusion by mitigating feelings of anonymity. In parallel, these direct interactions allow Fijian Ahmadis to witness a demonstration of the Khalifa's character, strengthening their confidence and reliance on his directives and consolidating his authority within the Jama'at.

Fijian Ahmadis often romanticised the Khalifa, expressing their perceptions of him through personal anecdotes that, according to them, demonstrated his sacred insights - a trait expected from a leader considered to be divinely connected. For example, Farkhanda stated that the Khalifa had the ability to discern character at a glance, *"When Huzoor sees a person, he can read the person's quality"*. Further, she shared an instance from her meeting with the

Khalifa in Nadi, where he correctly guessed her fondness for chocolate - a detail she found unusually accurate and which, to her, affirmed his extraordinary skills, *"Huzoor, he said - I am very fond eater of chocolate, and he quickly added - Does he (her husband) eat chocolate, or do you like eating chocolate?... I was like... how does he know that I am fond of chocolate?!"*. Similarly, Imam Tariq, who has served as a missionary at Taveuni Island and Vanua Levu since 1997, recounted his astonishment during a meeting with the Khalifa in London, at which the Khalifa allegedly selected the perfect ring size for the imam's wife, *"He took one, but then he said - No, this is too loose... I was sooo surprised!! Huzoor was sitting in England, and my wife was in Labasa!... Then he chose a second ring and said - This will be fine. I was sooo surprised!"*. Rather than attributing their experiences to a common-sense assumption, Imam Tariq and Farkhanda disclosed their conviction in the Khalifa's miraculous capabilities.

These personal, enthusiastic portrayals of the Khalifa were united in their description of his remarkable competencies or intuition. Émile Durkheim (1912) argued that religious beliefs and practices are fundamentally collective and reflect the structures of society and the shared consciousness of its members. Accordingly, Durkheim suggested that religious practices embody collective realities and rituals that emerge within assembled groups to excite, sustain, or recreate specific mental states. While Fijian Ahmadis' idealised views of the Khalifa can be understood as a product of cultivated community practice, their perceptions may also stem from the collective unconscious through the psychological mechanism of projection.

Projection, for instance, occurs when individuals attribute archetypal images from the collective unconscious onto leaders, transforming them into symbolic figures, as argued by psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1969). In this process, Jung (1969) suggested that individuals project their unacknowledged traits onto others, particularly those they admire or worship, which can lead to the collective idealisation of religious leaders and prophets as embodiments of perfection and divine attributes. As a result, projections can facilitate bonding by intimately tying followers with spiritual leaders by attributing positive qualities to them. However, projections can also misinterpret reality and represent potential obstacles to believers' more objective perceptions of spiritual leaders' guidance. Often, entire societies project archetypal images onto leaders, viewing them not merely as individuals but as manifestations of

unconscious collective symbols fuelled by communal needs, hopes, aspirations, and even fears (Jung, 1969; von Franz, 1980).<sup>25</sup>

Many Fijian Ahmadis I spoke with appeared to project their need for guidance, direction, stability and protection onto the Khalifa; as exemplified by Nazir, who disclosed that the Khalifa showed him “*the light and the way forward*”, by Abida, who conveyed her belief, that “*Huzoor is the person God sent to guide and save us (Ahmadis)*”, or by Musawat, who shared that the Khalifa represented “*our centre point that connects us with God*”. Furthermore, Nida revealed a serious challenge in sustaining spiritual practices independently of the Khalifa’s leadership, “*So if we don’t have Huzoor, how can we follow our religion?*”. The Fijian Ahmadis’ reverence for their Khalifa reflects their tendency to project onto him abilities that embody and fulfil their objectives of self-assurance, unmistakable religious practice and connection to the divine. By externalising these attributes onto the Khalifa instead of recognising them as their own capabilities, some Fijian Ahmadis reinforce their reliance on his leadership. Meanwhile, the strong dependency on the Khalifa’s mediated guidance for access to divine wisdom may distinguish Fijian Ahmadis’ practice from that of some Muslims.<sup>26</sup> Although Fijian Ahmadis viewed the Khalifa as a channel to the divine, they wished to plainly distinguish that he was not God. Many Fijian Ahmadis emphasised to me that to them, the Khalifa was a “*Second to God*” or “*The person nearest to God*”. As discussed in Chapter 4, associating anyone with God would constitute a form of *shirk* - one of the gravest sins in Islam.

Personal encounters with the Khalifa have a profound impact on Fijian Ahmadis, fostering emotional bonds through his perceived attentiveness to their lives and making them feel individually seen, valued and appreciated. During these direct personal interactions, Fijian Ahmadis view the Khalifa’s responsiveness, gestures, and everyday actions as signs of divine blessing, which deepens their faith in his leadership and reinforces an idealised image of him. Such idealisation may stem from a shared desire for confident spiritual direction and closeness to the divine - qualities that some Fijian Ahmadis attribute almost exclusively to the

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<sup>25</sup> Marie-Louise von Franz (1980) argued, that during a crisis following World War I, Germans projected the image of a hero-saviour onto Hitler. Tragically, this collective longing for a guiding figure was directed at an individual with psychopathic tendencies, leading to dire consequences. Yet, von Franz (1980) suggested, that if this collective desire for salvation had been projected onto someone morally sound and capable, it might have facilitated a path to recovery.

<sup>26</sup> For example, Sufism accentuates a direct personal relationship with God. While Sufi spiritual masters (*shaykhs*) offer guidance, practices such as chanting and dance are designed to elevate believers to an immediate divine experience, aiming at believers’ union with God without relying on intermediaries (Michon, 2013). Although the Sufi spiritual experience is often embodied through collective rituals, it remains deeply personal (Michon, 2013).

Khalifa, instead of recognising and developing them within themselves. This, in turn, may limit more reflective or critical engagement with the Khalifa's role and leadership.

### **Preference for Incontestable Leader**

The Khalifa emphasises submission to his leadership, shaping how Jama'at members view and respond to his authority. On its website, the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at rejects the notion of the Khalifa's absolutistic governance, arguing that if any member chooses not to align with the Khalifa's oath and its obligatory conditions, they can always leave. As I outline in Chapters 2 and 3, this may be, however, more complicated in practice. Fijian Ahmadis, whom I spent time with, revealed strong support for the Khalifa's supreme spiritual and administrative power. As Nida expressed, having a single leader made her feel protected, *"We stand with one leader only, and we follow his instructions. Connecting straight with Huzoor, I feel very safe"*. Her statement reflects the broader inclination toward hierarchical leadership in some Muslim communities, which prioritise the stability of a single leader over unpredictability and competition, often related to democratic power (Ahmed, 2002).<sup>27</sup> Fijian Ahmadis with whom I talk expressed trust and loyalty in the Khalifa's leadership, describing it as both personally reassuring for their spiritual fulfilment and essential for maintaining harmony within the Jama'at. As one member shared with me, *"Khalifa is a source of guidance, a source of happiness, a source of togetherness"*, emphasising his role as comforting and communally anchoring.

Despite occasional disagreements over organisational and communication matters among Fijian Ahmadis, the Khalifa represented a unifying element. Rahat recalled how *"the power of the khilafat brought all (Fijian Ahmadis) together"* when he disclosed challenges in building the satellite dish in Fiji in 1995 to follow the newly established Ahmadiyya television MTA. Rahat shared with me how around twenty Fijian Jama'at members worked together and locally fabricated the first five-meter radius satellite they installed at the Aqsa Mosque in Nadi, according to the blueprints from Pakistan, *"I still recall in July that was the first Jalsa Salana in the UK... we all went... ladies, children, men... we all joined in the library, and observed the first khutbah directly from Huzoor"*. This example illustrates how the Khalifa's centralised leadership aligns with and supports the collectivist orientation of Fijian Ahmadis,

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<sup>27</sup> Pakistani social anthropologist Akbar Ahmed (2002, p. 24) discussed the historical role of the Prophet Muhammad and the "rightly guided caliphs", who, seen as moral exemplars, served as foundational models for centralised Islamic governance and the ideal of charismatic hierarchical leadership in the Arab world, Iran and South Asia.

a characteristic shared across many Muslim societies (Haniffa, 2008; Kandiyoti, 1991; Abu-Lughod, 2016; Meer, 2008; Cheng, 2015; Jouili, 2011).

Throughout my research, I did not encounter a single instance of criticism directed toward the Khalifa. Among the Fijian Ahmadis I have interacted with, the notion that the Khalifa could be wrong was absent, and his authority was regarded as unquestionably infallible. After seeing circulars from the London headquarters printed out and displayed on a board inside the Aqsa Mosque in Nadi, emphasising that Ahmadis must follow the Khalifa's directives "with the spirit of 'we hear and we obey'", I asked some Fijian Ahmadis if they would ever disobey the Khalifa if they disagreed with him. Many of them laughed at my question, dismissing the idea entirely and asserting that neither disagreement nor disobedience was conceivable. Kiran, who recently graduated from the University of South Pacific in Suva with a degree in accounting and information systems, shared her categorical submission to the Khalifa's commands, "*Huzoor, he is our leader, and we do as he says*". Similarly, Bilal assured me that if the Khalifa asked him "*anything at all... I cannot say no. That much respect I have for my Huzoor*". Therefore, within the Fijian Jama'at, failing to follow the Khalifa's directives was not perceived as a challenge to his authority but as an act of disrespect and personal shortcoming.

Like all regular members, the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's regional leadership is equally expected to conform to the Khalifa's definite rulings. Missionaries (imams), referred to as *murrabi* or *maulana*, who trained for seven years at Ahmadiyya Universities (*Jaami'ah*) in Islamic theology, history, jurisprudence, comparative religion, Arabic, Urdu, English, Persian, and Dialectics, are posted and rotated at their missions, upon the Khalifa's orders. Like the Ahmadiyya executive office bearers (discussed in Chapter 3), missionaries also rely on the Khalifa's permission to leave their post for holidays or personal matters. During my stay in Fiji, Nasreen, the president of *Lajna Ima'illah*, the Jama'at's national women's organisation, waited for Khalifa's confirmation to visit relatives in Australia before buying the air tickets. After receiving his consent to travel, she shared with me, with a sense of privilege and relief, that she would feel protected by the Khalifa's prayers throughout the trip, "*Every single thing I do, every step I have to take, I consult with Huzoor*". The absoluteness of Nasreen's account underscores her perception of security that comes from seeking the Khalifa's continuous guidance. Additionally, her desire to align every aspect of her life with the Khalifa's directives reflects the broader Fijian Ahmadis' understanding of the Khalifa as an everyday spiritual

leader. Nasreen disclosed that being under such a sense of controlled direction brings her deep satisfaction. Similarly, many Fijian Ahmadis I met expressed comfort in relying on the Khalifa's authoritative instructions through his letters and broadcast sermons, citing the benefit of clarity in guidance, which helped them to make choices and relieved the stress of taking full responsibility for decision-making on matters in their lives.

By embracing the Khalifa's unchallenged role in shaping religious doctrine and daily affairs, Fijian Ahmadis demonstrate a form of loyalty that differs from how some Muslims relate to their leaders. Anthropologist Michael Lambek (1990) observed that while everyday Islamic practice among Malagasy-speaking villagers in Mayotte, in the Comoro Islands, offers a shared framework of knowledge, through sacred texts of the Qur'an and Hadith, the authority to interpret and implement this knowledge in daily life remains upon the local leaders, i.e., *fundis* who engage with those texts. Although the sacred texts are considered incontestable in their authority, they become socially relevant only when articulated and interpreted by *fundis*. Therefore, Lambek (1990) argued that a leader's authority could be contested. In contrast, I have not observed Fijian Ahmadis challenging the Khalifa's authority in matters of doctrinal interpretation.

Like Lambek (1990), anthropologist Charles Hirschkind (2001a), who studied the religious practice of Egyptian Muslims in Cairo listening to tape-recorded sermons, highlighted the significance of participation and debates within Islam's communities, which enable Muslims, to a certain extent, to take an active part and influence the religious discourse, thus ensuring its greater diversity and flexibility. Naturally, this may and often becomes challenging when there are more leaders with diverse understandings, and when there are cultural contexts accepting of debate. For instance, Lambek (1990) revealed a tension between personal and textual authority in a dispute over Friday prayers, regarding whether to follow textual instructions or adhere to the interpretations by local *fundis*. In comparison, the Fijian Ahmadis I spoke with consistently praised the Khalifa's absolute authority. Furthermore, they shared their belief that the Khalifa's dominant power, free from diverse and conflicting perspectives, advantaged them over other faith groups, particularly Muslims, whom they perceived as disoriented due to the alleged confusion caused by pluralistic interpretations. As expressed by Hina, *"When you look at other sects, they all have different leaders; even in one country, one city... and sometimes these leaders contradict each other. But for me, I know that there is only one person that I can rely on, and I am loyal to that"*

*one person*". Likewise, many Fijian Ahmadis viewed the Khalifa as a benevolent sovereign whose governance they believed served their ultimate spiritual, personal and communal well-being.

For many Fijian Ahmadis, the Khalifa's undisputable authority was perceived as highly beneficial for providing consistent and uninterrupted spiritual and moral directives. Their views also demonstrated their inclination toward collectivism and centralised, hierarchical leadership, with many prioritising uniformity and cohesion under a singular Khalifa's governance, which they believe strengthens their communal identity and structure.

### **Corresponding with the Khalifa**

For Fijian Ahmadis, connecting with the Khalifa frequently involves sitting alone to write him a letter, which they then send via fax, as it takes only a few seconds to reach from the Pacific to London. Some write to him weekly or monthly, and others just on special occasions. Although the Khalifa reportedly receives thousands of letters daily from Ahmadis worldwide, Fijian Ahmadis expressed their firm conviction that he personally reads and responds to each one. As Nazir assured me, *"It is so fortunate that Huzoor does reply personally, through letters"*. When Fijian Ahmadis receive letters from the Khalifa, typically sent by post but also by fax or email, they are commonly typed but often include his handwritten signature, sometimes a short personal note. The value of this private exchange appears to be experienced more intensely by the fact that the Fijian Ahmadis' letters are often entirely written by hand. According to Sonja Neef (2012), who studied handwriting in the digital era, for the creator and the sender of the letter, the act of handwriting can be a reflective and meditative process, allowing for a more intimate expression of sincere thoughts and feelings. This description aptly reflects the practice among Fijian Ahmadis, for whom writing to the Khalifa evokes a sense of meaningful personal connection and often serves as an expression of their emotions.

In contrast to traditional communication methods, social media has introduced new modes of engagement that have reshaped interactions between Muslim preachers and their followers, providing preachers with broader outreach among their audiences. Anthropologist Martin Slama (2017), who researched exchanges between imams and everyday Muslims in Indonesia, revealed believers' desire for more dynamic online guidance. He further argued that this demand for instant online responses shifts and challenges conventional Islamic

leadership, which often relies on hierarchical, face-to-face exchanges. Slama (2017) documented how utilising social media to engage with believers increased Indonesian preachers' capacity to provide immediate, accessible, personalised advice and emotional support, enabling them to develop closer relationships with their followers. By leveraging digital platforms' facilitation of real-time experiences and strategically managing online presence through timely responses, Indonesian Islamic leaders developed intimacy with believers and enhanced their own charisma and authority (Slama, 2017).

Social media engagement through direct messaging and near-instant responses fosters a "sense of copresence" with the preacher (Slama, 2017, p. 101). This contrasts with the Fijian Ahmadi's handwriting letters to the Khalifa, which typically involve a substantial wait for the Khalifa's response (as explored further, Fijian Ahmadi's also have alternative means to cultivate a sense of immediate connection with him). Meanwhile, whereas believers using social media often seek swift, pragmatic advice on contemporary issues and appreciate the increased accessibility of preachers (Slama, 2017), these interactions lack the ritualistic intimacy and tangible engagement inherent in the physical process of writing, sending, and receiving letters. Additionally, through handwritten correspondence, Fijian Ahmadi's engage with the Khalifa's authority much like seeking paternal guidance, requesting prayers and blessings within a structured exchange. Apart from providing spiritual counsel, this practice also nurtures a more symbolic relational bond, akin to familial interactions where intimate exchanges are valued for their role in "merely" maintaining connection, not just serving immediate practical purposes. Despite the Khalifa's global leadership, the Fijian Ahmadi's letter-writing cultivates a sense of exclusivity and privilege in personal attachment grounded in their substantial effort and time investment. By contrast, religious leaders who connect with a broader audience online increase their accessibility but may, comparatively, diminish the depth and distinctiveness of individual interactions.

Commonly, Fijian Ahmadi students sought Khalifa's advice about choosing subjects at the university or their future profession. Zahra shared with me how the Khalifa praised her decision to pursue science when she wrote to him about considering becoming a dentist. Farah, one of the university graduates, relayed how, during annual examinations, she asked for the Khalifa's prayers before each exam for four consecutive days, *"I had a layout of this letter all set, and every day, I would change the name of the subject of the exam that I was sitting for, and I would send the letter to him before. I just dropped a fax"*. When her excellent

results arrived, Farah promptly informed the Khalifa of the good news through another letter faxed to him. This illustrates how the letters transmitted by fax make the Khalifa a near presence in Fijian Ahmadis' everyday lives, nurturing a sense of instantaneous closeness similar to digital communication.

The intimacy is further evident in the fact that many Fijian Ahmadis revealed they begin their letters by addressing the Khalifa - *Abba Huzoor...* (Father). Moreover, in their letters, many also just reciprocated their love and care to their Khalifa. Umair, who was preparing for a Bachelor of Science in Agriculture next year as he was planning to become a farmer, reassured me that sending his well-wishes to the Khalifa was *"something very normal"* for him; *"Huzoor is the most important person in our Jama'at. We need him to be there... Every night when I sleep, I know that there is someone who's going to pray for me"*. Like some other Fijian Ahmadis that I spoke with, Umair expressed a sense of comfort and determination in his habit of maintaining a regular, weekly connection with the Khalifa.

Many Fijian Ahmadis shared with me that writing to the Khalifa brought them emotional relief. Amat disclosed feeling inner peace whenever her family wrote to the Khalifa, *"When we built our house, we wrote to Huzoor; when our daughters were getting married, we wrote to Huzoor... As soon as we write, we feel like we have done something good"*. Notably, writing itself was seen as spiritually significant, offering emotional reassurance before even receiving a response. In many cases, it appeared that it was not the Khalifa's reply to the letters but primarily an act of actually writing to him that many Fijian Ahmadis said helped them attain a degree of inner clarity and resolution in case of personal difficulties. Imam Asad explained to me, *"As soon as I write a letter to Huzoor, I feel that my problem is already solved"*. A similar experience was shared by Imran, who used to oversee finances for five-star hotel resorts on Denarau Island and claimed to have exposed a major theft involving several workers empowered by local unions. Under enormous stress, he described how he regained strength by writing to the Khalifa, *"I sat down and wrote him every detail of what was happening. And by the time I finished writing that letter, I knew I was going to win this battle. That much confidence we have in our Huzoor. As soon as you write a letter, you get the feeling that the problem will be gone"*. Imran's statement indicates that the process of writing to the Khalifa is not only a form of communication but a quiet, almost meditative practice that may provide a sense of balance and mental rest. Imran's description is consistent with psychological research (Adams, 1999; Den Elzen & Lengelle, 2023; Lepore & Smyth, 2002),

which confirms that some writing practices, particularly types of creative writing, can help individuals externalise their emotions through language and provide a feeling of containment and relief during emotionally intense experiences.

However, the form of the letters that Fijian Ahmadis write to the Khalifa substantially differs from expressive private writing formats. As Professor of Sociology Ken Plummer (2001, p. 54) maintained, “Every letter speaks not just of the writer’s world, but also of the writer’s perceptions of the recipient. The kind of story told shifts with the person who will read it”. Consequently, for Fijian Ahmadis, the content and tone of their letters are likely shaped by their perception of the Khalifa as a revered spiritual guide, and their writing is presumably influenced by their expectations of his response. As described below, many Fijian Ahmadis confirmed to me how their letters to the Khalifa often reflected personal struggles or stories of success, expecting his approval or encouragement. Further, some Fijian Ahmadi women told me that, because they weren’t confident in their English writing and didn’t want to feel embarrassed, they would ask their husbands to write to Huzoor on their behalf if they wished to ask for his prayers or convey a message. Therefore, to Fijian Ahmadis, writing to the Khalifa is primarily not about creative endeavours but about seeking help and a spiritual and relational expression, reaffirming their bond with their leader and a sense of belonging to the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at.

There seemed to be only few subjects that Fijian Ahmadis were hesitant to share with the Khalifa. Farkhanda told me that she entrusted the Khalifa with her most personal secrets, *“I don’t share my problems with anybody. The only one with whom I share my problems is either Allah or Huzoor”*. Some Fijian Ahmadis disclosed that they wrote to the Khalifa about stressful decisions related to their business; others who struggled financially asked his permission to reduce obligatory monthly community fees, *chanda* (discussed in Chapter 3). Khan’s family in Nadi immediately informed him when their house partially burned down just before Fiji introduced the COVID-19 lockdowns and told me that they received a swift response from the Khalifa, inquiring if everyone was alright. Some Fijian Ahmadis disclosed to me that they reached out to the Khalifa with their anxieties about the newly elected Fijian government in 2022 (explored in Chapter 2), and one member sought the Khalifa’s insight on the meaning of his dream when he was losing hope endlessly (and illegally) waiting for PR in Australia. Most Fijian Ahmadis thus seemed assured in confiding their most personal concerns to the Khalifa in their letters.

One of the most common reasons Fijian Ahmadis reached out to the Khalifa was due to health-related concerns - either their own or those of family members - trusting that the Khalifa's advice and prayers would aid in healing. Kiran revealed that she was born eight years into her parents' marriage, following several miscarriages that her mother suffered. After her mother consulted the fourth Khalifa, who recommended a homoeopathic treatment, implementing his suggestion, she successfully conceived and had a daughter. Stories like this strengthened the devotion and trust of Fijian Ahmadis to the Khalifa's guidance; as for Kiran's family, this event was understood to be near-miraculous and served as a testament to the Khalifa's divinely approved leadership. Because of the Khalifa's endorsement, Ahmadis in Fiji commonly used homoeopathy as a complementary treatment. Hanya told me, "*Our Huzoor Saab mentioned that homoeopathy medicine is a big blessing for us*", and like many other Fijian Ahmadi women, she confirmed that she had used homoeopathy to ease her childbirth.<sup>28</sup>

While I was listening to Fijian Ahmadis relating to the Khalifa, sometimes they reminded me of children looking for reassurance from a father figure. When I conveyed this impression of a kinship dynamic to Nasreen, in whose family's house I lived, she expressed that she regarded such portrayal as accurate and welcomed it as gratifying. As per Talal Asad (2003), both Islamic and Christian traditions link authority to moral discipline, which is often mediated through family-like relationships with religious figures. Despite anthropologists' lack of agreement on the precise definition of the multifaceted, unstructured concept of kinship (Barnard & Spencer, 2009), the association between kinship, religious identity and social unity has been well-documented (Asad, 2003; McKinnon et al., 2013). Fijian Ahmadis' referring to the Khalifa "Abba" (Father) in letters, seeking his prayers and spiritual advice when they feel vulnerable, and voicing concern for his well-being shows a deeply personal and familial bond. Furthermore, Fijian Ahmadis' expressing their conviction that the Khalifa is intimately aware of their personal circumstances and histories blurs the line between his religious authority and close family interactions, binding Fijian Ahmadis to him emotionally and spiritually.

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<sup>28</sup> Imam Naeem from the Aqsa Mosque in Nadi shared, how he learned homoeopathy through the fourth Khalifa's lectures and his books. Since the fourth Khalifa had a keen interest in homeopathy, he actively promoted its practice within the Jama'at, providing education through his writings and even preparing a homoeopathic kit designed to treat 50 different sicknesses with specific remedies.

Narratives highlighting the Khalifa's deep personal concern for Ahmadis, nurtured through the exchange of letters, underscore the belief in the Khalifa's compassionate leadership among Fijian Ahmadis. Imam Naeem recounted to me a story from the times of the second Khalifa, allegedly witnessed and described by his private secretary and passed down among Ahmadis since then. One night, around midnight, a security guard urgently informed the secretary that the Khalifa was seen walking in the yard outside his house, appearing extremely troubled. The secretary approached the Khalifa, who confided to him that he had developed a routine of reading letters from his followers every night before sleep. Among these, one mother supposedly kept writing to the Khalifa every day about her sick son. However, on that particular night, the mother's letter had not arrived, and the absence of her correspondence concerned the Khalifa, who worried about what had happened to the son. To Fijian Ahmadis, such stories underlined the lengths to which their Khalifa goes to remain personally involved in their lives, even to the extent of losing sleep over the well-being of a single family.

In the quiet countryside near the Ahmadiyya Mahmood mosque in Maro, Samina and I sat under the now-mature tree planted by the fifth Khalifa during his visit here in 2006, which serves as a lasting visual reminder of the Khalifa's care for Fijian Ahmadis despite their remote location. Samina told me she had written to the Khalifa around three months ago, requesting a reduction in her monthly *chanda* payments (discussed in Chapter 3) due to her family's financial difficulties. When I asked how the Khalifa responded to her plea, she said she was still awaiting his response. Despite that, she smiled and added, "*We write to Huzoor for our prayers, and we know his prayers are always there for us*".

For Fijian Ahmadis, the Khalifa represents someone they trust with deeply personal aspects of their lives, typically shared only within close family circles. They believe he is constantly available to listen and offer the best guidance for them, making him a steady and reassuring presence in their lives. Fijian Ahmadis' personal exchanges with the Khalifa complement theoretical discussions on the intersection of religious authority and emotional intimacy within global religious communities. The devotional practice of writing handwritten letters to the Khalifa among Fijian Ahmadis cultivates a form of intense affective proximity that transcends physical distance. As the Khalifa responds by writing back, these intimate, personal and reciprocal exchanges between the community's supreme spiritual leader and

regular followers fortify the Khalifa's authority within the Jama'at while deepening members' emotional bonds to him.

### **The Khalifa's Orthodoxy**

As per my observations, the Fijian Ahmadis' reliance on the Khalifa's guidance tended to reduce their integration of Fijian cultural influences. Residing in London and issuing directions to Ahmadis worldwide, the fifth Khalifa maintains members' focus on uniform adherence to Jama'at norms and traditional values, while demanding obedience. Whereas this helps foster a global community cohesion, it can also draw Fijian Ahmadis' attention away from their immediate local realities.

Several scholars of Islam concur that religious orthodoxy in Islam is not static but reflects both power dynamics and evolving interpretations within communities (Asad, 2003; Soares, 2020). Anthropologist of religion Talal Asad (2003) argued that Muslims often conceptualised the correct practice in Islam through a discursive tradition that aims to guide followers on the proper religious practice and is traditionally linked to Islam's foundational texts. However, Asad (2003) suggested that forms of correct religious performance are meaningfully influenced by ongoing discussions regarding the ideal behaviours and expectations of the believers. Similarly, according to the Professor of the Anthropology of Islam Benjamin Soares (2020), orthodoxy in Islam is dynamic and contested. Rather than simply complying with established doctrines, it is lived and includes theological, legal and ethical dialogues about what is considered correct practice within a specific community. Nonetheless, despite its negotiable nature, Soares (2020) highlighted that Islam's orthodoxy inherently involves a relationship of power dynamics at its core.

The Ahmadiyya orthodoxy, represented by the Khalifa, appears to incorporate some degree of negotiability, adapting to shifting external perspectives and demands. At the same time, it demonstrates a substantial capacity to remain static and, as proposed by Soares (2020), dependent on the Khalifa's absolute command. A certain extent of the evolving nature of the global Jama'at norms might be exemplified by the differing advice given by the fourth Khalifa to Babar and the fifth Khalifa to Susana, despite their similar circumstances - the children of both Babar and Susana decided to marry non-Ahmadi Fijians. Whereas Babar shared with me that the fourth Khalifa reassured him that "*nothing prevents your children from getting married outside of our Jama'at*", Susana disclosed a contrasting reaction from

the fifth Khalifa regarding her daughter's marriage, "*The only advice Huzoor sent to us was to try and bring her back into the fold*". The differing responses of the two khalifs might have been shaped by some external - historical, and socio-political factors, as well as the internal aspect related to the varying strength of the Fijian Jama'at during their times (discussed in Chapter 2). Nevertheless, it might have also been linked to the nature of the marriages - while both of Babar's children married indigenous Fijians - iTaukei, Susana's daughter married a local Sunni Muslim. Although mixed marriages are generally viewed highly unfavourably among many Fijian Ahmadis (as discussed in Chapter 4), in cases where they proceed, the khalifs' differing advice might have, in fact, firmly aligned with the Jama'at's constant strategic preference for indigenous Fijians over local Muslims.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, in this context, the fifth Khalifa's advice to Susana's family reflected orthodoxy shaped by the power dynamics of spiritual authority, exerting pressure in terms of social control to conform to his expectations.

In a separate case, the fourth Khalifa's guidance showed openness to unconventional advice. One of the Fijian Jama'at members shared with me that challenging circumstances made him contemplate taking a mortgage, which is considered *haram* (forbidden) in Islam. The fourth Khalifa reportedly allowed him to proceed with it, provided that the mortgage was settled as soon as possible. Therefore, in some instances, the fourth Khalifa might have embraced a more flexible interpretation of orthodoxy than the fifth Khalifa, which would indeed confirm orthodoxy's shifting and interactive character, on which Asad (2003) and Soares (2020) agreed. These examples illustrate that Ahmadiyya orthodoxy, anchored in the Khalifa's authority, can shift in response to contextual factors. The differing advice from the fourth and fifth khalifs regarding interfaith marriages and the mortgage exemption reveals that Ahmadiyya orthodoxy can be adaptive in some instances while firmly enforcing communal boundaries in others. Meanwhile, although the Ahmadiyya orthodoxy is not a fixed doctrine, it nonetheless remains shaped by the Khalifa's unrestricted power.

The current fifth Khalifa's orthodoxy is known among Fijian Ahmadis for responding to the modern world by accentuating the Jama'at's values of self-restraint and patriarchal ideologies, including prohibitions. Azhar shared with me how, before "*Huzoor stopped us (Ahmadis) from debating on social media*", he had engaged in a Facebook debate on the

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<sup>29</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4, the fifth Khalifa supposedly advised the Fijian Ahmadis to focus on spreading Ahmadiyya faith specifically among the indigenous Fijians. Due to iTaukei's strong political positions in the country, such conversions would offer an opportunity to expand Ahmadiyya Jama'at's influence in Fiji. In contrast, marrying into local Muslim sects, may be seen less favourable.

existence of God, which he claimed had comments from around 2000 people in Fiji. In one of his recent YouTube videos, the fifth Khalifa responded to a question from a young Ahmadi man about how Ahmadis should interact with members of the LGBTQ+ community. The fifth Khalifa recommended showing kindness but advised against forming close friendships to avoid undue influence and suggested that Ahmadis should guide LGBTQ+ individuals to reformation, explaining to them that their orientation is incorrect and unnatural (Voice of Khilafat, 2021, “How should we treat people who are LGBTQ+?”).<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the fourth Khalifa compared homosexuality to destructive human impulses, equivalent to stealing or killing, asserting that such tendencies should be restrained, and suggesting that “out of suppression, the noble society is born” (Al Islam, 2025, “English Mulaqaat (Meeting) on April 19, 1998”).<sup>31</sup> The Ahmadiyya orthodoxy reflects consistent patterns of moral regulation on gender and sexual diversity.

Another example of the static and traditional nature of Ahmadiyya orthodoxy can be observed in the persistent condemnation of dancing as shameful and morally corrupt by both the fourth and fifth khalifs (as discussed in Chapter 2). Hence, despite occasional flexibility, cultural variations, and differences between the current Khalifa and his predecessor, Ahmadiyya orthodoxy is understood by its adherents to remain primarily constant, focusing on fostering a cohesive community rooted in traditional moral and social values.

I enquired among many Fijian Ahmadis whether they had tried drinking *kava* (also called *yagona* or *grog* in Fiji), a traditional Pacific Islands’ drink central to social ceremonies and known for its mild intoxicating effects. Some Fijian Ahmadis admitted that they used to drink it when they were young. However, they disclosed to me that in the 1990s, a fourth Khalifa issued a special circular for the Fijian Jama’at banning its members from *kava* drinking. Since then, most of them have claimed they have not consumed it. During my time in Fiji, I encountered only one Fijian Ahmadi, Javed, who admitted to me that he drank *kava* regularly despite being aware of the Khalifa’s ban. Based in Lautoka, Javed appeared relatively less assiduous in his religious adherence than many Ahmadis I met in Nadi. In the meantime, he also seemed more socially integrated with Fijians from other communities than most other Jama’at members in Nadi with whom I interacted. This suggests that strict adherence to the

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<sup>30</sup> The Khalifa’s vocal advocacy for compassion - while not fully embracing others as they are, is mirrored in Fijian Ahmadis’ outward self-presentation as tolerant, yet with a restricted acceptance of other faiths (as discussed in Chapter 4).

<sup>31</sup> According to some Fijian Ahmadis that I spoke to and in line with the fifth Khalifa’s view on gender minorities (Voice of Khilafat, 2021, “How should we treat people who are LGBTQ+?”), homosexuality can be treated and cured and is caused by external influences, including eating pork meat.

Ahmadiyya orthodoxy might curb Fijian Ahmadis' social integration and cultural assimilation within broader local society.

The Khalifa's directives that enforce uniform communal, spiritual and moral norms also appear to redirect some Fijian Ahmadis from personal choices. Cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1997) argued that cultural norms often promoted "false heroism", which he understood as a pursuit of actions that can lead to destructive behaviours as people strive to meet the standards imposed by their culture. Further, by clearly defining what was to be considered meaningful and valuable, societies directed individuals in ways that supported existing cultural norms (Becker, 1997). Becker's analysis oversimplifies the complex motivations behind human behaviour; however, his concept of false heroism does have some relevance in the context of the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at.

While many Fijian Ahmadis with whom I interacted showed a commitment to upholding strict adherence to the Khalifa's orthodoxy, I have also noted that many of them work to enforce compliance with the Khalifa's guidance among other members of the Jama'at. However, this firm observance may involve personal or relational costs. For example, if a parent like Susana discourages their child's relationship with a non-Ahmadi Fijian - not out of personal conviction, but to embody the ideal of Jama'at norms and despite the emotional distress this might cause within the family. Susana disclosed to me that she did not wish to influence her daughter's partner choice, *"She found someone that she could trust. Whatever religion he is, it is okay"*. Meanwhile, Susana's respect for her daughter's autonomy deemed her disobedient to the Khalifa, who advised her family to persuade the daughter to marry an Ahmadi. As I discuss in Chapter 4, Susana's stance on allowing her child to choose a partner from another Fijian community is a striking exception among Ahmadi parents in Nadi. I observed that Susana's deviation from the standards, requiring members to adhere to the Khalifa's rule, might have affected her standing among certain Ahmadis in Nadi, who seemed to view her as a "less good" member compared to themselves. Like Javed from Lautoka, whom I mentioned above, Susana's religious adherence and participation in Jama'at events were comparatively less rigorous than those of some other members.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, like Javed, Susana appeared to be more integrated with diverse Fijian communities than most Ahmadis in Nadi, whom I met. While both Javed and Susana pursue their own independent paths

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<sup>32</sup> While I met Susana regularly at the mosque during Friday prayers, I did not see her participating in other Jama'at activities. Nor did she observe *pardah* (discussed in Chapter 2) as strictly as many other Fijian Ahmadi women I interacted with.

alongside Jama'at norms, other Fijian Ahmadis might not have the capacity or readiness to do the same - in case they wished to prioritise their personal choices over the Khalifa's orthodoxy. Instead, they may be more inclined to conform to the community's expectations.

The Ahmadiyya orthodoxy exhibits both rigidity and some flexibility, adapting to external circumstances and leadership priorities while remaining deeply rooted in the Khalifa's authority. Despite not being entirely static, it primarily reinforces the community's boundaries and expectations, often limiting individual agency and deeper cultural integration. The Khalifa's influence on specific aspects of Fijian Ahmadis' spiritual and social practices is reflected in their abstention from drinking *kava*, avoidance of close friendships with individuals of certain minority gender identities, refraining from social media debates and participation in dance or sports gatherings, as well as their predominant reluctance to marry non-Ahmadi Fijians. As such, the Khalifa's orthodoxy effectively defines communal norms and directs followers' everyday choices and social boundaries in alignment with the ideals it seeks to uphold.

### **The Authority of Religious Symbols**

Despite Fijian Ahmadis' frequent assertions regarding the rationality of their faith (as discussed in Chapter 4), their perceptions of the Khalifa simultaneously revealed and expressed a form of attachment that appeared beyond rational comprehension. To Geertz (1971, p. 19), religion is better understood through the social and psychological influences of religious symbols such as beliefs, rites, or meaningful objects, which he termed "systems of significance". He argued that those symbols help devotees order their lives and guide their outward actions by creating and upholding inescapable and enduring systems of meaning and establishing concepts of existence that are believable and socially accessible (Geertz, 1971). Similarly, according to Huston Smith (1991), who conducted comparative studies of major religious traditions, religion, whether belief or ritual, begins with experience. Since these experiences are not always visible or easy to explain, Smith (1991) argued that the mind tries to make sense of the unseen by creating symbols to represent and give meaning to the transcendent realisation. However, due to symbols' intricate, wide, spontaneous and unconscious features, they can never be precisely defined or fully clarified (von Franz, 1980; Jung, 1969). As a result, symbols and religious concepts have the power to evoke profound

meaning and authority, influencing individual and collective experiences in deeply subjective ways.

The complex, mysterious and emotional implications of symbols in cultural, religious, and social contexts suggest that religious leaders and charismatic figures can develop into symbols themselves. Many Fijian Ahmadis shared that they regarded the Khalifa as their community's core spirit, a guardian, and a source of healing. Analytical psychologist Marie-Louise von Franz (1997) argued that leaders can embody an archetype, such as God-man, a Great Healer, or the Saviour, and thus become living symbols that personify the community's hopes and values. Further, the mythologist, Joseph Campbell (2008), noted that those who embodied heroic qualities of the human quest for transformation could become symbols of ideal aspirations; as to their followers, they represented the possibility of navigating life's difficulties and achieving a form of transcendence. Understood through such a framework, intertwining mystical, transcendence and longings, the Khalifa meets the emotional needs of his followers. Similarly, as the Qur'an can *speak* to devotees' hearts (Hirschkind, 2001a) or *barakat* (God's blessing) can be *sensed* (Geertz, 1971, p. 107), the Khalifa to many Fijian Ahmadis possesses specific associations similar to symbols' attributes as described by Jung (1969, p. 18), "beyond which conscious knowledge cannot pass, nor can one hope to define or explain it". While Fijian Ahmadis could articulate the significance of the Khalifa's role and meaning in their lives, they often struggled to explain their emotional connection to him or the overwhelming feelings they experienced regarding him. Many attributed the intense sacred experiences and emotions they sensed in his presence or when thinking about him to their belief in the Khalifa's divine connection.

Among Fijian Ahmadis, I observed recurring symbolic expressions of an indescribable bond with their spiritual leader, underscoring the Khalifa's influence in fostering their religious commitment. When Nasreen recounted her meeting with the Khalifa in Nadi in 2006, her voice suddenly softened as if she recalled a wonderful dream. When she shared with me how her family was deeply moved during their private five-minute interaction with the Khalifa, she smiled and gazed into the distance, telling me her connection to the Khalifa was "*impossible to express in words*". Later, she articulated her feelings by stating, "*Huzoor is dearer to me than anyone else in this world... even more than my children, my husband, my parents, my brother...*". Her statement revealed an unusual and, in her own words, inexplicable personal attachment to the Khalifa. To understand such mysterious subjective

affinity, Geertz (1971, p. 17) suggested that symbols and religious concepts “glow with their own authority” and are immediately and fundamentally persuasive to those who respond to them. Thus, due to the believers’ subjective perceptions, symbols are not only inherently ambiguous but may also have the power to carry their own justification.

The symbolic authority of the Khalifa among Fijian Ahmadis appeared to validate and reinforce their connection to him, independently of external validation. When recalling encounters with the Khalifa in conversations with me, many Fijian Ahmadis started to cry or kept talking with tears in their eyes despite their voices breaking down. Babar, born in Kiribati and initially baptised as a Roman Catholic, is one of the few anaesthesiologists in Fiji. He converted to Ahmadiyya Islam in 1971 while studying at the University of the South Pacific. Babar spoke calmly, but when he described to me what he perceived as a mysterious encounter with the fourth Khalifa during his visit to Fiji in 1983, he got overwhelmed by sudden emotions.<sup>33</sup> He shared how that particular meeting with the Khalifa left him struck by feeling an unfathomable close bond, *“When I met our Khalifa, there were many... sort of feelings... (paused and cried) ... I was so attracted to him. I accepted him as somebody that I seem to have known for very long. That’s why I don’t doubt him. I have full trust in him”*. This emotional attachment illustrated how, for many Fijian Ahmadis that I met, both interacting with the Khalifa in person and just recalling him or speaking about him seemed to trigger psychosomatic responses. Similarly, while Hirschkind (2001b) noted that the cultivation of Islamic moral personhood was linked to Egyptian Muslims’ emotional and sensory experiences, he observed that listening to sermons recorded on tape or engaging with leaders through various media platforms evoked spontaneous psychological and physiological reactions in them. To Fijian Ahmadis, the invisible spiritual experience of sensing their connection with the Khalifa, though externally unverifiable and immeasurable, carries profound personal relevance.

Interacting with the Khalifa in person and writing him handwritten letters holds significance that extends beyond the Fijian Ahmadis’ individual narratives. These practices serve as sacred encounters and tangible traces supporting the Khalifa’s charismatic authority within the global Jama’at. For Fijian Ahmadis, the physical and sensory experiences of closeness to their Khalifa exist alongside his traditional, top-down religious authority. As such, the Khalifa’s function is not merely representative and derived from the community’s

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<sup>33</sup> The fourth Khalifa Mirza Tahir Ahmad visited Fiji twice; in September 1983 and in July 1989 (*Ahmadiyyat in Fiji*, 2000).

religious doctrine and formal power structures; it is experientially transformative, mediating both spiritual transcendence and intimate personal bonds with his followers. In return, the Khalifa's role within the Jama'at is strengthened and made emotionally potent through nurturing kinship-like, trusted, affectionate relationships with Ahmadis worldwide. Consequently, Fijian Ahmadis do not see the Khalifa only as a religious ruler; due to the reciprocal interactions, they experience and appreciate him as a caring elder toward whom they uphold an almost filial sense of loyalty and devotion.

Furthermore, for Fijian Ahmadis, the Khalifa himself becomes a living symbol - a representation of divine connection, communal unity, and personal protection, onto whom they often project their needs for clear guidance and stability. The symbol of the Khalifa within the Jama'at is both divine and domestic, inducing sacred reverence and familiar affection - he is the man Fijian Ahmadis believe was chosen by God; meanwhile, he is their "Abba" (Father). This blending of spiritual leadership with aspects of kinship dynamics and symbolism helps explain the emotional intensity of Fijian Ahmadis' attachment and the reverence they express toward their Khalifa.

### III. SYMBOL OF A GLOBAL FAMILY

#### **Spiritual Unity through Televised Ritual**

The Khalifa's use of modern media, such as the community's own YouTube channels and the satellite television MTA - a free 24-hour international network run by the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at, providing its official perspectives on religious topics, serves as a critical tool for maintaining his influence and presence among Ahmadis dispersed worldwide.

In the last week of July 2023, from 9 p.m. onwards, Fijian Ahmadis and I were glued to the television screen, which was casting the YouTube live broadcast of Jalsa Salana - the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's annual congregation near London, in Alton, Hampshire, in the UK. At our home in Nadi, the television was usually off. Occasionally, Bilal, a former chef at the Sheraton hotel, and his wife, Nasreen, would stream YouTube videos of an Azerbaijani cook in the middle of charming Caucasian mountains roasting a whole bull, stewing lamb, grilling a goat filled with pilaf, or cooking beef ribs in a tandoor. However, this time, each evening, the television screen illuminated the room to cast the proceedings of the three-day Jalsa Salana that is attended by thousands of Ahmadis from the UK and from around the world (along with

some local non-Ahmadi guests) and serves as a defining expression of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's religious identity.

According to a scholar of Comparative Religion, Spencer Lavan (1974), Jalsa Salana, initially instituted by Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement, has, among Ahmadis globally, taken precedence over the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca - an obligation and one of the five pillars for Muslims.<sup>34</sup> Khan (2015) noted that the number of Ahmadis travelling internationally to attend the main UK Jalsa Salana each year far exceeds the number of Ahmadis undertaking the Hajj in Mecca during the same year.<sup>35</sup> My research among Fijian Ahmadis aligns with Khan's observation. While none of the Fijian Ahmadis I met expressed plans or longing to perform Hajj in Mecca, some shared that they had previously travelled to attend the Jalsa Salana in the UK. Despite the time difference, most Ahmadis in Fiji watched the UK Jalsa Salana in real time, late into the night and early morning. In line with the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's strict observance of *purdah* (as discussed in Chapter 2), which mandates gender segregation, the women's session of the UK Jalsa Salana was held in a separate hall. The ladies' session, which had some separate content, was, however, not publicly broadcast in real-time, with only an audio recording of the Ahmadiyya female leader's speeches, later made available on YouTube.<sup>36</sup> I have witnessed Fijian Ahmadis watching and listening to the men's session only.

The investment in media content by the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at is also directed towards professionally cultivating its public image. This is achieved through high-profile events such as Jalsa Salana and Ahmadiyya media that portray the Jama'at as a community of educated, well-organised Muslims who humbly defend humanity, all while impeccably

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<sup>34</sup> Traditionally, Hajj is considered the fifth Pillar of Islam and all Muslims who are financially and physically capable, are obliged to complete it once in a lifetime (Niu & Metwally, 2016). The official Ahmadiyya perspective reframes Hajj more as a voluntary pilgrimage, contingent upon personal assessment of safety. At the community YouTube channel, Imam Rizwan Khan of the US Ahmadiyya Jama'at suggested that "if there is a possibility of danger on the way to Hajj, then, according to the Holy Qur'an, Hajj is no longer obligatory". He further cited the guidance of the Khalifa, who emphasised that it was "up to every Ahmadi to judge whether it is safe to perform *voluntary* Hajj or Umrah" (MuslimYouthUSA, 2024). Spencer Lavan (1974) also noted that Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement, did not perform the mandatory pilgrimage to Mecca, suggesting, that this might have been due to chronic illness, which would have exempted him from the obligation. For Ahmadis, who are officially classified as non-Muslims by mainstream Islamic authorities (Valentine, 2008; Evans, 2020) performing the Hajj in Mecca can be a complicated endeavour. Therefore, the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's reinterpretation of the mainstream Islamic understanding of Hajj more as a voluntary than obligatory pilgrimage may be influenced by their status that deems them as non-Muslims by the broad global Muslim community.

<sup>35</sup> This is likely influenced by the fact that in 1973, Saudi authorities stopped issuing Hajj visas to Ahmadis. As a result, only those Ahmadis whose passports do not state the bearer's faith, such as holders of UK passports, have been able to undertake the pilgrimage (Balzani, 2020).

<sup>36</sup> When I attended the Jalsa Salana in Auckland, the ladies' hall was equipped with television screens that broadcasted live speeches from the men's section. The public session for non-Ahmadi guests (women and men) was held one afternoon as part of the men's program. While remaining in their separate hall, the ladies were also able to watch the guest session in real time.

dressed. As Nasreen, Bilal, their two sons with their wives, and I gathered in our living room in Nadi watching the live broadcast of the UK Jalsa Salana 2003, we listened attentively to one of the main speakers - Azhar Haneef, the vice president of the US Ahmadiyya Jama'at. With the intonation and vigour of politicians during the election campaign speeches, who raise urgent fears about threats to position themselves as problem-solvers consequently, Azhar Haneef warned of the "mindboggling degree" of sexual harassment of women reportedly in the Western world and preached in favour of girls wearing the hijab to signify their modesty and to protect them from "unsolicited advances". Another speaker, a Professor of Medicine, Dr Faheem Younus Qureshi, in eloquent Urdu, which did not require subtitled translation to attract my attention to its lyrical melody, highlighted scientific findings that affirmed the existence of God, referencing modern science's insights anticipated 1400 years ago in the Qur'an - such as a child's gender being linked to male chromosomes. He went on to firmly denounce discrimination against women who give birth to daughters.

Watching these proceedings on an 85-inch television screen located across the wall in a moderate-sized room, the speakers appeared human-sized, as if they were sitting just next to us on the sofa. The resolute, sometimes warm, reassuring tenors and the presenters' well-groomed looks, coupled with persuasive arguments, rhetorical questions and articulate vocabularies, all generated a style of sophistication, charisma and a strong stage presence, further amplified by the live camera shots of pin-drop silent Ahmadi male listeners seated on the green carpeted floor. When Dr Qureshi, whose voice briefly faltered and whose eyes appeared moist as he seemed to grow emotional towards the end of his presentation, concluded his address advising his listeners to "Seek the God from the heart - not through pomposity", judging by the careful attention and approving facial expressions of Khan's family members watching from the sofa in Nadi, the atmosphere in our living room momentarily filled with a tangible impression of brilliance and pride in their belonging to an exemplary global Ahmadiyya family.<sup>37</sup>

In small Ahmadiyya communities such as Fiji, apart from the flamboyant flora, there is little magnificence in the mosque's surroundings or interior. The meeting room of the Aqsa Mosque in Nadi is furnished with worn chairs and ageing cabinets from the 1970s, while the peeling paint of light blue walls shows progressing humidity; let alone the modest size of

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<sup>37</sup> As the production of Jalsa Salana incurs considerable costs, every member of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at contributes 1% of their annual income to *chanda* Jalsa Salana, in addition to other obligatory financial commitments, that are discussed in Chapter 3.

gatherings of only a few attendees. However, thanks to the broadcasting of the UK Jalsa Salana, even at the world's edges like Fiji, local Ahmadis get reminded that they, too, are a part of the Jama'at's splendour, glory and power.

Just two months later, we also watched the Jalsa Salana in Germany. "Liebe für alle, Hass für keinen", a truck-sized banner with the German translation of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's official motto - *Love for all, hatred for none* - hung at the ceiling above a Stuttgart hall. The hall, filled to its maximum capacity of around 47000 people, was overlooked by a 10-metre-high replica of a Minaratul Masih, a minaret of the Ahmadiyya mosque in Qadian, India, the birthplace of Ghulam Ahmad, the community's founder, that occasionally lit up and cast colourful glows. Behind the podium, on a purple background, a painted golden-leaved tree extended its branches wide and high - as if connecting the earthly and the divine. To Ahmadis, the flourishing tree symbolises Ahmadiyya Islam, which, like a tree, has grown from the seed sown by its founder under the guidance of Allah and blossomed despite the difficulties and adverse circumstances "as if the tree grew from the concrete" (Al Islam, 2025, "Ahmadiyyat – Roots to Branches (3)"). Observing the fifth Khalifa address his followers from beneath the tree evoked the imagination of the fulfilment of struggle and sacrifice, which created a powerful sensory experience communicated through emblematic language.

Per tradition, the Jalsa Salana in the UK and Germany culminate on the third and last day with a *Bai'at* ceremony, during which Ahmadis renew allegiance to their faith. Every new convert to Ahmadiyya Islam has to accept the *Bai'at* initiation declaration, pledging adherence to its ten conditions, which affirm their commitment to the teachings of Ahmadiyya Islam and Ghulam Ahmad as the Promised Messiah and the prophet. To Ahmadis, therefore, the *Bai'at* ceremony serves as a symbolic renewal of their pledge to their faith and reaffirms their spiritual and communal bond to the founder of Ahmadiyya Islam.

When *Bai'at* begins at noon in Europe, it is just after midnight in Fiji. As we closely watched the live broadcast on YouTube, the camera traced the image of the fifth Khalifa wearing a tailor-made *sherwani*<sup>38</sup> and white turban *pagri* with a golden thread fabric as he approached the crowd and sat on the ground. A close-up camera shot showed him extending his right hand with two big gemstone rings. As the Khalifa rested his hand on a tabouret in the palms of three men kneeling in front, other Ahmadis (his male blood relatives) sat behind

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<sup>38</sup> A traditional South Asian knee-length coat, signifying elegance and prestige, often worn by men on wedding day and special formal occasions.

him and placed their palms on the Khalifa's shoulders. In the same manner, from behind each other, all connected by touch, Ahmadi men created multiple human chains running from the source - the Khalifa, throughout everyone in the hall until outside... and into the world. Simultaneously, with those present at Jalsa Salana in Stuttgart, the Khan family members in our living room formed one small chain, touching the next person's shoulders, starting with Bilal as the eldest man in the house, followed by his wife Nasreen and then their sons with their wives. By physically joining in the ritual, rather than only watching others on the television screens, Ahmadis around the globe use and transform online broadcasting of the *Bai'at* initiation ceremony into a continuation of the chain and the spiritual connection.

As sight symbolically becomes touch, Ahmadis worldwide come together in real-time, bridging geographic distances, equally partaking in the Jama'at's key ceremony, and enhancing a collective sense of unity and belonging. The Khalifa started the ceremony by citing the affirmation of fundamental Islamic beliefs in Arabic and then switched to English. As he continued reading the Declaration of Initiation (*Bai'at*), others repeated out loud in English, sentence by sentence, after him. For around ten minutes, Ahmadis and the Khalifa are all linked to each other in an exceptional, intimate bond of a human chain. The *Bai'at* ceremony finishes with the *dua* - a silent prayer. The Khalifa holds palms in front of his face, and during moments of quietness, Ahmadi devotees on the screen and around me have their heads bowed in supplication. Now, I am the only one in our Nadi living room who still follows the MTA camera as it circulates the Stuttgart hall. Briefly, the hall appeared nearly motionless, as though frozen in time, but I still observed private moments of some Ahmadis on the screen, shaking and weeping, overwhelmed by irrepressible emotional reactions.

Many Fijian Ahmadis shared with me that regularly connecting with the Khalifa through the televised *Bai'at*, which takes place annually during Jalsa Salana in the UK and Germany, had immense value to them. Farah conveyed how this ritual enables her to maintain a strong bond to the Khalifa, "*The closest where I feel Huzoor is at the Bai'at ceremony at our Jalsa Salana. So twice a year, we get to experience that*". By administering the *Bai'at* ceremony, the Khalifa strengthens his leadership and charisma among his followers. In this ceremony that connects Ahmadis to their Jama'at's founder and prophet, the Khalifa acts as a mediator between the divine and the community and between the sacred and the secular, bringing together Ahmadis in both time and virtual space and facilitating their spiritual connection. The integration of broadcasting platforms like YouTube and MTA enables

Ahmadis internationally to participate in real-time in the Jalsa Salana and *Bai'at* ceremony, reshaping the ritual space and upholding a shared sense of spiritual and communal connectedness across geographic boundaries.

Thus, *Bai'at* becomes a potent ritual that enhances the Jama'at's global cohesion by enabling each Ahmadi to see themselves as part of the large "cosmic brotherhood" (Balzani, 2020, p. 250). Meanwhile, the *Bai'at* ceremony - serving both as an initiation for new converts and a renewal of faith for existing members - affirms the distinct spiritual identity of Ahmadiyya Islam. By fostering a sense of spiritual brotherhood uniquely tied to the Ahmadiyya Jama'at, this ceremony symbolically separates Jama'at members from the broader Muslim community. Subsequently, through annual participation in the globally broadcasted *Bai'at*, Ahmadis not only reaffirm their commitment to their Jama'at but also reiterate their religious distinctiveness from other Muslims.

### **Pro-Establishment Stance and Apolitical Image**

In his sermons, the Khalifa calls on Ahmadis to remain faithful to the governments of their respective countries, and the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at claims on its website that its members are "among the most law-abiding, educated, and engaged Muslims in the world" (Al Islam, 2004, "Ahmadiyya Muslim Community"). This strong pro-establishment standpoint reflects the foundational principles of Ahmadiyya Islam, rooted in Ghulam Ahmad's support of British rule in India, and constitutes one of the key elements that the global Jama'at consistently publicly presents as part of its distinct identity.

The Khalifa's promotion of traditional loyalty to governing authorities supports Lindholm's (2013) argument that charisma can reinforce existing power structures. Fijian Ahmadis demonstrated that the local government can rely on their proactive adherence to administrative standards. For instance, Imam Naeem and some other Fijian Jama'at members voluntarily take up the unpaid position of a Justice of the Peace, an appointment made by the Fijian Ministry of Justice to certify documents, witness oaths, and signatures. Similarly, while I attended official events of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at in Auckland, each time, among the honorary guests, apart from New Zealand's government representatives, there were members of the local police forces, indicating the community's dedication to promoting law and order. During the 2023 Jalsa Salana session for the public, the local Jama'at national president reminded all of us guest-attendees who had not yet completed New Zealand's

official census of our obligation to do so and provided us with the opportunity to submit the census on-site; printed blank forms were readily available at the entrance hall. These public emphases on compliance with government regulations highlight the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's dedication to civic service and its deliberate effort to present the commitment to the establishment as a defining aspect of its community's identity.

This global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's steady government-aligned position may contrast with the perspectives held by some Muslim communities. Hirschkind (2001a) found that the use of media, particularly tape-recorded sermons among Muslims in Cairo, not only shaped their religious practice but also fostered a space for a unique form of public debate. Rooted in Islamic ethics, cassette sermons encouraged engagement with religious texts and traditions, thus creating a space for discussion and moral reasoning. Hirschkind (2001a) suggested that sermon listeners acted as "Islamic counterpublic" - an active religious authority that shaped civic virtues in contemporary Egyptian society. He argued that the key value of the counterpublic was its ability to challenge official government strategies that focused on suppressing dissent by censoring religious media, overseeing mosques and regulating sermons to align spiritual discourse with the state's political agenda. Therefore, Hirschkind (2001a) viewed the counterpublic as an alternative Islamic community outside state control, which, thanks to media technology, established its influence by nurturing an environment that encouraged participation. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that while some Muslim movements utilise media as a platform for contestation, visibility and mobilisation in support of democratic processes, they may simultaneously uphold authoritarian social policies (Cesari, 2014; Hamid, 2014). These groups, termed by Hamid (2014, p. 167) as "illiberal democrats", view democratic freedoms as tools to advance a more religiously oriented and socially conservative order, one that, in practice, can curtail individual rights, including gender equality, minority protections, media freedom, and the tolerance of dissent (Cesari, 2014; Hamid, 2014). This analysis bears certain parallels to the role of the Khalifa, who similarly leverages modern media to disseminate the community's humanistic messages while simultaneously preserving a hierarchical framework and reinforcing socially conservative principles with the global Jama'at.

While the Khalifa explicitly positions himself and his followers as supportive of states' political agendas and refrains from pursuing direct political participation or opposition, his leadership nonetheless reflects the community's strategic public engagement, particularly

with (Anglo-Saxon) Western democracies. This is exemplified not only by the decision to base the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's headquarters in the UK, London, as opposed to, for example, Ghana<sup>39</sup>, but also by Fijian Ahmadis' frequent preference for seeking marriage partners in Western countries (as discussed in Chapter 4). Although Fiji is not entirely comparable to Euro-Atlantic liberal societies, as a democratic state, it nevertheless gives Ahmadis the freedom to practice their faith. This protection contrasts with some aspects of the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's social and moral frameworks. The Khalifa's emphasis on obedience to his authority and the primacy of the collective norms, rooted in traditional moral values, over individual rights, reveals tensions with the democratic principles, as illustrated by Hamid's concept of "illiberal democrats".

Relatedly, the use of media technology in the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at and by the Khalifa is not intended to encourage debates or diverse views but to disseminate unified spiritual guidance compliant with public structures. Like some Muslims in Cairo, Fijian Ahmadis seek to engage with spiritual teachings and self-cultivation of Islamic virtues through Jama'at YouTube channels and MTA television, which uphold the Khalifa's religious teachings. However, in contrast to Hirschkind's (2001a) conceptualisation of the counterpublic, which positions religious authority and communal ethics above secular state narratives, the Khalifa's and the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's media discourse operates within conventional public spheres, encouraging adherence to established powers. Notably, the official Ahmadiyya media channels also lack internal discussions. Ahmadiyya imams, who appear to be specifically appointed to engage with online platforms (whether for their aptitude to present in front of the cameras, neat looks, English skills and Western accents), commonly use the Jama'at's digital media platforms to clarify the doctrinal interpretations as outlined by the Khalifa. Typically, the audience's remarks under these videos in the comment sections reflect an endorsement of the conveyed views without questions or spontaneous debate.

This contrasts with the broader engagement of many Muslims with online media, where pluralistic and open religious discourse seems more common. Anthropologist Jon Anderson (2003), specialising in cyberculture, suggested that information technology has blurred the boundary between public and private religious expression, fostering a

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<sup>39</sup> Ghana, with more than half a million Ahmadis, has the highest proportion of Ahmadis relative to the broader Muslim population. While broad estimates of the Ahmadiyya population indicate that Pakistan has the largest representation, significant numbers, around 2 to 3 million Ahmadis, live in Nigeria and Tanzania. In contrast, the Ahmadiyya Jama'at in the UK is comparatively smaller, with an estimated 30, 000 members (Wikipedia, 2025, "Ahmadiyya by Country").

transnational Islamic public sphere in which Muslims increasingly negotiate their faith within a modern, globalised context. Online media platforms offering interactive features like polling and public opinion, together with figures such as “radio muftis” or “internet shaykhs” (Anderson, 2003, p. 901-902), have broken the monopoly of religious elites and enabled Muslims to cultivate connections with online preachers, as explored by Slama (2017) in Indonesia, but also engage with and interpret Islam independently (Anderson, 2003). By comparison, the Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s official media channels primarily serve to emphasise conformity to the Khalifa’s directives rather than fostering critical engagement with doctrinal or public matters. The Khalifa’s restriction on Ahmadi’s social media debate, as conveyed to me by Fijian Ahmadi, underscores this approach, reinforcing a narrative of community cohesion while simultaneously mitigating potential internal opposition. This strategy also reflects the Jama’at’s distinctive engagement with public discourse, aimed at projecting an image of a unified spiritual community defined by its cooperative, pro-establishment and apolitical orientation.

Whereas on its website, the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at hints at its “pride in having no political agenda”; subsequently, it justifies its frequent political involvement as a means to advance the “welfare of all Muslims” and “humanity at large” (Al Islam, “Why do we take pride in saying that Khilafat-e-Ahmadiyya has no political agendas”, 2004). The fifth Khalifa presents himself as a moral figure with the authority to address global socio-political issues, promoting justice and humanitarianism. In his speeches, the Khalifa frequently calls for broad solidarity (Malik, 2024) and urges, particularly Muslims, to act as one, as expressed by his declarations such as, “The Muslims should at least learn a lesson in unity from the West” (Farhad, 2022). However, as explored in Chapter 4, the strong adherence of some Fijian Ahmadi to Ahmadiyya Islam’s spiritual practices, values, and the Khalifa’s directives sometimes created barriers to nurturing relationships with Fijian Muslims, occasionally leading to exclusionary or antagonistic interactions.

Similarly, contradiction regarding unity and exclusion was observed by anthropologist of religion Robert Hefner (2009) on the political statement of Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, who, while promoting Malaysia as a modern, inclusive, and moderate Islamic nation, declared that “Malaysia is an Islamic state”

(Hefner, 2009, p. 266).<sup>40</sup> Unlike Mahathir Mohamad, the Khalifa is not a head of state, and his statements do not focus on ideological flexibility. Instead, his primary aim is to promote Ahmadiyya Islam's distinct identity as a non-confrontational community of virtuous Muslims.

Consequently, the fifth Khalifa's public presentations in the English language, often directed at audiences in Western democracies, tend to be notably vague on topics warning about the world passing through turbulent times and reminders that the world must adopt the ways of humility, righteousness and truth to attain peace - allowing the content of his speeches to be relevant to almost any society or historical context.<sup>41</sup> This deliberate broadness aligns with the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's efforts to enhance its public acceptance. By invoking widely recognised (Islamic) values alongside democratic principles of human rights, equity and justice, the Khalifa seeks to legitimise Ahmadis as noble Muslims committed to international peacebuilding while reinforcing Ahmadiyya Islam's interpretation within religious and political spheres, particularly for Western audiences.

In my experiences with both Jama'ats in Fiji and New Zealand, Ahmadis in Fiji were less politically engaged than those in New Zealand. Whereas at the Ahmadiyya Jama'at events in Auckland, the invited guests regularly included local MPs and various government officers, the events in Fiji mainly engaged with Jama'at members. This variation may stem from the smaller size of the Fijian Jama'at, but also from the lack of asylum applications by Ahmadis in Fiji. By comparison, Ahmadis frequently resettle in New Zealand through the Refugee Quota Programme (Byline, 2024), which may inspire the local Jama'at's greater political interactions to help the process.<sup>42</sup>

The global Ahmadiyya Jama'at presents a distinctive case of political engagement characterised by a deliberate avoidance of overt opposition to established regimes and subtle

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<sup>40</sup> According to Hefner (2009), Mahathir Mohamad partially aimed to address international audiences and respond to then-President Bush's derogatory remarks about Muslim states. Simultaneously, his ambiguous statement that offered multiple interpretations enabled him to navigate domestic religious and political challenges, counter Islamist opposition, and preserve flexibility in governance.

<sup>41</sup> The fifth Khalifa also meets and addresses his followers during gender-segregated internal Jama'at gatherings, which are not intended for the broader public, but are nonetheless broadcasted by MTA and available on YouTube. During these sessions, Ahmadis ask the Khalifa questions on various specific topics, seeking his guidance on the correct stance on everyday issues and traditional values. Typically, during those gatherings the Khalifa and his followers communicate in Urdu. Some of these recorded sessions that are available on community's YouTube channels include English subtitles, while others have only English titles without subtitles.

<sup>42</sup> According to Balzani (2020), the UK Ahmadiyya Jama'at, through an intense engagement with the Home Office and the British government, leverages its influence to support Ahmadi asylum seekers in the UK. Consequently, the UK Jama'at strategically keeps the issues of discrimination and persecution of Ahmadis consistently visible within the UK political circles (Balzani, 2020). Such forms of very specific advocacy focused on Ahmadis as international asylum seekers in Western countries limit the Khalifa's public initiatives to those which establish the Jama'at's identity as compliant and model Muslims advocating for human rights.

evasion of public articulation of community values that may contradict democratic pluralism in Western contexts - such as minimising space for internal debate, the expectation of strict obedience to a centralised, theocratic hierarchy over individual autonomy and limited inclusion of gender minorities. Rather than positioning itself as critical to aspects of (democratic and non-democratic) governments, the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at frames its values as universally compatible with humanistic principles and itself as apolitical and compliant with the ruling elites. This approach formally facilitates Ahmadis globally integrating into democratic societies as a distinct community of exemplary Muslims while pursuing the Khalifa's particular, often non-pluralistic, interpretations and conservative moral values.

### **The Identity Entangled in Controversy**

Apart from occasional broad claims of Western hypocrisy, one of the few exceptions to the Khalifa's careful avoidance of governments' assessment is his public explicit critique of Muslims and Muslim countries – often for their alleged lack of unity. Paradoxically, mainstream Muslims display substantial accord in viewing the Ahmadiyya faith as transgressing acceptable boundaries of Islamic doctrine.<sup>43</sup> I contend that the Khalifa's stance is based on the unspoken premise that Muslims will continue to be perceived as flawed unless they unite under Ahmadiyya interpretations of Islam.

I was in the midst of my research when the Hamas-led militants attacked southern Israel in October 2023. A few days later, during his Friday sermon in Tilford, in the UK, the Khalifa denounced the incident in a way which implied that, regardless of external challenges, Muslims must always remain peaceful, “Leaving aside for a moment the fact that innocent people have been unjustly killed by the Israeli army, Muslims should ensure that they always adhere to the teachings of Islam” (Farhad, 2023). Consistent with his previous sermons on the topic (Farhad, 2017), the Khalifa maintained that it was the lack of cooperation among Muslims that had given non-Muslim nations the confidence to act with impunity, leading to Israel's atrocities against Palestinians (Farhad, 2023). Upholding this Khalifa's perspective, the

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<sup>43</sup> The Amman Message concluded at a July 2005 conference in Amman, Jordan, sought to articulate a shared Islamic identity, strengthen Muslim unity, and confront extremism. It resulted in a broad consensus among scholars, religious leaders, and institutions from across the Muslim world to recognise adherents of eight established schools of Islamic jurisprudence as legitimate members of the Muslim community - Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali (Sunni); Ja'fari, Zaydi (Shi'a); Ibadi; and Zahiri (Literalist Sunni) (Browsers, 2011). Due to the theological differences from these schools, adherents of Ahmadiyya Islam were not included as Muslims.

president of the US Ahmadiyya Jama'at, Azhar Haneef, in his speech at the Jalsa Salana West Coast 2024 in California, directly blamed the ongoing injustice in Palestine on the inability of two billion Muslims across 54 Muslim nations to prevent it. Emphasising Muslims' failure to "combine *their* might" to stop the suffering in Gaza, he further remarked, "Muslims nowadays serve as a lesson for us (Ahmadis)" (Al Islam, 2024, "The Righteous Will Inherit the Land"). While intended as a condemnation of Muslims' disunity and moral decline, Haneef's comments openly distanced Ahmadis from the wider Muslim community, positioning Ahmadis as a distinct group of ethically superior observers, rather than part of it. The atrocities unfolding in Gaza since then have been used by the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at as an opportunity to primarily critique Muslim nations, while framing the Ahmadiyya khilafat as "the voice of reason and wisdom" and "the perfect modern-age model for Muslim guidance and unity" (Mirza, 2025).

Muslim society is indeed diverse, inconsistent (Ahmad, 2002), and Muslim-majority countries grapple with a range of internal issues, including religious ones, while pursuing varied political and social objectives. However, the Khalifa's, and by extension the Ahmadiyya leadership's, suggestion that Muslim countries bear some responsibility for what has been characterised as the ethnic cleansing and genocide of Palestinians under Israel's apartheid state (Pappe, 2006; Sand, 2020; B'Tselem, 2021; Shakir, 2021; Amnesty International, 2024; United Nations, 2024) offers a controversial perspective; one that downplays the root causes of violence on Palestinians by subtly redirecting culpability for acts committed by Israeli governments and extremists, enabled by Western powers<sup>44</sup>, onto Muslims globally (excluding Ahmadis).

The Khalifa's perspective seemed to imply a non-acknowledged assumption, one that I also observed among some Fijian Ahmadis - that the existence of alleged "flawed" *other* Muslim groups serves as evidence of the intrinsic superiority of Ahmadiyya Islam (discussed in Chapter 4). While political violence by minority extremist Muslims is seen as one aspect of this flaw, the broader narrative implies that if Muslims were united under Ahmadiyya Islam, there wouldn't be any violence. As such, by framing intra-Muslim diversity as inherently negative, the Khalifa reinforces Ahmadiyya Islam's legitimacy. Meanwhile, his rhetorical

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<sup>44</sup> The creation of Israel was, in part, facilitated by the displacement of the indigenous Palestinian population, serving as a means for European states to absolve themselves of their own Jewish populations and longstanding anti-Semitism (Said, 1979).

positioning entangles Ahmadis globally in an ongoing contentious relationship with the wider Muslim community.

The impact of the Khalifa's stance toward Muslims (including Palestinians) became evident during the Jalsa Salana in Auckland in January 2024, which I attended, where his public calls for unity were exposed as symbolic rather than actionable, revealing an absence of meaningful efforts to build wider Muslim solidarity. During this Jalsa Salana guest session, historical video footage was screened featuring a 1947 United Nations speech by Sir Zafarullah Khan, a foreign minister of Pakistan at that time and also an Ahmadi. In the video, Sir Khan fiercely criticised Australia, Canada, and the US for their refusal to accept Jewish refugees from Europe at the expense of Palestinian Arabs. While this video footage appeared to suggest that the Ahmadiyya Jama'at publicly opposed the historical injustice surrounding Palestinians, it should be noted that Sir Khan in the UN represented the official position of the Pakistani state, not the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, all Muslim-majority countries that were members of the United Nations at that time unanimously opposed the partition of Palestine (Zindani, 1976) - which challenges the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's leadership's claims regarding Muslims' lack of unity on this matter.

Beyond some historical emphasis on the conflict, throughout the Jalsa Salana in Auckland in 2024, I observed a notable absence of substantive effort by New Zealand's Jama'at leadership to actively support the Palestinian cause. With several Labour MPs - then in government - among the guests in the audience, alongside members of Auckland Council, police, and local representatives of various faith and peace group organisations, the Jalsa Salana 2024 could have served as a platform for the Jama'at to stand up for its stated objective of promoting Muslims' welfare. Instead, New Zealand's Jama'at leaders conveyed the Khalifa's message of humanity by closely reiterating his broader concerns about global inequality, de-escalation of conflicts and calls for peace.

The local Jama'at leaders, for example, did not take this opportunity to address what could be seen as the New Zealand government's double standards for humanitarian visas and to expedite the emergency visas for Palestinians as swiftly as it did for Ukrainians (1News Reporters, 2024). Nor did Jama'at leaders appeal to New Zealand's MPs in the audience to push for formally recognising a Palestinian state ("Recognition of Palestine Requires

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<sup>45</sup> I have found no record of the second Khalifa, at the time articulating the community's official stance on Israel's creation in 1947 except of the alleged vision that the second Khalifa had in 1946, in which he supposedly foresaw difficulties ahead for the Muslim world and presumably urged unity of Muslims in response to these anticipated challenges (Basit, 2021).

Conditions”, 2024), which I would expect from a community that vocally promotes human rights. Further, as of July 2025, I did not find any public record of the Khalifa calling upon the US, Germany or any other government to cease supplying weapons to Israel. This indicates a preference on the part of the community, as directed by the Khalifa, to adopt an exclusive position characterised by broad moral appeals centred on a rhetorical humanistic image. This not only enables the Khalifa to maintain his position as a higher ethical authority while remaining detached from direct political responsibility but also allows him to criticise Muslim nations without risking his own impartial status, particularly in Western societies.

Yet, most surprisingly, one of the invited speakers at the Jalsa Salana 2024 in Auckland represented New Zealand Friends of Israel, who, in his presentation to the audience, claimed that the world media intentionally exaggerated Israel’s bombings of Gaza by using fake images from earlier wars in Persian Gulf and argued that Palestinians had five opportunities to reclaim their land but rejected them all.<sup>46</sup> From a podium decorated with a banner reading “Voices of Peace - Ahmadiyya Islam”, in an articulate comment about needing to perceive others’ perspectives, the New Zealand Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s national president, who previously introduced the same speaker as his “long-time friend”, thanked all presenters for their “thought-provoking discourse”. As I struggled to reconcile this lack of scrutiny with the Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s praise for justice, and any critical reaction from both the public and the Jama’at audience around me, I observed one Jama’at member approaching the pro-Israeli speaker and commending him for a “great speech”. I recalled the same speaker addressing the Jalsa Salana the previous year, which I also attended; therefore, his regular presence made it improbable that local Ahmadis were unaware of the values that the New Zealand Friends of Israel organisation represented, including its anti-Islam attitudes and links to Zionism (NZ Friends of Israel Association Inc, 2004).<sup>47</sup>

This raises the question of why New Zealand’s Ahmadiyya Jama’at chose to invite a speaker from New Zealand Friends of Israel, whose views would likely not be welcomed by many (Muslim) organisations that advocate justice, peace and intra-faith cooperation. I

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<sup>46</sup> By that time, in January 2024, the Israel’s bombardment since October 2023 officially killed more than 20000 Palestinian civilians, forcibly displaced 85% of Gaza population, while targeting hospitals, and Martin Griffiths, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator claimed, “There is no safe place in Gaza” (United Nations, 2024).

Historians agree that the so-called offers made to Palestinians were lacking genuine sovereignty or the basic conditions necessary for their self-determination and rights, thus were understandably declined (Pappe, 2006; Finkelstein, 2003).

<sup>47</sup> On its website, in “1st Steps Beginners Guide to Middle East Conflict”, the group includes articles like “Islam is a Religion of Violence” and advertises invitation for meeting with representative of New Zealand Zionist Federation (NZ Friends of Israel Association Inc, 2004).

suggest that the answer comes back to the fact that Muslim diversity, although publicly criticised by the Khalifa as fragmentation, actually significantly functions to reinforce Ahmadiyya Jama'at's distinctiveness. By consistently highlighting divisions, even in contexts where Muslim communities display harmony, the Khalifa constructs disunity regardless of reality. While the Ahmadiyya Jama'at publicly emphasises its mission to unite Muslims and humanity, this call for union appears to function primarily as a means to promote its own religious identity rather than as an end in itself. Muslims' diversity, instead of being embraced, is strategically framed as discord - a negative condition that the Khalifa highlights to solidify the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's own cohesion. In Chapter 4, I examine in more detail how this Khalifa's stance influences Fijian Ahmadis in regards to public behaviour, particularly in their interactions with local Muslims.

The Khalifa's vision appears not one of unity across differences but of uniformity within the Jama'at, with the broader Muslim world's diversity serving as a contrasting upset to sustain the Ahmadiyya community's morally and spiritually superior sense of distinction. According to scholars (Qasmi, 2015; Ali, 2014), the Ahmadiyya Jama'at has faced allegations of "Zionist Collusion" alongside various other conspiracy theories (Ali, 2014, p. 142). Although the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at might not actively seek collaboration with Zionist groups, its focus on promoting its distinct (Muslim) identity - such as its criticism of Hamas's use of violence - can sometimes result in alignment with organisations like New Zealand Friends of Israel, rather than fostering broader solidarity with the wider Muslim community; even though the majority of mainstream Muslims also rejects violence (Jahanbegloo, 2018; Jalabi, 2018). Consequently, the current Khalifa's practice of consistently portraying *other* Muslims as theologically and morally misguided not only minimises Ahmadis' chances to strengthen relationships with the broader Muslim community but also implies that the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at may ultimately have little interest in fostering such cooperation.

This is also reflected in the fifth Khalifa's dual rhetoric. Although outwardly championing Muslims' unity, his critique of the disunity of Muslims appears to strategically serve to consolidate his authority as a worldwide Muslim leader among non-Muslims. This becomes increasingly challenging in light of Israel's ongoing terror of Palestinians, as the Khalifa navigates a pro-establishment position with his criticism of *other* Muslims, while advancing a public self-image as a unifying Muslim figure leading a virtuous community defending human rights and justice. In this manner, the Khalifa builds on the foundations laid

by the community's founder, Ghulam Ahmad, reinforcing the distinct religious identity of Ahmadiyya Islam and ensuring his leadership, even if it deepens the separation from the broader Muslim community (which already exists due to Ghulam Ahmad's claims of prophethood).

After the official program of Jalsa Salana 2024 in Auckland ended, as I walked back to my car, the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at motto - *Love for all, hatred for none* - was prominently visible on stickers decorating the parked vehicles of attending Ahmadis. While this official motto promotes empathy and acceptance of differing views, offering unconditional kindness can also enable exploitation without accountability. Like the Khalifa's speeches, the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at public presentation pursues a general humanitarian idealism that aligns with widely accepted values. However, in practice, the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's leadership seems to primarily tactically seek to promote the community's distinct identity, perpetuated by slogans of humanity. Hence, while noble in sentiment, the Jama'at's official motto carries an inherent ambivalence.

### **Reflection**

Throughout my fieldwork, some Ahmadis in Fiji encouraged me to write a letter to the Khalifa, the same as they would typically do when embarking on a significant endeavour, asking for his prayers to give me strength to conduct my research or anything else I wished for. Initially, I neither felt particularly drawn to it nor opposed to it. However, when Nasreen, the national president of the Fijian Jama'at's women's organisation, suggested that I give her my letter so she could send it to the Khalifa along with hers, I knew I would not write one.

Apart from being wary of not being controlled, I also did not want to take away the Khalifa's time, which he could instead dedicate to his followers, who appeared profoundly devoted to him. Then, I realised that always being acknowledged may be another feature of the Khalifa's connection that Fijian Ahmadis cherish. So far, I have not met any Jama'at member who would have shared feelings of inadequacy by demanding the Khalifa's attention, time and effort. Self-assuredly, they asked for his prayers, knowing that none of their private issues was too trivial to be seen and heard, and conveyed how the Khalifa genuinely noted their problems and praised their achievements. The Khalifa's personal recognition in mutual exchanges, as if he embodied a caring paternal figure who comforts, instructs, and encourages, seems to foster the deepest reverence among Fijian Ahmadis. This is reflected in

their heartfelt appreciation for the conviction that the Khalifa's letters are not just written by him but truly meant for them.

For many Fijian Ahmadis, feeling individually accepted by the Khalifa for what they are seems like a privilege; to others, seeking to develop independent perspectives on his expectations, the Khalifa's closeness to the community can be a drawback. Through maintaining an almost constant presence in his followers' everyday lives, the Khalifa draws Fijian Ahmadis' attention to their overarching spiritual identity, which may take precedence over their Fijian cultural heritage, personal interests beyond faith or political affiliations. Indian philosopher and economist Amartya Sen (2006, p. 16) cautioned that categorising individuals based solely on a single identity risks neglecting the multifaceted ways in which people connect, resulting in a "miniaturisation" of human identity and ultimately undermining relationships between different groups. While Fijian Ahmadis take pride in the security and comfort provided by the Khalifa's authority, this safety nest may also shield them from curiosity and limit their exposure to perspectives beyond his sanctioned boundaries.

## CHAPTER TWO: Powers of *Purdah*

*Purdah*, translated from Persian as “curtain” (Papanek, 1973, p. 517), is a behavioural concept involving societal manners and actions deemed virtuous by Islamic teachings. While *purdah* encompasses dress code and women’s veiling, it has a multifaceted significance that extends beyond clothing to social forms of values and practices, such as body language, speech tone, self-regulated emotions and conduct, including controlled gender interactions and seclusion. The aim of all these practices is to promote modesty and protect honour (Ahmed, 2021; Sehlkoglu, 2018).

This chapter explores how Fijian Ahmadis adhere to and rationalise *purdah* in their daily lives and social interactions. Ahmadis in Fiji devoutly observe *purdah* as a cultural, religious and spiritual principle, seeing it as beneficial for personal growth and essential for the progress of Ahmadiyya Jama’at. As they describe it, practising *purdah* fosters a profound connection with God and draws divine blessings. In addition, through the diligent observance of *purdah*, Fijian Ahmadis cultivate a distinct religious identity as exemplary adherents of Ahmadiyya Islam. As such, *purdah* constitutes an essential dimension of their religious practice, reinforcing both individual spirituality and collective cohesion.

Both Fijian Ahmadi men and women observe *purdah*, embodying its deep spiritual and communal significance. By emphasising shared gendered accountability, the Ahmadiyya Jama’at repositions modesty away from prevalent global patterns that tend to assign women primary responsibility for communal morality while generally subjecting men to fewer ethical expectations. Meanwhile, within the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama’at, the practice of *purdah* is pursued in distinctly gender-specific ways, with varying implications for men and women. For Fijian Ahmadi women, the *purdah* garments represent crucial identity markers, serving them as protective apparel but also as symbols of their claimed Muslim identity in a multi-ethnic country. These women practice *purdah*, including seclusion, as their right and a means to define their own space and position within the Jama’at and broader Fijian society, enabling them to engage with the outside world while upholding privacy and dignity based on their values.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how the practice of *purdah* among Fijian Ahmadis encompasses both internal and external dimensions and is deeply embedded in multiple aspects of their lives. First, I argue that for Fijian Ahmadis, *purdah* serves as a spiritual and

ethical practice of modest self-discipline but also as a marker of distinct religious identity, grounded in Ahmadiyya Islam's claim to represent the "true" Islam. For many Fijian Ahmadi, *purdah* constitutes a vital element of selfhood, religious identity and spiritual fulfilment. Although *purdah* is observed by both men and women within the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at, my observations indicate that its practice assumes gender-specific forms and meanings. Notably, *purdah* is conceptualised by Fijian Ahmadi as a responsibility that initially falls upon men in social interactions, whereas women often regard it as a means of protection and emotional reassurance.

Furthermore, although Fijian Ahmadi generally express meticulous conformity to the Khalifa's guidance, interpretations of the *purdah* dress code among some Ahmadi women in Fiji frequently go beyond his comparatively moderate directive on this subject, resulting in their adoption of non-obligatory *purdah* garments. I suggest this reflects deeply internalised understandings of modesty and religious obligation and is a rare departure from strict literal obedience to the Khalifa's guidance within a community otherwise marked by consistent submission to his central authority.

Secondly, I argue that *purdah* among Fijian Ahmadi women is experienced as both protective and restrictive, enhancing their moral identity and sense of safety while reinforcing social boundaries and constraining individual autonomy. Many of the Fijian Ahmadi women rely on the *purdah* practice and conservative dress code to withdraw from the broader public sphere. Consequently, they interpret avoidance by other Fijians not as social exclusion but as a sign of respect and validation of their own religious virtue. Whereas Fijian Ahmadi women claim to employ *purdah* to maintain a degree of invisibility, simultaneously, they use it as a visible affirmation of presumed Muslim identity in a non-Muslim context, where, paradoxically, Islamic dress often attracts public attention. By adhering to strict *purdah* observance, Fijian Ahmadi, both women and men, aim to distinguish themselves as a morally upright minority within Fiji's ethnically stratified and politically sensitive landscape while also strengthening their community cohesion amid its declining membership.

Although many Fijian Ahmadi women attested that *purdah* represents a deliberate expression of moral agency and self-respect, I caution against celebrating it as an entirely autonomous practice. Strict normative expectations within the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at foster internal judgment toward less observant members, reinforcing conformity and

discouraging alternative expressions of religious identity. Therefore, while autonomy is indeed present, it is exercised within clearly defined limits.

Thirdly, I argue that *purdah* among Fijian Ahmadi functions not only as physical seclusion but also as a symbolic system that structures social spaces such as dining arrangements and seating to maintain gender boundaries even among extended family. This practice creates exclusive symbolic shelters for women to interact and express themselves. Within those private spaces, Fijian Ahmadi women incorporate fashion and beauty self-care, pursuing it alongside their *purdah* observance. In contrast to their typically strict interpretations of Ahmadiyya Islam teachings, regarding practices of personal beauty and style, Fijian Ahmadi women challenge more traditional views perceived among some Fijian Muslims and present their own approach as an appropriate blend of modesty and spiritual authenticity. Meanwhile, Fijian Ahmadi women also navigate *purdah* as both a means of aesthetic expression and a deliberate practice of downplaying physical appearance, using it to redirect emphasis from external beauty to inner spiritual and moral values. Additionally, Fijian Ahmadi women also engage in *purdah* as a visible marker of privilege. Many reported receiving preferential treatment and heightened respect from other Fijians, linking *purdah* to their own refined conduct and a sense of moral superiority. As such, I suggest that modesty extends beyond personal piety, functioning as a social symbol that reinforces hierarchical distinctions between Fijian Ahmadi women and others, both non-Muslim and less observant Muslim women.

This chapter contributes to existing scholarship on *purdah* by illustrating its multifaceted and contextually shaped nature and revealing the complexity of the practice as it is enacted within communities that affiliate with Islam, particularly in non-Muslim majority settings. Among Fijian Ahmadi, the *purdah* observance is influenced by the demographic and socio-political situation of Fiji, where, as a shrinking minority, they seek to solidify their presence both within their own community and the broader society. In this context, *purdah* serves as a core spiritual commitment and a central symbol of their religious identity, deeply rooted in personal devotion and communal life.

### **Encounters with *Purdah***

When I began my fieldwork in Fiji, one of the first places I visited was the Ahmadiyya Aqsa Mosque in Nadi. Nasreen, then *Sadar Lajna* - the national president of *Lajna Ima'illah*,

the Ahmadiyya women's organisation, in whose household I lived, told me that I was her responsibility, since it was her duty to oversee the well-being of all Fijian Ahmadi women. Accordingly, throughout my stay, Nasreen sent me diligent WhatsApp reminders every Friday morning to attend *jumu'ah* prayer and every Wednesday afternoon to attend *daras* (a religious lecture). Nasreen and other Fijian Ahmadi women often emphasised to me that having access to the mosque, equally with men, was a right that filled them with gratefulness to be part of their Jama'at.

Though the mosque was just about 20 minutes walking distance from Nadi centre, where we lived, each time, Nasreen's husband, Bilal, drove us there and back in an air-conditioned car. When the weather was pleasant enough, and I longed for a stroll, Nasreen would dismiss my suggestion, "*It is not safe for you to walk there!*". As I have lived among rural Muslim communities in South Jordan for long enough to experience numerous similar commands, I interpreted that her instructions did not primarily come from an acute fear for my safety but rather expressed a form of social protection and acknowledgement that I was considered a part of a community. Meanwhile, by being part of the community, my social behaviour became, to an extent, associated with the Jama'at's reputation, and there was a gentle expectation that my individuality would conform to some of the community's moral norms. Consequently, whenever I walked to the mosque alone, I was conscious of breaching the community's conventions.

On the first Friday, when Bilal drove us to the Aqsa Mosque, Nasreen, in a motherly manner, ensured my headscarf was appropriately adjusted. We climbed up the stairs and walked through the entrance, which was divided in half by a partition, to the section marked "LADIES", leaving our fancy sandals outside to maintain cleanliness and respect. The space inside the mosque was separated by a thick brown curtain. From behind the curtain, I could sense the male presence, marked by occasional deep coughing, and shortly after, we also heard the voice of Imam Naeem delivering a *khutbah* (sermon).

Just ten Ahmadi ladies were in the space with me, listening and prostrating, some on the carpeted floor, others sitting in simple white plastic chairs. After the Friday prayer was concluded, upon leaving, I noticed the organisational board at the entrance. Next to the recommendation to cite specific Qur'anic verses for protection and names of ladies with assigned mosque cleaning dates, there was also a printed circular from the Office of the Private Secretary to the fifth Khalifa, written by the In-Charge of Lajna Section, addressed to

Ahmadi women. It stated in English that despite numerous notices from the Khalifa, some female Jama'at members still did not refrain from posting their pictures on social media, and they were instructed to remove them. The command **"No picture of any Ahmadi lady should be on social media"** - underscored and highlighted - was followed by the reminder that it was the duty of Ahmadis to demonstrate their respect and love for the Khalifa by conforming to his directives.

When outside, Nasreen introduced me to other ladies, who were mostly her aunties, first, second or third cousins, her mother's uncles' daughters, her aunt's nieces, or eventually, her husband's female relatives. While the ladies were busy discussing the upcoming weekly *Lajna* meeting, I looked for Imam Naeem, eager to meet him in person after our prior communication through email and Zoom, during which he had supported my research and also arranged my accommodation at Nasreen's house. I found him standing aside, encircled by men, and looking as if he had not noticed me. I approached a men's group and greeted Imam Naeem with a hand on my heart, and while he politely replied to me, he nevertheless did not stop looking towards the ground.

Neither at that moment nor at any time during our interactions throughout my field research did Imam Naeem ever look me straight in the eye, shake my hand, or approach me closely. Similarly, every time I interviewed Fijian Ahmadi men in the privacy of their homes, their wives sat next to them, listening to our conversation, snoozing off, scrolling down through Instagram on their mobile phones, or, in the worst scenario, washing and arranging dishes in the adjacent kitchen (to the great detriment of the interview recording quality). During my stay among Fijian Ahmadis, I was never placed in a situation where I was alone with an Ahmadi man in a car or any enclosed private space. I was included in Fijian Ahmadis' careful compliance with *purdah*, a broad Islamic concept of gender seclusion rooted in the idea of piety.

Through my time in Fiji, encounters with the multi-layered concept of *purdah* illustrated to me how its observance informs daily routines, spiritual practices, gender dynamics, and social interactions within the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at, while also influencing Fijian Ahmadis' cultural integration in the broader Fijian society. As I go on to discuss, the accounts and practices from within the Fijian Jama'at reveal that *purdah* not only informs members' individual behaviour but also structures community dynamics and the negotiation of gendered expectations. Additionally, the Fijian Ahmadis' strong alignment with religious

authority, particularly the guidance of the Khalifa, demonstrates how *purdah* compliance is embedded in the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's framework of spiritual discipline and collective identity.

## I. PURDAH'S INTRICACIES

### Historical Context

Following the Muslim conquest of Persia and the Byzantine Empire, *purdah*, associated with gender seclusion and veiling, was assimilated into the broader Islamic culture, reflecting both the regional cultural heritage and the new religious identity of the emerging Muslim world (White, 1977; Papanek, 1973; Ali, 2004). As such, those socially visible behaviours linked to *purdah* have been shaped by historical and cultural factors rather than being solely derived from Islamic texts (Ali, 2004; Papanek, 1973). Initially, the practice of *purdah* indicated a woman's protected status within the family structure and signalled her social rank, with veiling serving as a visual marker symbolising the privilege of seclusion and distinguishing women from those of lower social standing who were not permitted to veil (Pastner, 1972; White, 1977; Ahmed, 2021).

The complexity of *purdah* in Islam derives from the immense diversity of Muslim practices worldwide. The understanding, implementation, and expression of decency codes vary substantially across Muslim communities, influenced by cultural, social, and political factors, but also individual choice (Ahmed, 2021; Sehlkoglu, 2018). In many societies, *purdah* plays a role in marking social identities, different statuses within the community, economic standing and prestige.<sup>48</sup> Yet, *purdah* is not just a form of social differentiation or privacy that involves being unseen; it includes a deep introspection involving purity, respect and behavioural restraint (El Guindi, 1999; Mahmood, 2011).

Until the 1970s, *purdah* was often narrowly construed by academics as synonymous with veiling and framed primarily as a practice imposed on Muslim women, with anthropologists commonly depicting those women in general as being subjugated by patriarchal norms and lacking agency in aspects of public life and decision-making (Sehlkoglu,

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<sup>48</sup> For example, for Baluchi women in Pakistan, *purdah* guards family honour, with wealthier families observing stricter forms of seclusion, indicative of their financial ability to maintain practices such as having separate living quarters for women and servants to maintain the household (Pastner, 1972). Similarly, in rural areas of Morocco, *purdah* is seen as a privilege reserved for women married to wealthy men (Mernissi, 1985).

2018). Leila Ahmed (2021, p. 155), who studied gender relations predominantly in Egypt and broadly in the Arab world, is among those who have criticised such early anthropologists and feminist ideas, calling them “handmaids to colonialism”, arguing that they aided European colonial powers in establishing themselves in Muslim countries by reinforcing stereotypical roles of Muslim women’s biological inferiority and natural domesticity.<sup>49</sup> In these Western discourses, *purdah* has been limited to the act of covering, confined to Islamic tradition, and regarded as a dubious method to dominate women.

The 1970s saw a significant socio-political change in the Muslim world, accompanied by the revival of Islamic identity, piety, and women’s empowerment, with the veil emerging as a powerful symbol of traditional *purdah* practices. This resurgence paralleled post-colonial shifts in academic scholarship, including critiques against earlier biases of feminine oppression within Islam, towards more culturally sensitive research methodologies. There has been a gradual change in how *purdah* is perceived by researchers - from simplistic views of controlling Muslim women’s public presence to an appreciation of their autonomy influenced by numerous cultural, social, and political factors and reflecting the multiple realities of their lives (Sehlikoglu, 2018; El Guindi, 1999).

This study underscores *purdah* as a set of dynamic practices shaped by religious authority, cultural expectations, and individual agency, and one that is embraced by Fijian Ahmadis, both women and men, as indispensable to their moral and spiritual framework. The concept of men’s *purdah* observed among Fijian Ahmadis challenges dominant narratives that conflate aspects of *purdah* exclusively with women, underscoring the need for a more nuanced approach to modesty practices among adherents to Islam.

### ***Purdah* as a Spiritual Identity and Practice**

Fijian Ahmadis with whom I interacted perceive *purdah* as an essential religious practice that brings them closer to God and that serves as an important spiritual and ethical guideline that influences their daily behaviour. For Fijian Ahmadis, diligent observance of *purdah* transcends notions of modesty; it affirms and reinforces their identity as authentic believers, demonstrating their commitment to what they perceive as the true path of Islam.

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<sup>49</sup> This categorisation was further propagated in literature, as European travellers and scholars commonly depicted Muslim women as sensual, passive, submissive, and voiceless (Said, 1994), without exploring the women’s own perceptions. Islamic women’s modesty became a tool for critiquing Muslim societies, with colonial powers capturing the language of feminism and redirecting it to serve their own interests (Said, 1994; Ahmed, 2021).

By adhering to *purdah*, as both an inward disposition and outward expression, Fijian Ahmadis believe they increase their spiritual connection and are rewarded by Allah in many aspects of life. Hanya shared her belief that aligning with Ahmadiyya religious teachings - through prayer, modesty and faith - leads to a deeper spiritual connection with God and divine blessings. She noted that diligent religious observance encourages her to embody a personal model of spiritual commitment for her children, *"I'm teaching my children... I'm setting an example for them so they can follow it and see all the blessings. I'm trying my best, praying, doing purdah, bringing them to the mosque and believing in God"*. Similarly, many Fijian Ahmadis view their commitment to Ahmadiyya Islam's teachings as a source of divine favour that deeply influences their everyday practices and family dynamics. Additionally, a consistent religious observance, including the practice of *purdah*, reinforces a shared sense of spiritual and moral distinctiveness among Fijian Ahmadis, which, they often articulated, sets them apart from Fijian Muslims (as discussed in Chapter 4).

Fijian Ahmadis I engaged with perceive their commitment to *purdah* rigorously as an affirmation of their adherence to the "true" path of Ahmadiyya Islam, suggesting a correlation between success and their faith. As expressed by Abida, *"Following purdah and our true guidance, you feel blessed, and Allah gives you back more in many ways"*. This illustrates that *purdah* serves not only as an ethical and spiritual practice of modesty but also as a symbol of religious authenticity, through which Fijian Ahmadis affirm their identity as devout followers of a true faith.

Abida's view that the adherence to *purdah* and other Ahmadiyya Islam's teachings brings spiritual rewards but also potential worldly benefits is a common belief among Fijian Ahmadis. Similarly, Azhar linked his business accomplishments to the blessings he received through his assiduous religious practice, suggesting a reciprocal relationship between his faith dedication, material achievements, and modesty practised through *purdah*. Azhar described his challenging youth, where, despite hard labour, he felt frustrated and found little success. He acknowledged that during this period, he often neglected his religious duties, but claimed that everything shifted once he committed himself to Ahmadiyya religious teachings, *"Since I changed myself, the world around me has changed. I get closer to God, and my understanding and powers increase. Now, I pray five times, I follow purdah, and I regularly write to the Khalifa for prayers, and Alhamdulillah, I'm doing a very good business. Everything happens automatically in our favour. Obstacles fade out by themselves... This is blessings of our*

*khilafat*". Azhar attributed the positive changes in his life to his renewed dedication to religious observance, a transformation that he viewed both as reflecting and reinforcing his ongoing spiritual commitment. Additionally, he framed this transformation as stemming specifically from his loyalty to the khalifate and the principles of Ahmadiyya Islam rather than from general expressions of piety alone. This suggests that *purdah* among Fijian Ahmadis is understood not "merely" as a personal act of modesty but as a meaningful expression of religious identity and alignment with the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at.

Regarding the value of modesty as an aspect of *purdah*, Ahmadis globally are reminded by the Khalifa that divine blessings are granted only to those who remain spiritually focused and that material gains that divert one from their faith are not considered true blessings (as discussed more in Chapter 3). While this perspective emphasises Fijian Ahmadis' conviction that genuine spiritual fulfilment and divine favour are attained through their devout religious practice, it also influences how they reconcile modesty with their material realities. Fijian Ahmadis who appeared to belong to lower-income backgrounds tended to highlight the practice of *purdah* as a path to spiritual discipline, whereas wealthier Jama'at members, such as, for instance, Azhar, emphasised that their material success was both rooted in and reflective of their spiritual dedication to Ahmadiyya Islam.

Among Fijian Ahmadis, *purdah* is practised as both an internal orientation and an external expression, encompassing intention as well as outward appearance. Fijian Ahmadis that I have met have emphasised that *purdah* starts "*in one's heart*", suggesting the inner devotional commitment to its spiritual aspects. Meanwhile, they highlighted that in everyday reality, *purdah* "*starts with eyes*" - in particular, with the men's eyes.<sup>50</sup> In one of his sermons, the Khalifa explained the importance of the *purdah* of eyes for Ahmadi men cautioning, that by staring at women, mixing and chatting freely with them directly or on Facebook or watching movies containing nudity, men lose their purity, and "If one is not pure, they cannot reach God the Almighty" (Voice of Khilafat, 2022, "Why do women have to observe Pardah"). In Nadi, when I spoke to the young and handsome Umair, who plans to enrol in a Bachelor of Science in Agriculture next year, he referred to the Qur'an and Hadith, which direct men to control their eyes and intentions. As Umair emphasised to me, "*Men should lower their gaze*

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<sup>50</sup> Al-Gazali, a Persian philosopher of the 11th century, emphasised the significance of modesty and self-control in Islam and men's moral and ethical responsibility to guard their eyes. Al-Gazali alleged that a man's gaze can be as harmful to a woman's honour as physically grabbing her with his hands. He warned against the danger of the gaze, which can lead to undesirable thoughts and longings and thus is a potential gateway to sin (Mernissi, 1985).

*first. Purdah first comes on us and then only on the ladies*". While Umair expressed a remarkable resolve to strive for grace and respectability in social communications, he also self-reflectively acknowledged that he sometimes makes mistakes. For example, he shared how he had once commented on the clothes of a woman passing by on the street. Subsequently, he shared with me that he later contemplated his remarks as inappropriate and corrected his future behaviour to maintain a high standard of decency in alignment with *purdah*.

While both Fijian Ahmadi women and men highlighted the significance of lowering the gaze as an aspect of *purdah*, I noticed that greater emphasis was placed on the expectation of *purdah* of the eyes from men than women. This was explained to me by several Fijian Ahmadi men I interacted with, who referred to the Khalifa's guidance on *purdah*, noting that Allah addresses men first and, therefore, it is men who are expected to lower their eyes before women. According to Ahmed (2021), the Islamic concept of men's modesty, i.e., men's *purdah*, was deliberately overshadowed by European imperial nations seeking to establish themselves in Muslim countries. Promoting the idea that "Other men" (Ahmed, 2021, p. 151) beyond the borders of the "civilised West" oppressed women served as moral reasoning to undermine the cultures of Arab countries and depict Islamic societies as primitive (Said, 1994; Ahmed, 2021), thereby morally justifying colonisation in the eyes of the colonisers.

Among Fijian Ahmadi men, the concept of *purdah* of the eyes extends beyond human interactions to encompass broader behavioural modesty and self-control. Umair shared that since childhood, his mother had taught him and his siblings to lower their gaze whenever they encountered something generally deemed distressing or inappropriate. Similarly, Imam Tariq from Taveuni island, whom I met during the Jama'at's annual *Ijtima* religious competition (discussed in Chapter 3), underscored that for him, *purdah* of the eyes includes modesty in overall visual discipline and behaviour. He disclosed to me that, despite being in his mid-50s, he had never been to the cinema. When I asked if he had not been curious, he responded, "No, because I am satisfied with what I have". His voice carried a sense of pride in his strength of character and the virtue of modesty. For Imam Tariq, as he explained it, true fulfilment stems from a spiritual foundation, with *purdah* being its vital component. By avoiding the cinema, he intentionally evades environments that could potentially introduce sinful thoughts or impulses, thus maintaining his spiritual purity. Practising *purdah* in this manner encourages

him to honour his faith values, including simple living, avoidance of material and sensory temptations, and a focus on spiritual and personal growth.

Imam Tariq's choice reflects a broader commitment to modesty as a way to maintain spiritual purity of thought and conduct, illustrating that for some Fijian Ahmadis, *purdah* extends to a profound moral dimension that emphasises self-restraint concerning materialistic desires and societal influences. Meanwhile, the strong emphasis on upholding some traditional *purdah* values, such as resisting engagement with worldly matters, may limit Fijian Ahmadis' capacity to adapt to changing contexts or new ideas, and also presents some tension with Jama'at's self-representation as a community of modern and progressive Muslims (as discussed in Chapter 4).

By institutionalising men's moral discipline alongside women's, the Ahmadiyya Jamaat's practice of *purdah* subtly disrupts a persistent global cross-cultural pattern in which women are positioned as primary custodians of sexual purity, reputation, and ethical order, while men are evaluated according to different moral criteria. Research has consistently shown that in many honour-based communities, morality is disproportionately borne by women, who are more strongly required than men to deny their sexuality in order to assert moral worth (Nisha et al., 2024; Kandiyoti, 2019; Abu-Lughod, 2016; Mernissi, 1985). This asymmetry also prevails in Western contexts, where men's modesty is treated as less socially consequential than women's (Sheeran et al., 1996; Crawford & Popp, 2003), to the paradoxical extent that modest behaviour by men may attract social sanction, as documented in the United States (Moss-Racusin et al., 2010). Thus, the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's extension of modesty discipline to men represents a deliberate effort to equalise moral accountability across genders.

Further, the practice of *purdah* among Fijian Ahmadis emphasises the cultivation of emotional self-restraint as an aspect of their broader religious discipline. During the funeral of a local Jama'at member that I attended in Lautoka, I observed how Fijian Ahmadis adhered to the Khalifa's teachings, which caution against extravagant displays of grief at burial ceremonies and encourage quiet reflection instead. This internalisation of sorrow was evident among the grieving female relatives who, despite their visible sadness, consciously maintained a composed demeanour, supporting one another with gentle conversation and even humour. As one of the daughters of the deceased shared with me through a painful smile and teary eyes, "*we cry inside*". In this way, the reinforcement of emotional and

behavioural self-control forms an essential dimension of Fijian Ahmadi's spiritual practice, embodying the community's dedication to modesty and self-discipline.

Among Fijian Ahmadi, the committed practice of *purdah* serves as a powerful affirmation of their religious identity and alignment with what they regard as the true interpretation of Islam embodied in Ahmadiyya teachings. The Fijian Ahmadi observe *purdah* as both an internal discipline grounded in spiritual self-reflection and an external practice expressed through the regulation of gaze, behaviour and emotions, demonstrating their sustained commitment to moral conduct and spiritual purity. The commonly overlooked concept of men's *purdah* underscores the importance of gaining a deeper understanding before passing judgment on modesty practices. This is especially applicable within the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at, where *purdah* of the eyes is viewed as a collective duty; yet, there is a prevailing belief that its observance begins with men. This understanding reveals that *purdah*, as it is followed by Fijian Ahmadi, is a gendered practice, but one characterised by a redistribution of moral expectations across men and women.

### ***Purdah* and the Dress Code**

Fijian Ahmadi women and men also observe *purdah* in dress regulations, following the broad Islam's ethical guidelines, which prescribe that both genders should adhere to the modest clothing rules, ensuring that their attire is loose-fitting and does not reveal body contours (Ali, 2004; Ahmed, 2021), aiming to promote humility and piety.

From daily wear to special community events, Ahmadi men in Fiji, like their female counterparts, practice *purdah* through attire they view as decent and modest. While this practice reflects their dedication to their religious identity, their attire nonetheless often blends seamlessly with the broader Fijian society, thereby not offering the same distinctiveness as it does for local Ahmadi women. In adherence to *purdah*, Fijian Ahmadi men also choose clothing that signifies moral propriety.

Most adult men commonly wear long pants with plain long or short-sleeved shirts and, eventually, more casual collared T-shirts. Ahmadiyya imams in Fiji are always dressed in public in *shalwar kameez* and often also wear a waistcoat, which adds a touch of formality. During Friday prayers or Jama'at functions in Fiji (as well as in New Zealand), imams and many Ahmadi men also wear woollen *pakol* headcovers or *Jinnah caps*, named after Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. Particularly, *pakol* - traditionally made of sheep's wool and

strongly tied to highland cultures and cold climates of the mountainous regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan - seems curiously mismatched with the Fijian warm and humid environment.

I have not seen any Ahmadi men in Fiji wearing shorts. Usually elegantly dressed, Bilal occasionally wore muted versions of Fijian Bula shirts, however, with such subdued colours that his outfit wouldn't attract much attention anywhere. The rare exception of a vibrant male fashion was Bilal's and Nasreen's eldest son, Nazir, whose Bula shirts featured bold floral and pineapple prints on a fuchsia pink and red background, making him stand out. Nazir's sense of personal style might be influenced by his work at the local travel agency, where he is mainly surrounded by iTaukei colleagues.

Fijian Ahmadi women distinguish their dress code between the *purdah*, which consists "only" of a headscarf, usually called a *dupatta*, *hijab*, scarf, or veil, and the *full purdah*, which, in addition to a headscarf, includes a long-sleeved, ankle-length coat - referred to as a *burqa*.<sup>51</sup> Based on my observations, Fijian Ahmadi girls typically began wearing a veil between the ages of 9 and 13, with some as young as 14 also adopting a *burqa* coat as part of their *purdah* practice. Although *purdah* is not the same as the veil (El Guindi, 1999; Papanek, 1973), among Fijian Ahmadi, the terms are often conflated and used interchangeably. Fijian Ahmadi women commonly say, "When I am in my *purdah*... I feel safe" or "When I wear my *purdah*... others respect me".

By using terms such as "being in" or "wearing" *purdah*, Fijian Ahmadi women express the multifaceted meaning of *purdah* practice, which involves physical barriers as well as ethical aspects of their spirituality, and also their identity. As conveyed by Farah, "*Purdah is part of me*". Farah shared with me that if she were to leave the house without her headscarf, she wouldn't feel at ease, "*Even the wind that touches me, it would feel weird. My entire life, I have observed purdah, and it has become this very protective shell around me now. It's something I enjoy doing. Without purdah, I am uncomfortable*". Farah's statement demonstrates that, to her, the observance of *purdah* is an internalised practice that provides emotional security, personal comfort, and a sense of identity. Anthropologist Hanna Papanek (1973, p. 520) termed *purdah* garments as "portable seclusion", while Lila Abu-Lughod (2002, p. 785) likened them to "mobile homes". Both anthropologists suggested that *purdah* attire represents not just a community identity for Muslim women but also a form of liberation.

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<sup>51</sup> For Fijian Ahmadi, the term *burqa* refers only to the coat worn usually over their *shalwar kameez*. Their faces are not covered. This is different from the traditional *burqa* used in countries like Afghanistan, parts of South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, which covers the entire body, including the face, with a mesh grille over the eyes.

These garments enable women to uphold their moral standards of modesty and participate more freely in public life by maintaining both moral and physical boundaries, particularly in the presence of men who are not family members (Papanek, 1973; Abu-Lughod, 2002). Similarly, this understanding of *purdah* as both a boundary and a safeguarding layer was echoed by Fijian Ahmadi women with whom I spoke and who articulated that *purdah* was fundamental to their identity and daily experience.

The headscarf, which is frequently part of *purdah*, remains a source of many debates within and outside Muslim communities. The diversity and varied engagement with the veil were aptly captured in El Guindi's (1999) dedication at the beginning of her book *The Veil: Modesty, Privacy, Resistance*, which she devoted to, "those who decided to veil, those who refused to unveil, those who refused to veil, those who traditionally always veiled, and those who never ever veiled". This illustrates that the veiling is not simply a uniform religious mandate but is shaped and influenced by several factors. Whether Muslim women wear the veil is linked to their community, customs, cultural constructions of identity, personal choice, and views of self and body (El Guindi, 1999).<sup>52</sup> Consequently, many Muslim women regard themselves as devoutly pious, upholding their religious identity regardless of whether they choose to wear the headscarf or not.<sup>53</sup>

Most Fijian Ahmadi women I have met, especially in Nadi, opted for wearing full *purdah* (i.e., headscarf and coat) in public. Notably, this was the only instance in which I observed Fijian Jama'at members diverge from the Khalifa's guidance (which showed a less stringent approach to this matter). In one of his online videos on the subject, the Khalifa clarified that the required dress code for women, according to Islamic scriptures, involves modest, loose clothing and a chest-covering shawl. He went on to explicitly state that the *burqa* - coat, or even a *hijab* - headscarf, is not obligatory but rather an innovation developed by women for their own convenience (Voice of Khilafat, 2023, "Is it mandatory for Muslim

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<sup>52</sup> Contrary to the expectations, Afghan women continued wearing the *burqa* - perceived by Westerners as a symbol of oppression under the Taliban - even after the regime's collapse. That is because, to many Afghani women, the *burqa* represents a deep-seated cultural norm of modesty that is tied to local Pashtun traditions (Abu-Lughod, 2002). In Sri Lanka, where Muslims are often a marginalised minority, the veil transcends personal piety and takes on a wider socio-political role, symbolising a collective Muslim identity (Haniffa, 2008). Meanwhile, in the US, many Muslim women have chosen to stop veiling while they still remain profoundly committed to their faith (Ahmed, 2021).

<sup>53</sup> To challenge Western criticism of Islam as repressive towards women, Islamic feminists have often defended *purdah* and the veil as a feminist act (Vakulenko, 2012). Syrian-American poet Mohja Kahf (2005) published an article, "Spare Me the Sermon on Muslim Women", where she challenges the stereotypical view that Muslim women are submissive and oppressed by their culture and religion and defends veiling, "I wear a veil when I go out. What a loss it would be for me not to have in my life this alternating structure of covering outdoors and uncovering indoors". However, Kahf admits that the veil is not the primary spiritual focus of being a Muslim woman. What she sees far more significant is "the central blessing of Islam that affirms women's spiritual equality with men".

women to wear an outer covering”). Despite that, many Fijian Ahmadi women adhere to stricter and non-mandatory full *purdah* garments, even amidst the discomfort of wearing a long, often heavy coat on top of their clothing in Fiji’s tropical climate. Hina recounted to me that one of the most frequent questions she receives from other Fijians concerns whether she feels too hot in her coat. She explained that while her body has adapted, her priority is the sense of comfort and safety it provides in shielding herself from the gaze of those who do not observe *purdah* and do not lower their gaze. Therefore, wearing *full purdah*, she attests, makes her feel immune to unwanted attention. Hina’s stance reflects a conscious, embodied response to her social environment, where the coat functions as a protective mechanism that allows her to assert control over her visibility and maintain a sense of safety and autonomy in public spaces where others may not share or respect her modesty values.

Nonetheless, views on the *purdah* dress code among Fijian Ahmadi women are diverse. Now retired, Sajjad and his wife were born in Fiji and later moved to Sydney, but return to their hometown of Nadi and the village of Navaka every year. Sajjad’s wife wears a *shalwar kameez* with a shawl draped over her chest. She does not wear a headscarf except when inside the mosque. Sajjad emphasised that *purdah* covering should adhere to the Khalifa’s directive, “Our Khalifa said that *purdah* is what is mentioned in the Holy Qur’an, and we shall follow that”. Sajjad directed his critique toward other Muslim women globally, expressing concern over how many of them have strayed from those guidelines, with extremes in both over-covering by hiding their entire face and or through insufficient modesty in dress. He articulated his disapproval with both extremes by stating, “This is not Islam”. Advocating for moderation in clothing, Sajjad pointed to his wife as an example, who dresses modestly without the headscarf, “That’s all that we need!”.

The choice of more conservative *purdah* attire by many Fijian Ahmadi women reflects deeply internalised notions of modesty and religious identity within the Ahmadiyya Jama’at in Fiji, highlighting a complex interplay between personal conviction, communal expectations, and doctrinal guidance. By wearing *full purdah*, these women navigate both their individual and communal identities while also shaping the norms within the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama’at. Moreover, as discussed later in this chapter, their practices also impact other Fijian Ahmadi women who might not adhere as strictly to the dress code, despite their standards aligning with the Khalifa’s official advice. Although the overwhelming majority of Fijian Ahmadi women stated that they sincerely cherish the headscarf, the very few who

decide not to wear it admit to facing pressure from other community members (discussed later in this chapter).

For Fijian Ahmadi women, the *purdah* attire transcends its role of concealing body contours and providing a sense of security. It evolves into a significant expression of their identity and spirituality, embodying internal modesty that influences their interactions with other Fijians. Viewing *purdah* garments as integral to their existence, their choice of clothing becomes a declaration of faith, culture, and identity, influencing how they connect with the world. While views on the *purdah* dress code among the Jama'at members are not uniform, many Fijian Ahmadi women, nonetheless, associate the *purdah* attire with notions of safety and decency.

## II. SAFETY AND FREEDOM

As a practice rooted in self-restraint, *purdah* generally exemplifies a dialectic between the established virtue of modesty and the concepts of safety and freedom. *Purdah* serves both as a shield and a barrier, isolating individuals from the external world and reinforcing a sense of personal security and cultural norms. Furthermore, I noted that the observance of *purdah* among Fijian Ahmadis promotes collective identity through the moral values it upholds, strengthening the community's sense of integrity and decorum. However, the very boundaries that protect can also constrain, potentially enhancing or restricting members' liberty and authenticity. Thus, the dual nature of *purdah* inevitably accentuates the intricate relationship between communal values and personal autonomy.

### Armoured Protection

Although the dress code is just one element of the *purdah* observance, for Fijian Ahmadi women, *purdah* is closely associated with their clothing practices. One of the most commonly cited reasons Fijian Ahmadi women shared with me for wearing *purdah* is that it helps them avoid becoming the focus of physical attraction. At the age of 80, Sajjad does not shy away from calling out what other Jama'at members may just tiptoe around, "*When men see a pretty girl dressed in shorts, they will want to take her to bed. Short dresses attract men's lust. See, that happens in European countries. You know that*". This perspective was expressed by both older and younger Fijian Ahmadis, who often framed others, particularly Europeans,

as embodying loose morals and immodest clothing, a contrast that reinforced their stated appreciation for their community's guidance on *purdah*.

By wearing *purdah*, not only do Fijian Ahmadi women seek to protect themselves from men's alleged aggression, but they also claim to guard others against acting in a perceived inappropriate manner. A fresh university graduate, Farah, disclosed to me how she always lowers her gaze when in public and does not directly look into other people's eyes, particularly a man's eyes. In an attempt to tease her, I asked if she avoided eye contact even with men she liked. She giggled and replied, "*Even more if I like them! To help me safeguard those feelings so that it doesn't lead me to do wrong things*". Farah's response reflects a deeply internalised ethic of modesty, where *purdah* extends to govern bodily and emotional restraint, serving as an additional layer of protection beyond the dress code.

Like many Fijian Ahmadi women, Nasreen's mother, Duryaab, whenever she leaves the house, wears *full purdah* (i.e., *burqa*). She told me that without her *burqa*, she would feel exposed and insecure, whereas wearing it provides a sense of concealment and comfort. She described how, in contrast to the Jama'at's practice of gender separation, medical clinics in Fiji have shared waiting rooms. In these mixed spaces, Duryaab views *purdah* as a means of maintaining her boundaries while still allowing her to interact with others, "*When we do the purdah, nobody can see us. We cover our heads, we cover everything, and then we have no problem... You can sit anywhere. It's easy for us. It's so comfortable. I can talk to anybody*". As Duryaab expressed through her perception that "nobody can see her", a sentiment often shared by many Fijian Ahmadi women who praised *purdah* for minimising unwanted attention, this view can be complicated in a non-Muslim context like Fiji, where visibly Islamic clothing sets wearers apart and, in fact, may draw significant public scrutiny.

Further, Duryaab also touched on one of the unforeseen practicalities of the *purdah* dress code, a point similarly revealed during Ahmed's (2021) research in Egypt. As wearing Islamic garments indicates compliance with a particular moral and sexual code, Ahmed (2021) observed that this paradoxically enabled Muslim women to freely interact with men outside of their family circles without risking their reputations. In Egypt, Ahmed (2021) noted that female students reported deliberately avoiding being seen speaking with male classmates before adopting Islamic dress. However, after wearing the veil, they felt comfortable studying alongside men or even walking with them in public without harming their social standing (Ahmed, 2021). Consequently, the Islamic dress allowed them to move outside the home

while adhering to social norms that signify modesty and respectability, thus “carving out legitimate public space for themselves” (Ahmed, 2021, p. 224). Although Duryaab described *full purdah* as enabling her to interact with unfamiliar men, my ethnographic findings indicate that young and middle-aged Fijian Ahmadi women, despite strictly adhering to *full purdah*, generally prefer to limit exchanges with “outsiders” and often opt for social isolation from other Fijian communities.

For Fijian Ahmadi women, *purdah* clothing also functioned as a tangible expression of their distinct communal identity, conveying religious adherence and alignment with Ahmadiyya Islam values. Another university student, Sanam, disclosed to me that she rarely interacted with other students. This was mainly because she considered herself generally more introverted, and also had little interest in engaging with those outside her Jama’at. Sanam termed *purdah* her “*protective shell*”, and shared with me how her garments helped her remain in her element, “*My purdah implies that I will not be tolerating unnecessary stuff. So, it’s kind of... Yeah, people get that perception about me - Okay, we are to stay to the point with her*”. Her statement reflects a stance where *purdah* serves as a boundary that signals limits to unwanted social engagement.

Through *purdah*, many Fijian Ahmadi women actively strive to discourage close interactions with the general public. According to Fijian Ahmadi women that I have met, other Fijians demonstrate their regard for women who wear *purdah* by maintaining physical distance and refraining from verbal or bodily social contact. Farkhanda, who lives in Navaka village and wears *full purdah* in public, disclosed to me, “*Doing the purdah, you don’t have to look for the respect; you receive it from others*”. She shared, that whenever she goes to Nadi town centre, she wears a *burqa* coat, and people refrain from commenting on her or tapping on her shoulder, “*When they see me, they think that when I am doing this kind of purdah, I am not going to communicate with other people. And that’s what I love*”. Farkhanda, like many Fijian Ahmadi women that I have spoken with, interpreted that being ignored or even avoided by others as a mark of respect that upheld her dignity. Framing others’ detachment as a demonstration of respect was reiterated by the 18-year-old Zahra, who is the only Ahmadi in her high school. Zahra conveyed to me that wearing *purdah* is enjoyable because it maintains a barrier between her and others, “*People don’t come close to you and won’t be touchy with you. Whenever a classmate comes, especially a boy, he will distance himself because he knows that I’m a Muslim. So, it’s a pretty good thing. You have for yourself respect*

*there*". Like Zahra, other Fijian Ahmadi women that I have met appreciated if the label "the Muslim woman" had some deterrent effect on Fijians from other communities in social interactions. For instance, Hina articulated contentment that her clothing marked her as a Muslim, and motivated others to interact with her differently, "*They know not to offer handshakes*". To Fijian Ahmadi women, being avoided by strangers is embraced and seen as a sign of getting respect. Whereas many Fijian Ahmadi women expressed being sensitive not to stir attraction in others as individuals, in contrast, they welcomed that their *purdah* attires evidently identified them as Muslims and prompted others to social distance.

Adherence to the *purdah* dress code also influences professional lives and choices of some Fijian Ahmadi women. A few years ago, Farkhanda apparently declined a job offer due to her firm commitment to observing *full purdah*. While the employer reportedly did not object to her wearing a headscarf, due to the company's staff uniform requirements, she would not have been allowed to wear a *burqa* coat. As Farkhanda expressed, *full purdah* clothing was non-negotiable for her, regardless of the consequences her stance entailed, "*So I did not find any job. But I did not get disheartened. If your heart is pure, if your thinking is good, obviously God will make a way*". Farkhanda decided to stay home and began making sweets, occasionally receiving small orders. Although she admits the money isn't enough, she disclosed finding satisfaction in aligning her actions with her faith values, "*If the purdah comes between anything, you choose your purdah*". Farkhanda's resolute dedication to the strict *purdah* dress code (which, as mentioned earlier in this chapter is not mandated by the Khalifa) is further underscored by the fact that, based on my observations, her family was among the less well-off within the Fijian Jama'at, with the financial burden entirely borne by her husband, employed as a gardener. Consequently, Farkhanda's choice reveals a profound commitment to *purdah* adherence, demonstrated by a willingness to uphold a self-imposed religious practice despite financial hardship and the absence of formal obligation.

The practice of *purdah* among Fijian Ahmadi women is, therefore, I argue, not merely a spiritual obligation but a deeply internalised and personally meaningful expression of religious identity, modesty, and moral agency. Apart from shielding themselves from unwanted attention, Fijian Ahmadi women rely on *purdah* as a tool through which they assert their distinctiveness and manage interpersonal and professional interactions by setting firm social boundaries as a minority group in a predominantly non-Muslim society. For many Fijian Ahmadi women, *purdah* is a conscious expression of self-respect and an empowering spiritual

practice that allows them to navigate public space with confidence and autonomy. Their adherence to *purdah* reflects a strong personal conviction and a deliberate assertion of control over how they engage with the world around them on their own terms. In doing so, Fijian Ahmadi women contest prevalent assumptions that equate modesty and piety with subjugation.

### ***Purdah* as a Safeguard within the Ethnic and Political Landscape of Fiji**

Fijian Ahmadis also rely on *purdah* to present themselves as distinctly virtuous citizens and devout Muslims, using it as a protective response to underlying anti-Indo-Fijian sentiments in Fiji. The meticulous adherence to *purdah* distinguishes Fijian Ahmadis from other Indo-Fijians and also from some less traditional and committed Fijian Muslim communities. By exemplifying religious devotion and law-abiding conduct, Fijian Ahmadis stated that they hoped to alleviate potential negative perceptions held principally by the iTaukei majority and foster a positive image that could shield them from prejudice.

Ethnically, Fijian Ahmadis identify as Indo-Fijians. The representatives of this second-largest Fijian ethnicity, primarily descendants of indentured labourers, typically from the Indian Subcontinent, are mainly Hindus, but some are also Muslims (Lal, 2011). Although the predominantly Christian iTaukei population holds most of the land and significant political influence in Fiji (Regan et al., 2024), Indo-Fijians consistently tend to fare better economically. Such disparities between the land-rich indigenous iTaukei and the relatively economically prosperous Indo-Fijians have historically contributed to political power conflicts, social stratification, and ethnic-centric policies that amplify perceptions of disparity and dominance between the two largest ethnic groups in Fiji (Trnka, 2008; Naidu, 1980).<sup>54</sup>

Zakaria's office is part of the Ahmadiyya family-owned busy compound alongside the main road to Nadi airport, which includes multiple rented shops, restaurants and flats. Following the 2022 general election in Fiji, which saw a former leader of the 1987 coups, Sitiveni Rabuka, become the prime minister, Zakaria disclosed that he had noticed a growing hatred towards Muslims and remained cautious.<sup>55</sup> He mentioned that he once displayed

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<sup>54</sup> Other ethnic groups in Fiji are part-European Fijians (Eurasians) with mixed ancestry of European settlers and indigenous Fijians; Rotumans from the island of Rotuma, which has a unique cultural and linguistic heritage distinct from the rest of Fiji; and other Pacific Islander communities - Tongans, Samoans, Tuvaluans, Kiribatians, Solomon islanders, ni-Vanuatuans and Banabans, along with a small percentage of Europeans and Chinese (Norton, 1990).

<sup>55</sup> In Fiji's election on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2022, prime minister Frank Bainimarama lost his parliamentary majority. The opposition parties - the People's Alliance, the National Federation Party and Sodelpa formed government coalition ("Fiji elections 2022", 2022).

photos on the now-empty wall behind him, featuring himself with several former Fijian politicians, but had taken them down since 2022 out of concern that such associations might negatively affect his business partnerships. Now, the only decoration remaining at his desk is a wooden plate with Ahmadiyya Jama'at's official motto - *Love for all, hatred for none* - which Ahmadis in Fiji and New Zealand abundantly display on key chains, car stickers, desktop backgrounds and even baseball hats. Like Zakaria, many other Fijian Ahmadis conveyed to me a sense of caution following the 2022 election. Their attitude is not out of place and has roots in recent Fijian history. Still remembered by many Fijian residents, the late 1980s marked the beginning of political advocacy for the paramountcy of iTaukei's rights and open hostilities towards Indo-Fijians, which had significant public and social dimensions. Led by the nationalist *Taukei* Movement<sup>56</sup>, which emphasised land ownership and the preservation of traditional chiefly authority, the movement's actions often escalated into violent attacks on Indo-Fijians and their properties, including calls for Indo-Fijians' repatriation to India (Howard, 1991; Lawson, 1991). The *Taukei* Movement significantly influenced the two 1987 coups led by Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, who aimed to restore iTaukei's dominance by embedding their privileges in the constitution (Lal, 2000).

The 1990 Constitution institutionalised ethnic preferences by disproportionately allocating parliamentary seats to iTaukei and marginalising Indo-Fijians and other minorities (Robertson & Sutherland, 2001; Howard, 1991). As a result, over the following two decades, Fijian politics was marred by the politicisation of ethnicity, which sustained racial divisions. The ongoing political confrontations between Fijian nationalism and Indian communalism played on the fear of ethnic group domination, jeopardising efforts to build a harmonious multiracial nation. While the governing elites often perceived their own interests, they failed to promote a unified Fijian national identity (Norton, 2015; Howard, 1991; Robertson & Sutherland, 2001).

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<sup>56</sup> The *Taukei* Movement in Fiji was primarily a reaction to political shifts that seemed to undermine the social and political dominance of the indigenous iTaukei. It opposed the 1987 election of Timoci Bavadra's government, which was predominantly supported by Indo-Fijians and represented a multi-ethnic coalition. *Taukei* movement played a crucial role in shaping Fiji's political landscape, often at the cost of national unity and multicultural integration (Howard, 1991; Lawson 1991).

The prolonged political instability, economic degradation, international isolation, and diminished foreign investment contributed to subsequent coups in 2000 and 2006<sup>57</sup> (Lal, 2006). The military increasingly played a dual role as both a stabilising force and a source of political interference (Norton, 2015) and especially after the 2006 coup, the army became a permanent political actor (Fraenkel, 2013). Despite the turmoil, Fiji-born historian Brij Lal (2006) and anthropologist Robert Norton (2015) agree that the reforms during this period, aimed at reducing ethnic polarisation, achieved some minor success.

The integrational efforts culminated under the leadership of Commodore Frank Bainimarama, who, following the 2006 military coup, as the prime minister, implemented the 2013 Constitution, establishing more equitable power-sharing frameworks. Professor of Politics Stewart Firth (2015) noted that the abolition of ethnic-based electoral systems<sup>58</sup> and the dissolution of the traditional Great Council of Chiefs<sup>59</sup> marked a shift from Fiji's prior conflicts of ethnic nationalism.

Nonetheless, Fiji remained somewhat less than a fully democratic democracy. While Bainimarama earned praise for establishing Fiji as a secular state and promoting inter-religious tolerance, he faced criticism for authoritarian tendencies, top-down reforms with limited consultation, suppression of dissent, and the undermining of democratic institutions through the consolidation of power (Firth, 2015). Although 2013 Constitutional measures promoted a singular national identity, promising multi-ethnic coexistence and "Fiji for all Fijians" (Lal, 2006, p. 41), they also sparked controversy among iTaukei over their diminished political influence and endangering their cultural heritage and autonomy (Firth, 2015; Regan

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<sup>57</sup> On May 19, 2000, George Speight and his group of armed gunmen seized the parliament, taking Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his government hostage. Speight, a relatively unknown figure, portrayed the coup as an action aimed at correcting perceived injustices and reasserting iTaukei's control. The event led to significant political fragmentation and a shift in the dynamics of Fijian politics, undermining the 1997 constitution and creating a prolonged hostage crisis that deeply affected Fiji's socio-political landscape (Lal, 2001; Lal, 2006; Robertson & Sutherland, 2001). The 2006 coup was led by Commodore Frank Bainimarama, who was critical of the government's perceived corruption and its racially discriminatory policies favouring iTaukei over other groups. Bainimarama justified the coup as a necessary intervention to root out corruption and prevent the enactment of legislation that would grant amnesty to perpetrators of the 2000 coup. Following the coup, Bainimarama's regime promised reforms to address these issues but faced criticism for its methods and the suspension of democratic processes (Lal, 2006; Fraenkel, 2007).

<sup>58</sup> Prior to 2013, constitutions of Fiji had provisions for communal representation, where citizens voted in ethnic-based electorates. This system was designed to ensure representation of various ethnic groups, including indigenous iTaukei, Indo-Fijians, and other minority groups. The 2013 Constitution abolished these communal electorates and introduced a form of proportional representation through a single national constituency (Firth, 2015).

<sup>59</sup> The Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) was composed of chiefs from the iTaukei community and was traditionally a significant body in Fijian politics and a crucial part of the socio-political hierarchy among the iTaukei. The GCC was originally established in 1876 to embody the relationship of trust and protection between the Fijians and the British, and over the years, it played a significant role in Fiji's political landscape, advising on indigenous affairs and contributing to constitutional developments. In 2013, GCC was removed from its role in the formal governance structure and a legislative process (Norton, 2009).

et al., 2024). The 2013 Constitutional reforms also had mixed effects on the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at. As part of the Indo-Fijian group, local Ahmadis faced prospects of a heightened sense of belonging and civic engagement, yet they remained a potentially vulnerable minority.

In the general elections in December 2022, despite Bainimarama's electoral manipulations,<sup>60</sup> his party, FijiFirst, narrowly lost, and Rabuka of the People's Alliance Party became prime minister by forming a new coalition government.<sup>61</sup> Among Fijian Ahmadis, the election of Rabuka, a coup leader from 1987 and a firm defender of iTaukei's dominance who once declared that "Fijians must rule Fiji: that was God's wish" (Lal, 2000, p. 319), did not bring peace of mind. According to Lal (2000, p. 319), since the 1980s, Rabuka has undergone a remarkable transformation, turning from "a strident hero of ethnic chauvinism, God-appointed Christian crusader with a mission to convert all heathens to his faith" into "a messiah of multiracialism and cross-cultural understanding, a national statesman, a regional peacemaker". Yet, despite Rabuka's supposed personal change, earning the trust of Fijian Ahmadis and other Indo-Fijians may still prove considerably challenging. Amid the political uproar over his actions in the late 1980s and claims of divine guidance (Lal, 2000, p. 323), Rabuka's assertions do not sit well with Fijian Ahmadis, not least due to an uneasy parallel with their community founder, Ghulam Ahmad, who equally claimed to embody divine inspiration. Understandably, some Fijian Ahmadis expressed serious concerns, and few shared with me that they have written to the Khalifa to voice their worries about Rabuka's return to power. Reportedly, the Khalifa responded by advising them to fully cooperate with the newly formed government.

Whereas the notion of Indo-Fijians' repatriation remains hypothetical, it could be particularly distressing for Fijian Ahmadis, more so than for other members of this ethnic group in Fiji. For Fijian Ahmadis, returning to Pakistan or Afghanistan - their ancestral homelands - presents significant risks and restrictions due to Pakistan's blasphemy laws, which, since 1974, have labelled adherents of Ahmadiyya faith as non-Muslims, and therefore, practising Islam subjects them to being considered heretics and criminals (Qasmi,

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<sup>60</sup> The Bainimarama's government-imposed restrictions on opposition parties and implemented amendments that weakened the Electoral Commission's authority. Additionally, opposition leaders were frequently harassed by the Fiji Independent Commission against Corruption (FICAC), and several opposition MPs were imprisoned ahead of the 2022 election (Fraenkel, 2023).

<sup>61</sup> The coalition includes the People's Alliance Party, the National Federation Party (NFP), and SODELPA ("Fiji elections 2022", 2022).

2015). Consequently, Fijian Ahmadis are aware of the predicament of having no safe country to which they can return.

Fijian Ahmadis, like some minorities affiliating with Islam, intentionally use religious practices to adapt to and integrate into their host societies. Research on Muslims in Germany and France showed that members of those minorities demonstrated concerted efforts to exhibit moral virtue and good citizenship, often as a tactic to mitigate discrimination or to foster acceptance and integration within their respective societies (Al-Azmeh & Fokas, 2007). Similarly, sociologist and political scientist of Islam Kathryn Spellman-Poots (2004) observed that Iranian Muslims in the UK adapt their religious practices to the surrounding socio-political context, at times modifying traditions or highlighting beliefs aligned with values like democracy and human rights that resonate with the broader UK public.

With lingering memories of ethnic conflict and political upheaval, especially with the return of figures like Rabuka, Fijian Ahmadis seek to uphold personal and public identity that is devout, ethical, and apolitical (as discussed in Chapter 4). Fijian Ahmadis regard their firm practice of *purdah* as an expression of religious devotion, setting them apart as a morally principled and distinguishable group within Fiji's multicultural society. From their perspective, this approach also functions as a means of safeguarding their community's well-being and securing social acceptance. It was not within my research purview to examine how iTaukei view the principles and behaviours linked to the strict observance of *purdah*, as practised by Fijian Ahmadis. However, owing to the existing suspicion with which Muslims are sometimes perceived in Fiji, including potential anti-Muslim biases (Williard, 2023; Garrette, 1990), the conservative *purdah* clothing and rigorous adherence to aspects of *purdah* among Fijian Ahmadis may contribute to further social distancing rather than support broader Muslim integration into Fijian society.

### ***Purdah* within the Demographic Context of Fiji**

Among Fijian Ahmadis, the practice of *purdah* also represents a strategic adaptation to their socio-political context and minority status in Fiji, serving to reinforce internal community cohesion. Facing a declining local population due to widespread migration for better opportunities and marriage (as discussed in Chapter 4), Fijian Ahmadis use their religious practices to solidify their community's identity. The commitment to disciplined

religious practice helps them foster a sense of belonging, unity and maintain community integrity in the face of external pressures like demographic changes.

Ethnographies of Ahmadiyya Jama'at from the UK (Valentine, 2008) and India (Evans, 2017, 2020) have documented that Ahmadis' meticulous adherence to religious practices, such as *purdah*, stems from their aim to exemplify Islamic virtues. Evans (2017) noted that the commitment to more conservative Islamic practices showcases the broader strategy of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at to preserve its unique identity. This approach reflects the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's dedication to its own distinct interpretation of Islam while simultaneously seeking to affirm its legitimacy within the broader global Muslim community.

In Fiji, Ahmadis' strict religious observance is further shaped by enduring demographic trends of shrinking communities influenced by local historical-political developments, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Many Fijian Ahmadis have expressed concerns about the decline in their community's numbers, mirroring the broader pattern of skilled migration from Fiji that began in the late 1980s and continues to this day, as individuals seek better opportunities and more stable conditions overseas.<sup>62</sup> Zakaria has witnessed this migratory trend, which impacts all Fijian groups, including local Ahmadis, dramatically intensifying since the COVID-19 pandemic, as all seven of his employees left upon receiving job offers from New Zealand and Australia.<sup>63</sup> Seeing migration as the most significant challenge to the local Jama'at, Zakaria expressed a resolve to strengthen the integrity of those Ahmadis who remain in Fiji, "*As our numbers are dropping, we have to put more efforts into keeping our Jama'at*".

Similarly, other Fijian Ahmadis I spoke with pointed to high inflation and rising unemployment, while some also highlighted the expansion of the illegal drug market in Fiji as a factor influencing people's decisions to migrate.<sup>64</sup> Fijian Ahmadis additionally migrate for marriage, resulting in many members born in Fiji being now active contributors to Ahmadiyya communities in New Zealand, Australia, the US, and Canada.

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<sup>62</sup> The initial wave of migration from Fiji was driven by discriminatory policies mainly against Indo-Fijians and the economic difficulties that followed each coup in Fiji in 1987 (two coups), in 2000, and 2006 (Lal, 1992).

<sup>63</sup> Since 2022, Fiji has experienced large-scale emigration of skilled and semi-skilled workers, driven by better job opportunities abroad, particularly in Australia and New Zealand. Net departures rose from an annual average of 9,000 before 2018 to over 40,000 in both 2022 and 2023 - equivalent to a net emigration rate of 5% of the total Fijian population in 2023 (Howes & Liu, 2024).

<sup>64</sup> Fiji has evolved from an initial transit country, trafficking narcotics from South America and Asia for lucrative markets in New Zealand and Australia, into a production and consumption site - notably methamphetamine (Sousa-Santos, 2022). This trade undermines the rule of law and heightens security concerns.

Social anthropologist Pnina Werbner (2020), who studied the Mirpuri Pakistani community in Manchester, UK, noted that its members frequently adopt more rigorous and strict religious practices as a means of self-preservation. The rituals and sacrifices performed by Pakistanis in the UK serve to reconstruct and sustain a moral and cohesive community in their new environment. Werbner (2020) argues that such a response can emerge when a community feels vulnerable or under threat, as these practices help strengthen group identity and cohesion, offering a sense of security and continuity. As one of the largest Pakistani ethnic groups in the UK, the Mirpuris' rich cultural heritage contributes to their well-established community (Werbner, 2020). Although Fijian Ahmadi face different socio-political challenges than British Pakistanis, their status as a shrinking community has led them to similarly intensify religious practices to preserve their identity and navigate their position as a minority within a multicultural society. Amid declining numbers, many Fijian Ahmadi viewed the intensification of religious practices and strict *purdah* observance as strategies to preserve cultural and religious continuity, strengthen internal cohesion, and provide stability for remaining members.

I have observed some obvious differences in how Ahmadi visiting Fiji from Australia or New Zealand follow *purdah* practice, often less strictly than those permanently residing in Fiji. During one of the Friday prayers at the Aqsa Mosque, I met Meesha, an Ahmadi woman from Sydney visiting her birthplace, Nadi. She suggested we walk back to the town together after the prayer, which was uncommon among Fijian Ahmadi women, whom I observed always driving or being driven everywhere. Immediately upon leaving the mosque, Meesha removed her headscarf. As we passed the bus station, she exchanged a friendly chat with a taxi driver whom she recognised from her childhood, then walked with me through the market, past stalls in the *grog* section with dried *kava* roots, to a spice shop, where she collected her order of jeera, coriander, and turmeric. Upon leaving the market, iTaukei at the entrance were selling *nama*, edible seaweed grapes indigenous to Fiji that smelled like the ocean. Meesha exclaimed excitedly, "Oh, I have missed those!" and negotiated the price of one plate of *nama*. Before catching a taxi, she introduced me to her tailors, located in the nearby workshop, greeting them loudly, "Hare Krishna", in line with their religious affiliation. Meesha's spontaneous and lively communication with market traders and other Fijians stood in contrast to the public behaviour of Ahmadi women in Nadi, with whom I interacted, and

who commonly deliberately limited or avoided social engagement, thereby presenting themselves as unapproachable.

For Fijian Ahmadi, I argue that the heightened adherence to *purdah* serves to establish and maintain social boundaries as well as reflect their efforts to strengthen their communal identity. Such an approach to *purdah* may not feel necessary for some Ahmadi in Australia or New Zealand, where the presence of a larger Jama'at, different socio-political environment, or even the anonymity of the bigger cities, may provide a greater sense of security to its members.

### **A Heart that Does not Follow the Mainstream**

While *purdah* practice among Fijian Ahmadi women is generally marked by strict observance and conservative dress, members who adopted alternative understandings of *purdah* often found themselves in a challenging position within the Jama'at, having to negotiate the boundaries of communal expectations and personal conviction. In Lautoka, I met the youngest member of the local Jama'at, Kiran, who also happens to be *Sadar Lajna*, the president of Lautoka's Ahmadiyya ladies' branch. Kiran is just 26 years old, and what sets her apart within the Jama'at is her choice not to wear a veil. She dresses modestly in long-sleeved clothing and shared with me that she felt too young to wear *purdah*.

When I inquired if she was ever criticised by other members, she laughed, "*Oh yes! A lot. Especially being a Sadar... I've been pressured a lot. I get judged a lot, and I get lectured a lot about that*". Nonetheless, she remains persistent in her choice, fulfilling her community duties and praying regularly. She explained to me that had she started wearing *purdah* solely due to pressure from others, she wouldn't have been happy, "*Only when I will feel it from my heart, that's the day when I will start purdah. And then I will not stop*". Kiran's adherence to the *purdah* dress code reflects a personal choice that also aligns with the Khalifa's interpretation of appropriate clothing and takes precedence over the normative expectations of the local Jama'at.

Similarly, Samina, who is also *Sadar Lajna* in Maro, does not wear a veil except when she goes to the mosque. Employed at a golf club at Natadola Bay resort, and surrounded by iTaukei colleagues, she wears a uniform at work, with long pants and a long-sleeved top. While Samina's view on *purdah* includes modest dressing, she placed greater emphasis on its moral and spiritual dimensions. Meanwhile, she acknowledged to me that not following the *purdah*

clothing as rigorously as other Fijian Ahmadi women isn't easy for her, "*Sometimes I feel bad. But I have to think of my family and my work*". Samina expressed feelings of guilt but contextualised her decision within the broader demands of providing for her family, thereby aligning her choice with a prioritisation of economic stability over strict religious adherence.

Notably, although Kiran and Samina's dress code differs from the majority of other Fijian Ahmadi women, their choice does not defy the Khalifa's guidance, but instead deviates from the local Jama'at practices and expectations. Nonetheless, despite resisting those norms, both women have been appointed to the most significant executive roles within their respective branches.<sup>65</sup> While the appointments of Kiran and Samina may attest to the level of tolerance within the Fijian Jama'at, they might also serve as a form of strategic pressure on them to conform to mainstream practice. As leaders in their respective communities, Kiran and Samina balance their personal convictions with their roles as *Sadar Lajna*. This may lead to heightened scrutiny of their practices and cause them to feel conflicted about not meeting the stricter standards of some other Jama'at members.

Drawing on research among Muslim women in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, Deniz Kandiyoti (1991) emphasised that societal moral codes, often rooted in notions of shame and guilt, function as powerful social and psychological tools for regulating women's adherence to *purdah*. Consequently, Kandiyoti (1991) argued that observance of *purdah* is upheld through religious or cultural beliefs but also via the social application of shame. This is further complicated by the nature of collectivist Muslim communities, where deviation from the norms brings shame not solely to the individual but to the family and community (Kandiyoti, 1991; Abu-Lughod, 2016). These forms of communal regulation seem relevant in the context of the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at, not just regarding the aspects of *purdah* observance but also, as discussed in Chapter 4, in instances when members intend to marry outside their community. Such an environment constrains individual agency, limiting the capacity to cultivate one's moral self through autonomous decision-making.

Beyond the dress code, interpretations of the *purdah* practice among Fijian Ahmadis differ relative to gendered interactions, individual autonomy, and participation in broader social life. Nida, who divides her time between Nadi and Auckland, New Zealand, shared with me her critique of how certain aspects of *purdah* are practised among Fijian Ahmadi women.

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<sup>65</sup> *Sadar Lajnas* are chosen at the branch level through a voting process conducted by local member organisations known as *majlis* (assembly).

Compared to New Zealand, where Ahmadi women are reportedly more proactive in engaging with diverse groups outside of their community, Nida observed that in Fiji, Ahmadi women adopt a reserved stance, preferring to stay within the comfort of their Jama'at and showing less willingness to interact with other Fijian communities. She recalled a time when, following a community event at the Aqsa Mosque in Nadi, she and two other women planned to go to a restaurant, whereas one of the women insisted that they should be joined by at least one *khuddam*<sup>66</sup> to ensure they had male protection. Nida disagreed with this idea, "*We don't need any boys. We ladies are good enough. We can drive, we can go to other places, and we can talk to people!*". On another occasion, when Nida allegedly visited McDonald's in Nadi with a group of Ahmadi women, she recognised a bank employee with whom she and her husband had previously interacted professionally. After Nida exchanged greetings and had a brief conversation with him, one of the Ahmadi women present supposedly questioned her morals for speaking with a stranger, suggesting that Nida should only talk to women.

Whereas during both occasions, the restricted behaviours were framed as efforts to uphold moral conduct as a part of *purdah* observance, Nida conveyed her belief that such interpretations do not accurately reflect how Ahmadi women should adhere to their *purdah* practice, "*I can discuss anything with men, and my husband can talk to any woman... As long as I am in my purdah... I mean in a good manner... Even Huzoor hasn't stopped us from talking to anyone*". Nida's understanding of *purdah* emphasised her autonomy to engage with others independently. Additionally, she expressed that such rigid observance of *purdah* compromises the Jama'at's ability to interact publicly with other Fijians. She remarked on the absence of such interactions and the apparent reluctance of Fijian Ahmadi women to engage with those outside the Jama'at, "*I don't know why they do that, not opening themselves up to go anywhere by themselves*". In Nida's view, how *purdah* is practised by Fijian Ahmadi women reflects a lack of progress, a tendency she attributed to the local Fijian socio-cultural environment and significant emigration of educated local Jama'at members.

While *purdah* offers Fijian Ahmadi a sense of agency through symbolic and socially practised protection, it can also, in contrast to other interpretations of *purdah*, reinforce self-limiting perspectives that are paradoxically celebrated as moral virtues. In the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at, the internalisation of strict modesty norms as markers of moral identity

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<sup>66</sup> A member of the *Majlis Khuddam-ul-Ahmadiyya*, which is the youth organisation of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at for male members between the ages of 15 and 40 (Ahmad, 2020).

may lead some Fijian Ahmadis to evaluate both themselves and others through rigid criteria. Kandiyoti (1991) noted that while some women may comply with the strict communal norms due to social pressure, others find ways to resist or redefine *purdah* practices, though such efforts can often lead to social ostracism or further repercussions. The tendency among some Fijian Ahmadis to cultivate a culture of judgment toward those perceived as less observant, along with an inclination for religious inwardness, may contribute to the alienation of members who struggle to meet idealised standards of piety or seek a more inclusive communal environment.

Susan, whom I occasionally saw at Friday prayers at the Aqsa Mosque in Nadi, remained somewhat detached from Jama'at activities - not necessarily because of her Samoan Christian background or conversion through marriage, but likely due to her daughter's marriage to a Sunni Muslim (as discussed in Chapter 1), which I noticed to be met with disapproval by some members. Despite internal community challenges, Susan maintains a strong sense of her spiritual identity and practice, "*Purdah is a good way to protect you. But the main protection must be here inside*", she said while placing a hand on her heart. Like Nida, Susan expressed the view that many Fijian Jama'at members were reluctant to foster broader engagement, emphasising the need for a more inclusive approach, especially in building relationships with iTaukei and other economically disadvantaged communities.

With the few exceptions mentioned above, Fijian Ahmadi women that I have met in Nadi practised even interpretations in their *purdah* observance and dress code. The relatively limited variation in *purdah* adherence among Fijian Ahmadis suggests a broadly shared mainstream understanding of the practice within the local community. Its relatively stricter observance may be shaped by demographic and historical conditions specific to Fiji, which have motivated the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at to reinforce its identity in the face of declining membership and minority status. Although such rigidity may reinforce the Jama'at's internal cohesion, it also risks alienating less observant members, potentially undermining internal inclusivity and hindering the community's integration into broader Fijian society.

The adherence to *purdah* and Jama'at's guidelines may not, however, be as uniform or fervent among all Fijian Ahmadis as it might appear. Through various discussions, I learned that some members do not actively participate in community events, seldom visit the mosque, and frequently delay their community's obligatory monthly *chanda* contributions (discussed in Chapter 3). These individuals were described as "lazy members" by the more

devout Fijian Ahmadis in Nadi, with whom I commonly interacted and who are committed to consolidating the Jama'at through reinforcing active participation and diligent religious observance. As the overwhelming majority of Fijian Ahmadis are Ahmadis by birth and not by conversion, the limited involvement of “lazy members” in the community inevitably raises questions of commitment: How freely do Ahmadis make personal choices within the framework of their Jama'at?

### **Free within the Jama'at Norms**

Many Muslim women's views on freedom, influenced by their cultural, religious, and historical contexts, diverge from traditional Western interpretations of individualism and feminism that commonly prioritise individual autonomy and personal rights (Mahmood, 2001; Abu-Lughod, 2016).<sup>67</sup>

Female anthropologists and researchers, such as Saba Mahmood, Fatema Mernissi, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Hanna Papanek, have presented nuanced, insider interpretations of the experiences of Muslim women across various countries, ethnicities, and social classes. Their ethnographies demonstrated that for many Muslim women, *purdah* is a deliberate practice through which they assert agency by committing to piety and spiritual life. This engagement allows these women to cultivate autonomy, deepen ethical awareness, and draw personal strength from embodying Islamic values (Mahmood, 2001; Abu-Lughod, 2016; Mernissi, 1985; Papanek, 1973).

Similarly, for Fijian Ahmadi women, submitting to religious practices aligned with Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at interpretations and norms is considered an active choice that shapes their moral and spiritual identities. Fijian Ahmadi women with whom I interacted understand ethical self-cultivation as strict compliance with the Khalifa's directives and a practice of self-control that allows them to integrate their beliefs into their daily lives. This enables them to perceive their religiosity as a deliberate and empowered expression of autonomy. Thus, while it is generally accurate to view Muslim women as empowered and free within their cultural contexts (Mahmood, 2001; Abu-Lughod, 2016), this view is, nonetheless,

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<sup>67</sup> Abu-Lughod, who conducted fieldwork among the Bedouin communities of Egypt's Sinai desert, clearly illustrated this point by noting that no Bedouin women expressed a desire to emulate American or Western women. Their disinterest in Western lifestyles reflects a deep sense of cultural pride and a distinct identity and highlights their commitment to traditional values. These include specific gender roles and expectations that diverge from the ideals of liberal democracies (Abu-Lughod, 2016).

also not completely comprehensive or universally valid. I suggest that freedom, as it is experienced and understood by Fijian Ahmadi women, requires more detailed examination.

Many Fijian Ahmadi women autonomously navigate pious lives according to Ahmadiyya Islam's principles. Fulfilling *purdah* and religious duties makes Fijian Ahmadi women understand themselves to be appreciated and supported by their Jama'at, and consequently contributes to their personal contentment. However, it is important to consider how these religious practices are nuanced by the constraints and influences of their family and community, which may diminish personal agency within a wider cultural and historical context that establishes accepted norms and appropriateness.

Firstly, it is difficult to distinguish between truly autonomous decisions and those influenced by familial or community customs and pressures, which complicates the view of *purdah* as entirely a matter of personal choice. Several Fijian Ahmadi women have shared with me their move towards a stricter *purdah* dress code as being a gradual process, influenced by both personal motivations and external impacts, including ageing, the aspiration to maintain social standing, and the expectations of their Jama'at. For example, Amat disclosed to me that she began wearing a headscarf only a few years after getting married as a personal choice, showing commitment to her new responsibilities and identity as a married woman and a wife. Similarly, Nida started to wear a headscarf only when her son became a *murrabi* (imam). As his mother, she felt a sense of accomplishment, leading her to cover her head in public, which, as she expressed, became indispensable for her, "Now, if I didn't do *purdah* when I go out, I would feel like I'm half naked". Nida's account indicates a heightened sense of the importance of her role within the Jama'at, where she felt an increased responsibility to uphold specific measures of modesty that reflect positively on her family, particularly her son's respected position within the community. Nida's change in attire reflects both her self-perception within the community and the expectations of others who view her as the mother of a religious leader.

Farkhanda, who is now in her early 40s, shared with me that she started wearing a *full purdah* gradually around 14 years ago. As she explained, "wearing *purdah* somehow was not so important at that time in Fiji". Whereas Farkhanda's decision suggests a personal evolution in her faith practice, indicating deeper spiritual commitments as she aged, it was also influenced by changes within the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at's modesty norms. As the community's stance on *purdah* became more pronounced, Farkhanda felt an inclination to

conform to these emerging expectations. Consequently, viewing *purdah* observance and dress code as strictly personal choices can be problematic, as such practices are shaped by evolving beliefs, shifting collective norms and social influences.

Among the Fijian Ahmadi women whom I have met, the majority reported a gradual shift toward stricter forms of modest dress. Notably, I have not encountered anyone who expressed a move toward more relaxed dress standards. This consistent adherence to *purdah* among Fijian Ahmadi women thus demonstrates a shared community ethos grounded in modesty, religious devotion, and compliance with the local Jama'at norms. For those who embrace these values, their spiritual practice is a meaningful expression of autonomy, pursued within the framework of their community and transcending personal choice to serve as a marker of both collective identity and belonging. Meanwhile, uniformity in commitment to *purdah* among Fijian Ahmadi women can also suggest a perceived difficulty in remaining integrated within the Jama'at while making personal choices that deviate from mainstream expectations.

For many Muslims, Islam affects most aspects of believers' lives (Abu Raiya & Pargament, 2010; Jasperse et al., 2012), including obligations towards their own families, communities and Islamic moral restrictions (Jasperse et al., 2012). Professor of Sociology Nasar Meer (2008) suggested that Muslim identity is principally not entirely a matter of individual autonomy, and despite Islam technically allowing for abandonment, the concept that anyone can simply choose to stop being Muslim oversimplifies the reality. For many, being Muslim is an inherited social identity established by birth into a Muslim family and community rather than the result of a conscious personal choice (Meer, 2008; Cheng, 2015). Similarly, the identity of members of the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at goes beyond voluntary affiliation, being firmly rooted in broader social and cultural contexts that render it more complex and less focused on individual autonomy. A consideration regarding autonomy within the Jama'at is that if freedom is understood as an inner truth formed through self-reflection and personal conviction, then departing from accepted norms may be both necessary and potentially limiting to one's sense of liberty. While all individuals are influenced by societal forces, such external pressures may be more pronounced within communities like the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at, given the complex questions surrounding the (in)voluntary nature of members' communal identity.

Among the Fijian Ahmadis with whom I interacted, however, maintaining community spiritual practice and cohesion often took precedence over personal autonomy. Likewise, studying Islamic revival movements in Europe, sociologist and anthropologist Jeanette Jouili (2011) noted Muslim women's preference for interdependence over individual rights, reflecting a broader Islamic philosophy that values community and family ties and emphasises shared responsibilities.

Yet, this collective orientation does not exclude the existence of divergent views within the Jama'at. In environments where community identity is deeply embedded in cultural and family life, religious practices and decisions are not merely personal but hold significant social meaning (such as Ahmadis' practice of in-group marriage, discussed in Chapter 4). Therefore, some Fijian Ahmadis who wish to question dominant norms or consider alternative practices may refrain from acting on these thoughts due to concern about familial and communal judgment. Given the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at's emphasis on rigorous adherence to religious norms and the cultivation of a morally upright collective identity, individual deviation from prescribed rules can be especially tense, particularly for Fijian Ahmadi women, whose economic dependence on their husbands or family members may constrain their capacity to exercise personal agency. Consequently, such an environment may lead some Jama'at members to opt for the ease of conformity over the potential burdens. Although decisions and behaviours motivated by fear or distress may not constitute genuine expressions of freedom, some interpret them as forms of self-discipline.

Thus, while in correlation with the research findings of others (Mahmood, 2001; Abu-Lughod, 2016), the majority of Fijian Ahmadis may generally be less interested in the Western version of individuality and freedom, their community preference for collectivism (Meer, 2008; Cheng, 2015; Jouili, 2011) nonetheless limits their capacity to pursue autonomy in particular areas of life.

Throughout my fieldwork, as discussed above, I met a few Fijian Ahmadi women and men who heeded the inner voice and asserted their spiritual observance as a more autonomous religious identity despite misalignment with some conventional community practices. I also observed many who found comfort in engaging in pious self-restraint, both out of profound sincerity and a habit of abiding by religious guidance. Hence, I argue that, aside from being an authentic expression of spiritual piety, *purdah* can also represent a less conscious, self-imposed limitation, where one's authenticity is rooted in a more automatic

replication of prevalent routine mainstream practice - a choice that I perceive as equally legitimate and fulfilling as any other personal value decision.

Based on my observations among Fijian Ahmadis, the concept of *purdah* offers individuals the potential for different kinds of social and self-formative powers - nourishing or restrictive; a power that can be used to protect or control others, and an approach that one can use to own support or self-constraint. To some, modesty can be a dimension of deeply personal and private matters of (religious) faith driven by conscious decisions to self-discipline and cultivate virtues. By others, pious self-restraints are undertaken from a sense of duty and considered morally praiseworthy because they are done out of respect and compliance with the community's norms. Thus, the virtues of *purdah*, intensely valued within Fijian Ahmadis' spirituality, can manifest in many ways – from acts of empowerment to empowerment of self-limitations. Ultimately, however, the practice of *purdah* by Fijian Ahmadis is tied not only to their personal spiritual identity but also to the collective effort to uphold the Jama'at's reputation as a morally upright minority within Fiji's ethnically stratified and politically sensitive context.

### III. ENRICHED BY RESTRICTIONS

#### Sacred Space

*Purdah*, through practices such as physical seclusion, veiling, and adherence to social norms, plays a role in influencing gender-specific organisation of social space. By establishing physical and symbolic boundaries, *purdah* informs individuals how to interact with each other, guiding men and women in maintaining decorum in their interactions. Papanek (1973), who explored gender relations in Pakistan and India, argued that *purdah* primarily acts as a symbolic form of protection for women in the family, safeguarding them from intense human impulses such as sexual desires and aggression, which are acknowledged as inherent but challenging for individuals to manage. Papanek (1973, p. 518) introduced the concept of "separate worlds", referring to the strictly distinct yet highly interdependent physical and social spaces that men and women occupy. In this section, I apply and adapt Papanek's argument and consider how symbolic recognition and use of space affect behaviour and social interactions, with *purdah* functioning as a continual reinforcement of societal norms surrounding modesty, respect, and self-discipline.

Within the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at, women are expected to remain separate from male relatives who are not part of their immediate family, i.e., *non-mahram*.<sup>68</sup> This is understood to be in obedience to the Khalifa, who instructs Ahmadis to socialise within their respective gender groups and advises women not to engage in informal conversations with *non-mahram* men or mingle freely with them (Q&A With Huzoor, 2023). To Fijian Ahmadis, gender segregation in mosques, at Jama'at events and elsewhere ensures a safe space for women to honour their privacy from unrelated men. Fijian Ahmadi women with whom I interacted welcomed and perceived this as their *right*, to which they are *entitled*. As Farkhanda explained to me, "*The comfort zone for ladies is when we are among ladies. As soon as we go out of it, the comfort is gone. In our comfort zone, we are free to do anything. There's nothing that stops us. Your comfort zone is the best*". Her statement confirms that, in terms of spatial symbolism, *purdah* ensures what Papanek (1973, p. 518) described as a "provision of symbolic shelter", transforming the spaces that women occupy into emblematic zones of emotional safety and sanctity.

Yet, the practice of seclusion is not merely about isolating and shielding women from the external world; it also plays a key role in sustaining decent relationships and the community's harmony. Anthropologist Fadwa El Guindi (1999) noted that Islamic seclusion is deeply relational and communal. She highlighted how privacy is tied explicitly to protecting the sanctity of women and the family unit, thus influencing various aspects of daily life, including space, architecture, and proxemics (i.e., use of space and the effects that interpersonal distances have on behaviour, communication, and social interaction). Like Papanek (1973), El Guindi (1999) argued that the essence of the protection of women within Islam's teachings is viewed as a sacred duty that upholds the dignity and sanctity of the individual and the family. This sacredness adds a layer of respect and reverence to the women's role and position in the community, aligning with broader religious and cultural values that govern social interactions and the organisation of space (El Guindi, 1999). Therefore, rather than serving solely as a restriction mechanism, *purdah* seclusion is a culturally meaningful practice that reinforces social cohesion, moral responsibility, and structures the roles of individuals within the community.

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<sup>68</sup> *Non-mahram*, refers to a person who is not closely related by blood or marriage and is thus legally eligible for marriage under Islamic law (Papanek, 1973).

Based on my observations, Fijian Ahmadis consistently uphold *purdah* seclusion, actively reinforcing gender boundaries in public spaces, and on some occasions also within their home. This was particularly visible around shared meals. In the extended household of Nasreen and Bilal, where they lived with their two married sons and their wives, and where I stayed during my research, daily meals among family members were typically eaten together at the large dining table that could seat up to 12 people. However, the practice often changed when additional relatives visited or we were hosted at their homes. During these larger family gatherings, men would eat first, and once they finished, women would prepare a separate table, replenish the bowls with fresh dishes, and dine together as a female group. This highlights how the *purdah* observance among Fijian Ahmadis influences routine behaviours and spatial organisation, reinforcing gender divisions even in private family settings.

Once, Imam Naeem and one of his daughters invited me to lunch at their modest flat on the Aqsa Mosque's ground floor in Nadi. With the imam's wife away in Canada, visiting family relatives, it was his daughter who prepared the lamb, dahl and rice. As she and I sat at the main dining table, Imam Naeem ate alone on a coffee table by the sofa. Moreover, while he engaged in our conversation keenly, he did so strictly only when I directly addressed him. Imam's choice to eat separately and even provide relative symbolic privacy to the conversation that I and his daughter shared illustrates a form of *purdah* that involves maintaining a level of gender separation in social situations when outsiders are present. These everyday practices reflect Fijian Ahmadis' engagement with *purdah* as an expression of their faith and religious duty and as a way to sanctify domestic spaces and uphold gendered boundaries. In doing so, *purdah* becomes a framework through which Fijian Ahmadis sustain communal values and social order in public and household settings.

### **Official Visit**

Since my arrival in Fiji, when I started spending time in the main family house of Nasreen and Bilal, I had been puzzled about the purpose of the floral curtain panels that hung open by the walls between the living room and the adjacent kitchen. The use of this curtain would eventually become clear to me when the national president of Ahmadiyya Jama'at in Fiji (referred to by the title the *Amir*) and his family visited our house for dinner. This event prompted a more formal atmosphere among all household members. At 8 p.m., I descended from my apartment to find Nasreen's and Bilal's elder son, Nazir and his wife, Abida, already

waiting in the lounge. Shortly after, their younger son, Musawat, joined us with his wife, Hina. Everyone was dressed up for the occasion, and both young women opted for their favourite bright red lipstick.

This time, Nasreen and Bilal prepared dinner together. Bilal, who used to work as a chef, had a hectic week. Just the day before, he had cooked a meal for about 30 Jama'at members at the Aqsa Mosque gathering, and before that, he had also done all the grocery shopping at the Nadi vegetable market. During many Fijian Ahmadiyya community gatherings, as well as at major Jama'at events that I attended in Auckland, such as Jalsa Salana and Iftar during Ramadan, meals were usually prepared by Ahmadi men, including those served in the women's section, where men are not permitted. When the *Amir* and his family arrived, Bilal, Nazir, and Musawat went outside to welcome the guests and remove the cats that habitually resided at the main doorstep inside the shoes, effectively blocking the main entrance. As soon as we heard the approaching voices of strangers, Abida and Hina swiftly drew the curtains closed, cutting the large room in half. Suddenly, we women found ourselves in the private space near the kitchen, where the household's iTaukei maid, Oripa, set a separate dining table earlier that afternoon.

The *Amir* had travelled to Nadi from Suva with his wife and their youngest son, who was soon moving to Canada to study at Ahmadiyyat University (*Jaami'ah*) to become a missionary, following in his father's footsteps. Along with them came another missionary who had recently relocated to Fiji from Islamabad, Pakistan, with his wife and their two little children. All were accompanied by Imam Naeem from the Nadi's Aqsa Mosque. The *Amir*, originally also from Pakistan, spent 19 years in Nigeria before he was posted by the Khalifa to Fiji nine years ago.

Without hesitation, the female guests joined us in our behind-the-curtain hideout, immediately engaging in lively conversation in Urdu. The wife of the new missionary expressed her longing for her parents in Islamabad and her craving for the city vibes that she missed while living in Suva. As Hina and Abida served the food to the women, Musawat, being the youngest man in the house, attended to the men's table. Whenever men needed more beef curry or rotis, Musawat discreetly approached the curtain to notify his wife Hina, who would fill a plate in the kitchen and hand it back to him. While husband and wife engaged in delicate food and plate exchanges from the other sides of the curtains, I observed through a small gap between the hems how Musawat always diligently averted his eyes from the area

where we women were seated. Similarly, Hina always adjusted her scarf in a microwave door reflection, ensuring that her head remained appropriately covered. She, too, kept her gaze fixed on the floor away from male guests.

As soon as we finished the dessert, the *Amir* raised his voice from behind the curtain, calling everyone to *dua* (prayer). Women around me placed their palms in front of their faces, then greeted each other and left as quickly as they arrived. Nasreen opened the curtain, and the family gathered around our female table, relaxed that the official visit had gone so well and that they were now free from the duties of attending to the visitors. Hina and Musawat started washing the dishes, Nasreen finished eating the remaining chicken korma, and Bilal left to cook dinner for the hungry cats.

The temporary separation of men and women during the *Amir's* visit suggests that the *purdah* practice among Fijian Ahmadis is more about observing social decorum and respecting gender boundaries in specific contexts rather than a rigid, continuous division. Among the women, this arrangement fosters a sense of intimacy and solidarity, as they converse privately over the meal in the absence of men. The separation, thus, is less about isolation and more about creating a respectful and comfortable space for all participants, aligning with the broader religious and cultural code that governs Fijian Ahmadis' social interactions and the organisation of space.

### ***Purdah* and a Beauty**

Prevailing traditional expectations of female humility, combined with the recognition of *purdah* as a source of empowerment, create a delicate relationship between modesty and beauty standards in the 21st-century globalised world and social media. Anthropologists attest to Muslim women's varied engagements with fashion and attractiveness, which intersect with faith, piety, and personal identity and often correlate with themes such as cultural beauty ideals, media influence, self-doubt and societal expectations (Tarlo, 2010; Liberatore, 2019).

Fijian Ahmadi women negotiate beauty and spirituality in ways that align with their individual choices and community frameworks. Their observance of *purdah* often integrates personal grooming and aesthetic expression, reflecting a complex relationship between piety and self-representation. Ahmadi women with whom I interacted in Fiji generally held similar views on the merits of beautification, viewing it favourably within private settings. Many

possessed extensive wardrobes featuring a variety of *shalwar kameez*, keeping up with the latest trends and frequently shopping online from Pakistan, India or at various stores with Indian clothing across Fiji.

Based on my observations, significant Jama'at events, in particular, offered opportunities for Fijian Ahmadi women to display their fashion preferences. Due to *purdah* seclusion at these gatherings, with no male presence, the young women confidently showcased their style through high heels, bright red lipsticks, and thoughtfully matched accessories, handbags and jewellery. An 18-year-old Zahra disclosed to me that she enjoyed wearing makeup during community occasions and in other domestic settings to enhance her natural features and beauty. Additionally, many Fijian Ahmadi women typically had a perfect manicure and pedicure. For example, Hanya, apart from grooming her long nails, also occasionally got the nail art design with little crystals done professionally at a nail salon in Nadi. Whereas other Fijian Ahmadi women were not against this, Hanya shared with me that she supposedly faced criticism from some local Sunni Muslim women. Hanya challenged their critique, arguing that it was based on an overly narrow interpretation, "*They (Fijian Sunni Muslim women) focus too much on one aspect of purdah. For us Ahmadi women, we practice purdah and also enjoy our makeup, nails, and other beauty things*". While Hanya acknowledged Islam's teachings on modest beauty and avoidance of undue attention, she explained to me that her approach adhered to the Khalifa's guidance, which allegedly permits makeup, nail polish, braided hair, and wigs, provided they do not hinder daily prayers or worship Allah. This illustrates how the Khalifa's religious authority is used to reconcile personal beautification with spiritual obligations, allowing for aesthetic expression within the boundaries of devotional responsibility.

Ethnographies among British Muslims revealed diverse experiences with personal appearance, where some women are criticised by community members for outfits and aesthetic self-representation that is considered too liberal, underscoring a tension between modern self-expression and conservative views on modesty among Muslims (Tarlo, 2010; Liberatore, 2019). In particular, some women use their appearance as a form of self-expression, challenging traditional norms and forging a contemporary Muslim identity that reflects their individual beliefs and multicultural environment (Tarlo, 2010; Liberatore, 2019). Social anthropologist Giulia Liberatore (2019), for example, disclosed the case of a female Islamic authority in Birmingham who was criticised for her appearance. Regularly wearing a

hijab, a nose piercing, and makeup, she has faced negative comments from some other Muslims who judged her as “insufficiently modest” and “overly sexualised” (Liberatore, 2019, p. 11). This reveals how women’s physical appearance can provoke contestation in Muslim societies, prompting some Muslim women to reconcile personal expression with communal norms and redefine modest outlooks within multicultural societies.

Paradoxically, while Fijian Ahmadi often critiqued Fijian Muslims for their alleged laxity in adhering to Islam’s teachings (discussed in Chapter 4), regarding women’s beautification, there seemed to be an inverse dynamic where local Sunni Muslim women were perceived as following overly rigid interpretations of *purdah* in matters of physical appearance. The above-mentioned example regarding Hanya’s nails illustrates a distinctive understanding of *purdah* among Fijian Ahmadi as compatible with makeup and nail art, which are viewed as acceptable forms of self-expression within the bounds of modesty. In contrast, some Sunni Muslim women in Fiji may adopt a more conservative stance, interpreting beautification as conflicting with the modesty ideals central to *purdah*. This indicates diversity within communities that adhere to Islam in how *purdah* is construed and practised in relation to bodily presentation. Meanwhile, I did not encounter any Ahmadi women in Fiji or New Zealand who had, for instance, visible piercings or tattoos, and it remains unclear how such forms of bodily adornment would be perceived within the Fijian Ahmadi community.

For Fijian Ahmadi women with whom I interacted, the legitimacy of beautification practices within Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s modesty norms was determined less by public visibility and more by the internal motivation guiding such actions. In addition to the Khalifa’s direction on women’s self-styling, Hanya emphasised that the underlying intention behind aesthetic enhancement lay in its intended purpose - namely, to please one’s husband, “*If we are putting on makeup, we can do purdah and not show it to other men. We think we are putting makeup on for our husband. And that’s it*”. This perspective aligns with the findings of Professor of Anthropology Emma Tarlo (2010) in her research among Muslim women in London, which confirmed that while women were expected to conceal their beauty and sexuality from male strangers, they were encouraged to express beauty towards their husbands. Likewise, among Fijian Ahmadi women, I find that practices of personal beautification are guided by culturally and religiously informed notions of intention, with particular attention to maintaining privacy and adhering to context-specific norms of modesty.

According to Leila Ahmad (2021), who studied women and gender among Muslims in the Middle East, in cultures where male pride is both a significant and delicate component of identity and status, women's piety plays a key role in framing male dominance. When positioned as protected individuals, women's modest appearance and behaviour are critical indicators of their male relatives' social standing. Therefore, men may place great value on achieving this symbolic protection, viewing it as a testament to their ability to control their surroundings. As a result, Ahmad (2021) argued that *purdah* practice may also appear restrictive. Although differences in opinions about piety and modest dress codes may cause tensions between spouses, I have not noticed overt male dominance over women among Fijian Ahmadi. On the other hand, when there is agreement on such values, women who place high importance on pious self-fashioning can expressively elevate their husbands' or male relatives' status, thereby reinforcing family unity and their own standing within the religious community. Fijian Ahmadi women enjoy enhancing their appearance within the protective confines of their home and the privacy of exclusively ladies' gatherings, where there are no stated concerns about the sexualisation of the female body. Their practice, while aligned with *purdah* principles, reflects how beauty serves not only religious adherence but also personal expression and self-esteem within community-defined boundaries.

Similarly, in many Muslim contexts, *purdah* and modest fashion are not only religious obligations but are also celebrated as expressions of beauty, dignity, and elevated social value. According to Professor of Anthropology Saba Mahmood (2021), *purdah* and modest dress codes are considered beautiful and align with cultural and religious values in many Muslim communities. These practices are also linked with concepts of dignity and respect for women, indicating that modesty and *purdah* may elevate a woman's social status and enhance her sense of self-worth. Tarlo (2010) explored Islamic fashion brands promoting the aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of modesty to appeal to consumers, noting how these marketing strategies draw upon the broader Islamic belief that God values beauty. This connection underpins the concept of pious fashion, expressed through elements of light, purity, and peace, with such modest beauty being considered concurrently spiritually meaningful and visually appealing (Tarlo, 2010).

Within the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at, women who follow and wear the *purdah* are considered more valuable and, by Fijian Ahmadi men, more beautiful than those who do not observe this practice and dress code. Umair shared with me that he found Muslim girls who

exhibit modest behaviour to be attractive, *“The way Muslim girls dress... their style is different; their talking manner is different, and their body language is different”*. Umair’s comments reveal how *purdah* and modest behaviour are closely tied to his ideals of femininity, shaping his sense of desirability through religious and community values of piety.

Additionally, Umair’s reflections also underscored how *purdah* functions as a marker of women’s respectability, influencing the way they are perceived within the Jama’at. Umair expressed the view that, in Western culture, men are attracted to women who display their physical appearance. He observed this increasingly prevalent “Westernised” trend even among his Fijian female classmates, whom he claimed often wore tight-fitting clothing that accentuated their bodies - something he saw as conflicting with the traditional values of his community. His perspectives illustrate a concern with preserving religious identity through *purdah*, particularly as he observes changes in social norms regarding modesty that he considers as diverging from the moral standards of Fijian Ahmadi.

Alongside the integration of beautification into their *purdah* practice, Fijian Ahmadi women also emphasised the practicality of *purdah* and its function in shifting the focus from external presentation to inner virtue. Research among Muslim women in both more traditional and Westernised societies confirmed that *purdah* garments often boosted women’s confidence and redirected attention from physical appearance to personal abilities and actions (Tarlo, 2010; Ahmed, 2021; Abu-Lughod, 2016). Likewise, many Fijian Ahmadi women expressed to me that *purdah* provided them with a sense of self-assurance, offering a balance between functional and aesthetic expression. Hina, who works as a doctor, conveyed to me how *purdah* serves both as a marker of modesty and a comfortable dress that allows her to focus on work without distraction, *“Especially when I need to bend over during CPR or other tasks, I don’t have to keep pulling down my top. If I were wearing a skirt, I would have to be more careful and couldn’t get on the bed as quickly”*. Hina’s experience demonstrates how *purdah* operates as a purposeful symbolic garment that facilitates ease and confidence in her professional environment.

Similarly, to Farah, *purdah* redefines a sense of being “well-dressed”, from focusing solely on aesthetics to emphasising appropriate coverage. As she explained to me, *“In my purdah, I feel more confident going outside. When I’m properly covered, I’m not thinking about my body, and I’m more focused on what I’m doing because I know that I’m dressed well”*. As such, *purdah* enhances Farah’s sense of ease by alleviating concerns about the

appropriateness of her attire, enabling her to concentrate more fully on her activities. Farah's statement also suggests that beauty is not defined by outward display but by dignity, self-respect, and a purposeful presence, allowing her to disengage from external pressures and instead cultivate a spiritually grounded sense of self-worth. In this way, *purdah* redefines beauty as modest presence, challenging globalised ideals centred on visibility.

Redirecting focus from physical presentation to inner qualities may foster self-esteem rooted in personal attributes rather than external appearance. Yet, if the bodily appearance is overly de-emphasised, it can sometimes be at the expense of motivation to maintain physical fitness, which is often associated also with aesthetic goals. Throughout my fieldwork in Fiji, I have observed that Fijian Ahmadi women generally refrained from regular physical activity such as exercise, walking, or dancing. Their abstention was informed by their commitment to *purdah* in line with the local Ahmadiyya Jama'at's interpretations. Both the fourth and the current fifth Khalifa condemned dancing as "shameful", "devilish", and "promiscuous" - even in situations where women dance among other women. According to the fifth Khalifa, the prohibition on dancing also extends to exercising in tight-fitting clothes in public gyms (Al Islam, 2011, "Why don't Muslim women dance in public?"; Voice of Khilafat, 2023, "Is dancing allowed at weddings?"). Under the Khalifa's guidance, Fijian Ahmadi women typically view such body movements as undignified and leading to sinful thoughts and actions. As articulated by Hanya, "*Dancing, it is not the way to respect others. You shake your bodies and other stuff. It's not a good thing to do; it's not purdah*". The emphasis on tight-fitting sportswear in contemporary fitness culture, meanwhile, presents a barrier for Fijian Ahmadi women, whose commitment to the Jama'at's modesty standards may limit their willingness to take part in public athletic spaces. Consequently, such constraints also shape their broader attitudes toward physical exercise. Although the Khalifa's guidance permits women to engage in physical activity provided it is done in loose clothing, Fijian Ahmadi women's understanding of visible bodily movements, such as shaking or vigorous motion, as incompatible with modesty ideals, can diminish the motivation required for regular exercise, particularly in Fiji's hot climate. As a result, forgoing physical movement in the pursuit of an exaggerated ideal of modesty may lead to various health problems related to a sedentary lifestyle.

Fijian Ahmadi women's experiences with *purdah* and beautification practices illustrate their engagement with religious devotion, personal aesthetic expression, and social expectations. While within the Fijian Jama'at, *purdah* is viewed as a source of dignity,

confidence, and spiritual alignment, its interpretation also shapes members' attitudes toward physicality, public presence, and gender norms. Whereas a form of private beautification is embraced as part of Fijian Ahmadi women's identity and self-worth, (public) expressions of physicality, such as dance or participation in fitness, are constrained by religious interpretations. The dual function of *purdah* as both a mode of self-expression and a tool for cultivating inward-focused piety reflects a complex symbolic negotiation between visibility and modesty, shaped by personal intention, community validation, and the Khalifa's guidance.

### Exclusiveness

Based on my observations, the practice of *purdah* reinforces a distinct sense of identity among Fijian Ahmadi women, nurturing self-perceptions of spiritual and moral advancement and privileged differentiation from non-Muslim Fijian women who do not observe such practices. This construction of moral difference is both internalised by Fijian Ahmadi women and reinforced through Jama'at's discourse, which consistently positions *purdah*-observing women as embodying a higher standard of respectability.

Abida shared with me her belief that modesty is an essential universal value and emphasised that historically, people in Europe wore fully covered garments such as long dresses, pants, hats and even gloves. Noting the rise of revealing fashion trends in both the West and India, where she was born, Abida expressed pride in the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's consistent commitment to a modest dress code, *"From then to now, we Ahmadis are all wearing full clothes. So we are more advanced. We are the same, we never change our style... I mean, we do change our fashion style, but we don't change our modest way of clothing"*. To Abida, the continuity of modest dress equates Ahmadis' adherence to traditional clothing norms with modernity and moral progress.

Further, Amat, now in her 60s, disclosed to me how *purdah* clothing in Fiji gains her preferential treatment. She recounted her visit to the transportation government office in Nadi, where, in her view, wearing *purdah* prompted other Fijians waiting in a long queue to step aside, allowing her to move directly to the front. Her experience parallels how women are treated at the government departments in the United Arab Emirates, other Muslim states, but also in India, where there is typically a special token marked as "Ladies", providing access to separate counters for women. This remains the case regardless of whether she observes

*purdah* or not. Although in Fiji, no lane was marked explicitly for women, Amat's *purdah* attire seemingly achieved a similar privileged effect.

Similarly, Amat's daughter, Humaira, articulated her belief that women who observe *purdah* receive noticeably greater respect from men in Fiji compared to women who do not, *"When they talk to us, their tone... they are very respectful... I realised the way men treat us is special. It is very different from the way that they treat people who do not observe purdah"*. Like Amat, Humaira emphasised the perceived preferential treatment of women who observe *purdah*, expressing firm conviction, shared by many Fijian Ahmadi women, that it signifies distinctiveness and elevated esteem, rooted in their visible religious commitment.

In addition to the dress code, Fijian Ahmadi women associated their seeming privilege also with the emphasis that *purdah* places on respectful communication and interactions. Farkhanda underscored that *purdah* influences how women speak, carry themselves, and relate to others, with particular attention to adjusting language and tone based on context and audience. She suggested that, through their adherence to *purdah*, Ahmadis acquire refined communication skills, which are regarded within the Jama'at as a form of cultivated social competence, *"I always thank God for choosing me to be in this Jama'at. I feel grateful that I don't have to engage in certain behaviours that are not right"*. Farkhanda expressed compassion for women from other Fijian communities in her village of Navaka, whom she has heard experience domestic abuse and violence at the hands of their husbands, *"Why? Because some of the women don't have the knowledge of how to talk with other people... They use some wrong words. Sometimes, I see women joking with men... making inappropriate jokes. That is not allowed!"*. By attributing the hardships faced by women in neighbouring communities to their lack of adherence to the same moral standards as her own, Farkhanda elevates Fijian Ahmadis' cultural practices as more protective. Her view highlights the conviction that *purdah*, as it is practised by Fijian Ahmadis, uniquely fosters secure social interactions.

To Farkhanda, *purdah* takes precedence over connections with strangers from other communities, but also with her Sunni Muslim maternal relatives, who do not observe *purdah*, *"If they have a wedding, we ask them ahead. If you people are not doing any purdah and don't have separate places for women, I won't go. I have set my own rules. If it is the mix, we won't come"*. In contrast, she conveyed to me that she attends iTaukei and Hindu functions if invited and continues to observe her *purdah* within the possible limits. She respects that these

communities follow different rules. However, she is critical of Fijian Muslims who apparently neglect what she perceives as the correct instructions of Islam. In Farkhanda's view, all Muslims are obliged to follow *purdah*, "*Purdah is very important in Islam. They (Fijian Sunni Muslims) know the purdah, but if they are not giving it importance, then why should I be going? (to their functions)*". Farkhanda's firm adherence to *purdah* may distinguish her within the broader Fijian Muslim community, particularly through her deliberate absence from events where her standards are not observed. Nonetheless, she remains engaged in non-Muslim settings, provided they allow her to maintain her *purdah* practices. This selective participation underlines a boundary that Farkhanda draws around her religious and social engagement, reinforcing a sense of exclusivity in how she and Fijian Ahmadi interpret and commit to Ahmadiyya Jama'at's principles.

Fijian Ahmadi girls are introduced to *purdah* from a young age through Jama'at teachings that link modesty with protection and a moral safeguard. This is often reinforced through symbolic narratives that shape perceptions of female respectability and choice. Nasreen explained that Ahmadi girls are taught to cover their heads in public to feel safe, often through a commonly shared illustrative method: If a lollipop found on the street is wrapped, everyone would desire it, but if it is unwrapped, covered by dirt, and eaten by flies, no one would want it. While this analogy effectively communicates the value of the veil within the Jama'at, it undermines the dignity of women who opt out of this practice. Given that similar perspectives on women's modesty practices exist across various cultural and religious settings globally, such attitudes are not unique to the Fijian Ahmadiyya community.

Upholding social and symbolic practices of *purdah*, Fijian Ahmadi women actively sustain the notion that modest dress, speech and behaviours confer a morally and spiritually privileged community status. This reflects broader societal dynamics in which women's autonomy and identity are frequently assessed in relation to their conformity to traditional norms. Within such a framework, modest attire is positioned as essential to elevated social standing rather than being one of many equally respected choices. Consequently, the privileging of modesty within the Jama'at regulates personal conduct and serves as a mechanism that reinforces communal hierarchies and ideals of moral advantage.

## Reflection

During one of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's events in Auckland that I attended, in the women's section next to the henna hand-painting stand, there was a piece of paper on the table with the question: *What is al-haya?* (Arabic term for modesty). The ladies were encouraged to write their responses, and the first handwritten reply that I saw stated: *Modesty is self-respect*. To many Fijian Ahmadi women, adhering to *purdah* by dressing and behaving modestly is a way of valuing themselves and affirming self-worth by setting boundaries. While asserting control over their public self-presentation and upholding a sense of pride in their *purdah* adherence, many Fijian Ahmadi women also expect to receive respect from other Fijians in response to their spiritual observance. Thus, whereas Fijian Ahmadi practice *purdah* to uphold ideals of privacy and modesty, simultaneously, they rely on its public function to signal their religious and moral identity. As they described it, although *purdah* requires them to act with self-restraint, this practice isn't only about restriction but also about honouring their spiritual affiliation and cultural expression, as well as demonstrating personal dignity.

By emphasising decency, propriety, and privacy, the values of *purdah* offer a counter-narrative to the contemporary cultural influences of globalised media and fashion trends, which often promote exposure, flamboyance, and even provocation as markers of success. *Purdah*, as observed among Fijian Ahmadi, reflects a different means of attaining recognition rooted in quieter yet impactful displays of presence. Consequently, maintaining discretion and social detachment in public life should not be misinterpreted as a sign of weakness; rather, it represents a distinct form of power. Among Fijian Ahmadi women, the practice of *purdah* is often described as a source of confidence, spiritual fulfilment, and inner strength, reflecting a sense of empowerment derived from its observance.

By placing normative emphasis on modesty for both women and men, Fijian Ahmadi work toward a more balanced moral framework of gendered responsibility - one that may contrast with communities where women's modesty is elevated as a primary moral virtue while male conduct often remains comparatively unscrutinised. While Ahmadi women in Fiji are positioned as moral gatekeepers, Ahmadi men are not absolved of equivalent obligations of restraint and accountability. Consequently, the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's emphasis on reciprocal modesty frames ethical self-discipline as a shared moral duty rather than a gendered burden placed on women. In this sense, Fijian Ahmadi seek to depart from a

prevalent pattern in which communal morality is secured predominantly through the regulation of women, offering instead a model that foregrounds mutual restraint and shared moral agency across genders.

Fijian Ahmadi's commitment to *purdah*, shaped by the Khalifa's teachings, is fundamental to their faith expression, self-growth, purpose, and devotion to God's will. By directly associating their personal achievements with piety and consistent religious observance, *purdah* serves to further strengthen their spiritual discipline and dedication to Ahmadiyya teachings.

**CHAPTER THREE: Aspiring Role Models**

This chapter explores how Fijian Ahmadis strive to incorporate community values of duty, obedience, righteousness and self-sacrifice into their daily practices. They dedicate substantial time, effort, and financial resources to aligning personal conduct with Ahmadiyya Islam teachings, and their intense commitment to their Jama'at influences nearly every part of their lives.

One ongoing debate in the anthropology of Islam is how central Islam itself is to the lives of Muslims, with anthropologist Samuli Schielke (2022, p. 43), for instance, contending that “there is too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam”. Schielke (2022, p. 42) critiqued researchers’ excessive focus on overtly religious individuals, whom he described as “dedicated activists”. By contrast, other scholars argued that focusing too little on everyday Islam might misrepresent the practices of more orthodox Muslims as unusual (Fadil & Fernando, 2015).

Through my time spent with Fijian Ahmadis, I noted that belonging to the Ahmadiyya Jama'at is assumed not merely as adherence to a belief system, but as a way of life that profoundly shapes members’ actions and worldviews. Similarly, to how Valentine (2008, p. 97) described the UK Ahmadiyya Jama'at as a “brotherhood of enthusiastic followers” each committed to the growth of their community, in Fiji, Ahmadis with whom I interacted were devoted to vigorously following and promoting the Jama'at’s regulations. As documented among Ahmadis in the UK, in Fiji, I observed that affiliation with the Jama'at constitutes a central aspect of members’ identity that interlaces their ordinary routines and social engagements, under deeply held spiritual beliefs, cherished value system of order and perceived moral instructions.

In this chapter, I focus on the organisational framework of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at and argue that Fijian Ahmadis’ continuous active engagement within its bureaucracy fosters a strong sense of spiritual and social purpose. Fijian Ahmadis utilise the various official roles and responsibilities within the Jama'at’s hierarchical structure to uphold administrative, financial, and moral obligations assigned by its global centralised leadership. These roles promote a closely-knit community that integrates members’ spiritual, social, and familial activities with the larger goal of advancing Ahmadiyya theology. It also instils in members a sense of belonging to a cohesive worldwide movement with a shared mission that transcends

international borders. Drawing from my observations, for Fijian Ahmadis, adhering to their roles within the Jama'at and obeying its organisational commands is generally understood as being a "good Ahmadi Muslim". Hence, conforming to the bureaucratic standards and commitments of their community is closely linked to Fijian Ahmadis' sense of spiritual maturity.

In this chapter, I first argue that Fijian Ahmadis' participation in Jama'at auxiliary organisations and office-bearers' leadership roles sets a firm guideline for their personal, spiritual and moral development, which is systematically managed at the local level. Fijian Ahmadis' strong sense of duty was reflected in their disciplined work ethic and strict moral standards, which were explicitly expected of members and understood both as a means of attaining divine blessings and as evidence of the Jama'at's claimed progressiveness. Although members may occasionally fall short of these ideals in their everyday lives, they draw upon these standards both for self-cultivation and to uphold a positive public image.

While some scholars interpret the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's hierarchical organisation as modern owing to its efficiency, technological savviness (Hanson, 2009; Evans, 2017) and leadership roles for women (Balzani, 2020), I perceive the influence of its bureaucracy in Fiji differently - as an effective mechanism for regulating and containing its members' participation in broader modernity. This occurs through a centralised, top-down management structure that discourages alternative perspectives, prioritises internal Jama'at's engagements over external interactions, and reinforces traditional gender roles. Fijian Ahmadis who hold administrative roles in their Jama'at see them almost indispensable to their personal and spiritual growth. Furthermore, many Fijian Ahmadi women regard holding those roles as a form of empowerment, often viewing such opportunities as a privilege accessible uniquely within their community.

Secondly, I emphasise the role of key religious concepts through which Jama'at sustains its values and strict moral standards of dutifulness, submission and self-sacrifice. Fijian Ahmadis' commitment to charity and Islam's theological principles is expressed in *taqwa* (the awareness of Allah's presence that directs Muslims to observe divine commandments and avoid prohibitions) and *rizq* (the sustenance and provision given by Allah), which guide believers towards what they perceive as pleasing to God while reinforcing their gratitude for what they see as divine rewards). Fijian Ahmadis integrate financial sacrifices with their spiritual practices through Islam's structured charity contributions like

*zakat* (an obligatory act of giving; one of the Five Pillars of Islam) and *sadaqah* (voluntary almsgiving), as well as an Ahmadiyya community-specific obligatory fees known as *chanda* (an Urdu term for contribution). Fijian Ahmadi's strong adherence to their community financial obligations parallels and mutually reinforces their disciplined, rigorous involvement in Jama'at's bureaucratic structures, through which they strive to demonstrate how fulfilling communal responsibilities exemplifies them as righteous believers and role models.

I then discuss that many Fijian Ahmadi's voluntarily increase their financial contributions by becoming *Musis*, i.e., members who pledge a portion of their wealth by enrolling in the *Wasiyyat* scheme established by the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's founder, Ghulam Ahmad. He considered *Musis* to be the most loyal and righteous Jama'at members, meant to guide others by their virtuous example. Additionally, some Fijian Ahmadi's also dedicate their own children to serving the cause of Ahmadiyya Jama'at through the *Waqf-e-Nau* scheme. Fijian Ahmadi's frequently expressed the belief that increased contributions of financial and human resources lead to greater spiritual rewards from God. Accordingly, they regard such sacrifices as essential to their spiritual advancement. The dedication of Fijian Ahmadi's to their financial obligations is remarkable, showcasing the capacity of a small, geographically remote community to maintain demanding practices to align with the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's global mission and highlighting their steadfast faith in the spiritual returns of their sacrifices.

Thirdly, I underscore the importance of Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at's religious and moral education (*tarbiyyat*) in shaping its identity and self-presentation. Among Fijian Ahmadi's, *tarbiyyat* defines their community as knowledgeable and moral, whose members are trained to comply with authorities within the Jama'at and broadly. Additionally, as Ahmadiyya Jama'at consistently emphasises the rationality of its spiritual teachings, to many Fijian Ahmadi's, their perceived logical religious practice makes them generally more educated than other Fijians. In academic discussions about the extent to which Islam is compatible with rationality and modern science, there are primarily two factions: Those who outwardly reject such a possibility (Dawkins, 2006) and those who believe that reconciling Islam with science is crucial for maintaining a balance of values (Alhattab & Khairil, 2024; Kamali, 2003; Bakar, 2020). The global Ahmadiyya Jama'at adheres to the latter perspective, arguing that "all scientific theories are based on faith" (Waseem, 2024, p. 2). While Fijian Ahmadi's focus on the rational aspects of their faith serves to highlight their identity as a well-educated community, this approach also results in what may be an overconfidence in their intellectual

capabilities as well as cultural insensitivity. Meanwhile, their emphasis on rationalism often leads them to a diminished appreciation for other forms of spirituality (as discussed in Chapter 4).

Fijian Ahmadis' adherence to authority, sacrifice and structured religious education aligns with their self-perception and ideal of exemplary Muslims, emphasising regimented conduct as foundational to personal and communal growth within the Jama'at's framework. Through its administrative roles and financial and educational obligations, the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at strategically directs the involvement of its members in remote communities like Fiji towards its own centralised administrative and ideological frameworks. This effectively shapes and reinforces the Fijian Ahmadis' values according to the uniform standards and directives and increases their reliance on the Jama'at's hierarchical bureaucracy, thereby enhancing the community's cohesion at regional and global levels.

### I. DUTIFUL: OFFICE ROLES AND HIGH MORALS

Fijian Ahmadis' lives are intertwined with membership in the community's auxiliary organisations, tailored to a specific gender and age category to address each group's perceived unique needs. Further, a hierarchically organised system of Jama'at office roles ensures that elected Ahmadi members, i.e., office-bearers, also known as *amla* members, are accountable to the Jama'at's headquarters in London. Through this vast network, staffed by unpaid members and paid missionaries (imams) - who provide a professional level of religious leadership warranting doctrinal and organisational integrity, the Ahmadiyya Jama'at coordinates its official religious agenda, community meetings, events and volunteering tasks at international, national and local contexts.<sup>69</sup> Hence, the global Jama'at's methodical organisational structure creates a firm basis for a self-contained community that merges spiritual, social and work-related activities. Whereas Ahmadi missionaries receive salaries and housing in missionary homes, all other members devote their time and effort to serving the Jama'at without any financial compensation. In this section, I examine how Fijian Ahmadis understand and pursue their involvement in the Jama'at's administrative structures and what compels them to consistently engage in unpaid service within the Jama'at's bureaucracy.

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<sup>69</sup> Whereas imams are appointed and rotated in their positions and locations upon sole decision of the Khalifa, office-bearers at local levels like in Fiji are elected by the members of local *majlis* (branch).

### **Ahmadiyya Auxiliary Organisations**

Within the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at, there are three age-based auxiliary organisations for men. The *Majlis Khuddam al-Ahmadiyya*, established in December 1938, comprises young men aged 15 to 40, known as *khuddam*, meaning “Servants of Allah” (Khan, 2015, p. 81). Men over 40 belong to *Majlis Ansarullah* and are called *ansar*, i.e., “Helpers of Allah” (Khan, 2015, p. 81). Additionally, in 1940, an organisation for boys aged 7 to 15, *Atfal al-Ahmadiyya*, was established under the oversight of *Majlis Khuddam al-Ahmadiyya* (Khan, 2015; Mahmood, 2023).

For Ahmadi women, there are two auxiliary organisations. Women aged 15 and older engage within the *Lajna Ima'illah*, translated as “Council for the handmaidens of God” (*Garments for Each Other*, 2019), which was established in 1922 by the second Khalifa, who, as noted by Balzani (2020, p. 304) announced that “The vigorous participation of Ahmadi women was as essential for the success of the Community as that of men”. Consequently, Ahmadi women refer to themselves as *lajnas*, meaning “Maidservants of Allah” (*Garments for Each Other*, 2019). Girls aged 7 to 15, referred to as *nasirat*, are organised under the *Nasirat-ul-Ahmadiyya*, which operates under the jurisdiction of *Lajna Ima'illah* (Khan, 2015; Mahmood, 2023).

The organisational structure for Ahmadiyya male and female auxiliary organisations is similar. At the local level, each branch (*majlis*) elects a president (*Sadar*), who reports to a national president who reports directly to the Khalifa (Khan, 2015). As confirmed to me by the national general secretary of *Lajna Ima'illah*, according to the latest counts from the Ahmadiyya official database from October 2023, there are around 250 *lajnas* and around 60 *nasirat* in Fiji. When I expressed curiosity about where all those women were, as I estimated I have only met about 60 *lajnas* in Nadi, Lautoka, Maro and Suva together, I was informed that the figure also included so-called “lazy members”, i.e., those who do not regularly participate in Jama'at events and often delay their obligatory *chanda* payments (as discussed later in this chapter).

#### ***Lajna Ima'illah***

The stated purpose of the *Lajna Ima'illah* auxiliary organisation is to empower Ahmadi women to foster moral standards and religious knowledge while providing opportunities for community service and promoting unity among members (*Garments for*

*Each Other*, 2019). The constitution of *Lajna Ima'illah*, the *Silsila 'Aliya Ahmadiyya*, comprises 204 paragraphs that define 17 objectives and the organisation's processes.<sup>70</sup> It outlines the order of elected leadership roles, which includes the national president (*Sadar Lajna*), responsible for implementing day-to-day instructions from the Khalifa and overseeing the religious and social development of women and girls; the vice president, general secretary, and assistant general secretary, who support the president in her duties, and other roles such as secretaries for education, finance, publications, outreach, moral training, and physical health (Ahmad, 1939). Consequently, for Ahmadi women, participation in Jama'at activities is highly organised and covers a broad array of their social experiences, which are regulated by formal centralised rules and managed by designated secretaries responsible for the Jama'at's administration.

The relationship between morality and bureaucracy in Ahmadiyya Jama'at was highlighted by Balzani (2020), who studied the Ahmadis in the UK and suggested that the community relies on bureaucratic measures to enforce its social and ideological boundaries. Therefore, organised administration is vital for maintaining the Jama'at's unique cultural and religious identity (Balzani, 2020). Additionally, according to Müller and Steiner (2018, p. 14), who researched the bureaucratisation of Islam in Southeast Asia, one of the major aims of maintaining organisational standardisation within Muslim communities is to “erase ambiguities, grey zones, and unregulated spheres” within Islam. The standardisation of religious practices and categories simplifies the inherently complex and varied expressions of Islam, producing a more organised and manageable system of religious observance. Meanwhile, it also strives to foster a more predictable and governable religious environment, reducing dependence on individual interpretation or local traditions (Müller & Steiner, 2018). This correlates with my observation among Fijian Ahmadis and seems to apply most appositely to Ahmadiyya communities beyond Southeast Asia and Fiji. Valentine (2008, p. 80), for example, reflected, when studying the UK Ahmadiyya Jama'at, that it was “arguably the best-organised of any Muslim reform movement... providing ideological framework with a message that is relevant to every aspect of a member's life”.

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<sup>70</sup> 17 Objectives of the *Silsila 'Aliya Ahmadiyya* relate to organisation of programs for the spiritual, intellectual, and moral upliftment of Ahmadi women, educating them to promote communal advancement and emphasising women's role in nurturing future generations (mtaOnline1, 2019; Ahmad, 1939).

However, the Ahmadiyya Jama'at is just one of several well-organised movements that adhere to Islam. Among some other well-structured groups are *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, which advocates for establishing a global caliphate through nonviolent means<sup>71</sup> (Karagiannis & McCauley, 2006) or the highly organised *Tabligh* Jama'at<sup>72</sup> (Amrullah, 2011), which has a wide international presence, including in Fiji. As outlined in Chapter 4, many Fijian Ahmadis often strategically work to differentiate themselves from Fijian Muslim groups by highlighting their community's elevated, structured organisation and strict religious observance, consciously seeking to set themselves apart as orderly and highly disciplined.

The emphasis on codifying religious practice and ensuring uniform moral conduct of Jama'at members was apparent during regular monthly meetings of *Lajna Ima'illah* that I attended in Nadi and Lautoka. Those meetings displayed similar agenda patterns, following detailed directives provided by the centralised guidance from the Jama'at's London headquarters. In Nadi, monthly meetings are convened on the community's Aqsa Mosque ground floor.<sup>73</sup> When I attended, usually between 10 to 15 *lajnas* gathered seated around the table beneath large black-and-white photographs of Ahmadiyya Jama'at's founder and prophet, Ghulam Ahmad and his five successors - the khalifs - all elderly bearded men adorned in turbans (*pagris*). The branch president and vice-president of the *Lajna Ima'illah* occupied the head seats at the table. Next to them sat the branch secretary, who documented the meeting minutes by handwriting or typing on her laptop. Commonly, *Lajna Ima'illah* meetings began with an Urdu recitation of the Qur'an, followed by an English translation and a nazm<sup>74</sup> - a form of Urdu poetry chanted by one of the *lajna*. Each time, the presenting *lajna* stood

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<sup>71</sup> *Hizb ut-Tahrir* is a transnational Islamic movement with a strong presence in Central Asia and Western Europe, characterized by an organised cellular structure. The movement operates through localized study circles and broader regional committees, all coordinated by a central committee led by a supreme leader (*Amir*). The movement's strict hierarchical organisation ensures ideological coherence and operational security across its global divisions. Members undergo extensive political and ideological education, and the organisation effectively uses modern technology and internet for communication and recruitment. Further, the internal discipline is strictly enforced, with severe measures including expulsion for non-compliance, ensuring adherence to the group's directives and maintaining secrecy (Karagiannis & McCauley, 2006).

<sup>72</sup> The *Tabligh* Jama'at follows a hierarchical yet decentralised structure that facilitates flexibility across diverse cultural contexts. The movement operates through local, national, and international units, with leadership often held by elder, experienced members (Amrullah, 2011).

<sup>73</sup> At one of the *Lajna Ima'illah* monthly meetings in Lautoka, which I attended, there was an exception made. Instead of meeting at the local Ahmadiyya Rizwan Mosque, *lajnas* gathered at a member's home as she needed to care for her dying mother and did not want to miss the meeting. The male residents of house, were asked to leave and along with other men who drove the *lajnas* to the meeting, waited on the balcony outside. The *Lajna Ima'illah* meeting was held in a living room where the elderly lady rested on a hospital bed and as *lajnas* sat around the dining table, they periodically checked on her condition and needs.

<sup>74</sup> Ali-Chand et al. (2016) who observed traditions that helped Fijian Muslims retain their religious identity during and post-indenture period argued, that particularly folklore and songs were fundamental in preserving Islam in Fiji as local Muslims regularly engaged in different forms of traditional Urdu poetry and music, such as *qawwali*, *Gazals* and *nazm*.

up. Typically, the meeting started with the branch president addressing *lajnas*, reminding them to uphold their moral and spiritual obligations. The branch vice-president then reviewed, step by step, the official instruction checklist from the global Department of *Tarbiyyat* (moral education). According to those guidelines, every *lajna* was required to regularly write to the “beloved Imam” (i.e., the Khalifa) and observe the five daily prayers, including the *Tahajjud* prayer<sup>75</sup>, which is practised by the most devoted Muslims as it requires them to pray in the middle of the night (Mahfuzah & Hidayah, 2023). Further, the *Tarbiyyat* directive also provided a daily schedule of specific religious tasks, including links to sermons and Qur’anic verses that required study.<sup>76</sup>

This regulated set of rules and repetitive spiritual observations applies, I believe, equally to both women’s and men’s auxiliary organisations. As the Ahmadiyya bureaucracy governs the understanding and enactment of its religious beliefs, it regulates the knowledge and practices and determines what is officially acknowledged as valid within its religious framework. Thus, bureaucratisation serves as a “technique of power” (Müller & Steiner, 2018, p. 14), through which the Jama’at moulds the comprehensive religious life of its members, as discussed more below.

After being reminded of their spiritual obligations, piety, and moral training, the *lajnas* collectively discussed and wrote down how they had fulfilled the prescribed efforts of the past month as part of their commitment to the Jama’at and its values:

- Where was the *Tarbiyyat* visit made?
- Fill in the number of members who offer the five daily prayers.
- Fill in the number of members who recite the Holy Qur’an daily.
- Fill in the number of members who listened to at least three Friday sermons this month.
- Fill in the number of members who watch MTA regularly.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> *Tahajjud* prayer is performed after the obligatory evening *Isha* prayer and before the morning *Fajr* prayer. *Tahajjud* is believed by Muslims to bring them closer to Allah, offering spiritual benefits such as forgiveness of sins and acceptance of supplications, as well as physical and mental health benefits including disease treatment, reduced blood pressure, stress relief, and improved sleep quality. It is also believed to aid in character development by enhancing emotional and spiritual intelligence, discipline, memory, and providing mental peace. It is especially recommended for those who are deeply in need of Allah’s blessings and forgiveness (Mahfuzah & Hidayah, 2023).

<sup>76</sup> Monday: Recite and reflect on the following *dua* for our spouses and children (the text of *dua* was attached).

Tuesday: Recite and study Qur’anic verses related to the treatment of children.

Wednesday: Read the 10 Conditions of Bai’at, accessible at Alislam.org.

Thursday: Listen to the Friday sermon delivered by Huzoor, available on YouTube.

Friday: Today is Friday. Please try to recite *Durood Sharif* prayer at least 100 times. Especially recite “Astaghfirullah Rabbi min kulli ambition wa tube Allah”, which means “I seek forgiveness from Allah, my Lord, from every sin I committed, and I turn to Him.”

<sup>77</sup> Ahmadiyya TV channel.

- Fill in the number of *lajnas* who observe *purdah*.
- What efforts were made for the moral training of children?
- What efforts were made to motivate inactive members to attend monthly meetings, and how was *Tarbiyyat* information conveyed to them?
- What efforts were made to educate members about the importance of regular *Salat*, recitation of the Holy Qur'an, *purdah*, Friday sermons, and MTA programs?
- Report of the *Tarbiyyat* syllabus covered during this month.

Together, the *lajnas* compiled their responses into a single official document, which was signed by the *Tarbiyyat* branch secretary and the branch president. The monthly report would first be submitted to the national general secretary of Fiji, who collects it from each of the nine Fijian branches (Nadi, Suva, Lautoka, Sigatoka, Labasa, Seaqaqa, Valoca, Nasarwaqa, and Taveuni)<sup>78</sup> and collates their reports into a single document. As the branch president, Nasreen, conveyed to me, she would then forward the document “*directly to Huzoor*”. I voiced my doubts concerning the Khalifa’s capacity to individually process the extensive volume of reports received from all national Jama’ats worldwide, given that the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at claims to be present in over 200 nations (Al Islam, 2004, “Ahmadiyya Muslim Community”). However, Nasreen expressed her firm belief in the Khalifa’s ability and regular practice of doing so and disclosed a personal sense of accountability to him in fulfilling her duties as an office bearer.

After *lajnas* completed the *Tarbiyyat* checklist, the meeting discussion moved to specific tasks and activities, such as planning for the upcoming *Lajna Ima’illah* Centenary celebration and the annual *Ijtema* religious competition (discussed later in this chapter). During the formal dialogue, *lajnas* often mentioned the Khalifa’s latest recommendations and referred to his most recent Friday sermons to align their behaviour and activities with his guidance. On one occasion, the national secretary for *Nasirat-ul-Ahmadiyya* proposed a camping event for girls to foster connections between the older and younger generations. Another time, the national health secretary delivered a brief general presentation on mental well-being, urging *lajnas* to come up with ideas on how to enhance women’s and children’s feelings of happiness and comfort. On another occasion, the vice-president asked whether all attending *lajnas* unanimously supported sponsoring school uniforms and books for one Fijian

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<sup>78</sup> There is also the Ahmadiyya Jama’at on Rabi Island, which, as the national secretary of *Lajna Ima’illah* explained to me, was not yet fully structured. Nonetheless, there is the Ahmadiyya Baitul Mehdi Mosque, and Imam Tariq, who is based on Taveuni Island, oversees and regularly visits the Jama’at in Rabi Island as well.

child outside the local Ahmadiyya Jama'at, to which all agreed, and nobody spoke against it. After the formal part concluded with a brief *dua* (prayer), *lajnas* shared sweets and cookies each baked at home, drank juice and tea, and the vice-president drove to a nearby restaurant to pick up a fresh pizza.

While the hierarchical bureaucratisation process in Islam may be used to depersonalise and rationalise Islam's practices for greater efficiency and alignment with modern administrative practices (Müller & Steiner, 2018), within the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at, this procedural efficiency coincides with the emotional engagements of members who foster a personal connection to the Khalifa. Both Evans (2017, 2020) and Balzani (2020) described the Ahmadiyya Jama'at organisation as an enchanted bureaucracy, where the enchanted and the rational realms are not "eliminating and replacing the other over time, but rather both always co-existing and possessing permeable and blurred boundaries" (Balzani, 2020, p. 283). As a result, Balzani (2020) argues, the structured routines merge with more enchanted elements of the Khalifa's supreme authority, whose influence transforms otherwise dull procedures into engaging and effective processes. As some Fijian Ahmadi shared with me, like Nasreen, mentioned above, the emotionally resonant sense of personal accountability to the Khalifa motivated their continued active contribution to the Jama'at.

By pursuing an idealised self-perception of their bureaucratic involvement, Fijian Ahmadi sustain a narrative that can obscure the more complex realities of their engagement. The merging of mystical dimensions of existence and the actual conditions not only supports their enthusiastic bureaucratic involvement, as posited by Balzani (2020) and Evans (2017, 2020), but also heightens their dependency on Jama'at structures, as suggested by Müller and Steiner (2018), leaving them progressively tied to the central homogeneous leadership. Consequently, the enchanted nature of the Ahmadiyya bureaucracy reinforces the emotional attachment of its members and consolidates substantial power and control over their decision-making, discouraging critique and individual choices.

The methodical nature of *Lajna Ima'illah's* monthly meetings, detailed reporting, and the use of routine follow-ups integrates *lajnas'* individual efforts into a larger, shared vision and ensures their consistent involvement in the Jama'at. By regularly participating in the *Lajna Ima'illah* framework, Fijian Ahmadi women are not just attending meetings; they are engaging in a process that fosters the ethos of a dutiful, orderly community. Through their involvement in Jama'at auxiliary organisations, Fijian Ahmadi participate in roles and

practices that are designed to align their personal beliefs with the Jama'at's goals, thus maintaining a sense of purpose and belonging. In turn, their input ensures that the Jama'at's norms and values are continuously reinforced and practised. As the Jama'at's organisational structure clearly defines everyone's responsibilities, members understand what is expected of them. Consequently, the obligation to adhere to Jama'at standardised guidance, required from each member and surveyed as a part of self-examination and by others, encourages a shared sense of identity among actively involved Fijian Ahmadis.

The discipline and duty embedded in the Jama'at organisational structure foster unity, identity, and a feeling of connectedness among actively involved Fijian Ahmadis. For Fijian Ahmadi women, participation in *Lajna Ima'illah* provides meaningful engagement through governance rooted in their faith, intertwined with a sense of collective responsibility. Additionally, it supports them in sustaining self-discipline through adherence to consistent religious standards, thus exemplifying the community's high criteria for self-identification as perceived ideal devout Muslims. Meanwhile, the defined roles and Jama'at's top-down guidelines impose control over members, demonstrating a centralised, structured power that directs their religious and social development and denotes adherence to established norms or practices.

### **Modern Image**

Despite the Jama'at's autocratic leadership that lacks collaborative decision-making and promotes uniformity in members' public and personal lives, some researchers argue that its hierarchical structure typifies that of a modern organisation (Hanson, 2009; Evans, 2017; Balzani, 2020). This is mainly due to Jama'at's acclaimed effective management (Hanson, 2009), emphasis on regulatory compliance (Balzani, 2020) and its usage of contemporary technological tools (Evans, 2017). However, organisational and technical efficiency represents only one dimension of modernity. Therefore, instead of viewing the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at as a bridge between tradition and modernity, I argue that its bureaucratic structure primarily serves to uphold traditional values, albeit utilising modern technology. This nuanced depiction also more accurately captures the Fijian Ahmadis' views and relationship with modernity.

Fijian Ahmadis I have interacted with saw themselves as generally more progressive than other Fijians. Their self-perceptions aligned with Ahmadis in India, who described their

faith “as providing a way for modernity to culminate in Islam” (Evans, 2020, p. 492). Beyond commonly positioning themselves as more advanced based on the perceived rationality of their faith (as discussed in Chapter 4), many Fijian Ahmadiis associated their progressive self-image with organisational discipline, rule compliance, and adherence to established social, cultural and gender norms, believed to shield them from contemporary influences. Similarly, in the US, Ahmadi women revealed their aim to protect themselves and their families from the perceived negative influences of the “advanced” society through adherence to traditional values (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2006, p. 45). Hence, although Fijian Ahmadiis often presented themselves as well-educated and modern, their views on aspects of modernity and advancement were ambivalent.

One of the reasons why Balzani termed Ahmadiyya Jama’at as “a complex modern Islamic sect... in some respects socially progressive” (Balzani, 2020, p. 30) was her conviction of the Jama’at’s support for some leadership roles for women. Based on my observations among Fijian Ahmadiis, the nature of the local Ahmadiyya leadership does not encourage or support its leaders (women and men) to initiate and implement their own visions or make strategic decisions and choices for their local Jama’at. Instead, their leading roles seem more akin to technocrats, tasked with ensuring adherence to centralised directives and providing consistent administrative feedback to London headquarters through factual documentation. Whereas the opportunity for individual autonomous leadership and enhanced creativity at the local level was limited, such roles also appeared neither appealing nor actively pursued by Fijian Ahmadi women. While the Fijian Ahmadi women do take on office roles, these are focused mainly on managing other women and operating almost exclusively within the prescribed initiatives by the *Lajna Ima’illah*. Further, due to doctrinal interpretations, Ahmadiyya Jama’at does not allow women to become missionaries or lead men in prayers (Al Islam, 2024, “Can a Woman Lead Men”), and also the role of the *Amir* (the national president of the Jama’at) as well as the Khalifa is exclusively reserved for men within the Jama’at bureaucracy. Therefore, although Fijian Ahmadi women sometimes present themselves as empowered leaders, their leadership is primarily administrative rather than visionary, doctrinal or inspirational. Meanwhile, they remain structurally subordinated to the male-led hierarchy of the Jama’at.

Ahmadiyya women’s leadership is publicly framed within traditional and domestic roles. During the Peace Symposium in Auckland in 2024, the president of New Zealand’s

Ahmadiyya Jama'at, in his speech, proudly shared that Ahmadi women are celebrated as "Queen of the house", which reflects the Jama'at's expectations of women's leadership linked to their domestic role. This stands in contrast to examples of women from some Muslim communities in the US and Europe, where they may assume great leadership influence both within the mosque and in broader society (Wang, 2017; Joseph et al., 2013; Jouili & Amir-Moazami, 2006). For Fijian Ahmadi women and men, leadership positions are shaped by traditional gender roles, the technocratic nature of the tasks, and the centralised directives of the male-dominated global Jama'at.

Characterising Fijian Ahmadis as "modern" is analytically complicated because many attributes commonly associated with modernity, such as bourgeois class position, rationalism, education, and progressive social relations, do not consistently describe their lived realities. Most Ahmadis in Fiji are not landowners; many women do not work outside the home; education is often valued for moral cultivation and obedience rather than professional advancement; and rationality is defined within the framework of what is "logical" to the Jama'at's authority rather than through autonomous critique.

Instead of resolving whether Fijian Ahmadis are modern or not, it is more revealing to ask why modernity is so central to how they present themselves. Drawing on anthropologist and sociologist Bruno Latour's (1991, p. 10) view that "the modern" is often defined through contrast and conflict between "winners and losers", Fijian Ahmadis' self-identification as morally, spiritually, and intellectually "more advanced" seems to function to elevate the community over others and reaffirm a sense of collective superiority.

While Fijian Ahmadis express diverse interpretations of modernity, my observations indicate that the global Jama'at bureaucracy's emphasis on adherence to traditional norms limits critical engagement with their contemporary relevance and openness to new ideas, often considered a marker of social progress. Thus, I find the characterisation of the Ahmadiyya bureaucratic framework as modern, despite its high technocratic efficiency, to be problematic. By equating modernity with clarity, rationality, and obedience, and casting difference as confusion or "backwardness," Fijian Ahmadis sustain a positive self-image while maintaining strict social hierarchies. In this way, modernity operates less as an objective condition than as a means of affirming distinction and superior communal identity.

## Office-Bearers

To Fijian Ahmadiis, serving as an office-bearer extends into many aspects of life and provides a deep sense of personal significance. Office-bearers comprise regular members, men and women, elected to various roles and male-only missionaries (i.e., imams, commonly referred to as *murrabi* or *maulana*). The global Jama'at's written guidelines, issued by the Khalifa and accessible at the community website, outline practical steps concerning exemplary manners and conduct for all office-bearers, highlighting that their duty is to set such an impressive personal example that others would want to be like them (Ahmad, 2019).<sup>79</sup>

Through the assignment of formal titles and duties, the Jama'at cultivates a bureaucratic culture that intertwines members' religious commitment with professionalised forms of leadership. From my observations, the role of an office-bearer resembles a full-time job commitment, demanding substantial time, effort, and dedication. Moreover, by bestowing members with distinguished titles like president, vice-president or national general secretary, Jama'at provides them with something close to a professional identity, almost mirroring role titles in corporations or government agencies. This adaptation of administrative designations reflects Müller and Steiner's (2018) observations of Islam's bureaucratisation processes. They noted that within Muslim communities, as religious practices are translated into bureaucratic language and terms, they become "increasingly interiorised as natural and, therefore, as authentic" (Müller & Steiner, 2018, p. 5). Similarly, by integrating religious leadership with a structured hierarchy, the Jama'at endows its members with roles that hold both spiritual and administrative importance.

Within the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at, the hard work is well-emphasised as an essential value.<sup>80</sup> Despite not receiving any pay, the fervent involvement with which Fijian

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<sup>79</sup> Among the many requirements, guidelines suggest that the office-bearers shall greet others in a cheerful manner, converse softly and never forsake courtesy; they should be compassionate and humble, rid themselves of their egos and personal desires, control their emotions, and suppress anger; they must act confidently, yet not displaying overconfidence; they are expected to overlook the faults of others while maintaining composure over minor mistakes and particularly missionaries should walk regularly to remain physically active and those stationed in Western countries are reminded to avoid consuming junk food and eat home-cooked healthy meals (Ahmad, 2019).

<sup>80</sup> During his speech at the annual Jalsa Salana in Kenya in 2005, the Khalifa addressed hard and sincere work, "If an Ahmadi works in a government department, he would never accept a bribe. If he is a trader, he does not adulterate his goods nor sells faulty items. If he is an employee or a labourer, then no one works harder than him" (Al Islam, 2005, "Raising the Standard of Worship"). In another statement, the Khalifa stated, "An Ahmadi should be the hardest worker, the most truthful, the most mindful of others' rights, the most forgiving, and the least interested in worldly pleasures. And when this spirit is developed in you, these are the good deeds that will cause you to tread the path of righteousness" (Valentine, 2008, p. 216).

Ahmadis uphold their official duties reveals multiple incentives behind their voluntary service. Alongside a strong work ethic, Ahmadi office-bearers in Fiji disclosed several additional motivations they consider honourable, including fulfilling religious obligations, upholding the Jama'at's values, and, commonly cited, growing Ahmadiyya interpretations of Islam. Imran, who used to hold multiple office-bearer roles, explained to me, *"We are contributing to the success of the vision to spread true Islam to the whole world"*. The office-bearers, whom I met in Fiji, often saw their roles as contributing to something greater than themselves. During his fieldwork in Qadian, India, Evans (2017) observed that office-bearers viewed themselves as dutiful functionaries, executing Jama'at directives understood as direct instructions from the Khalifa. Similarly, research among UK Ahmadis revealed an awareness of members' roles as modest individual contributions to community service, as expressed by one of them, *"We are like an army, a workforce of ants"* (Valentine, 2008, p. 80). While Fijian Ahmadi office-bearers emphasised their commitment to collective values and the community's perceived noble mission, some also expressed a belief that Ahmadis are divinely chosen to guide others (discussed in Chapter 4).

For many Fijian Ahmadis, involvement in the Jama'at functions serves as a means of self-cultivation and the deepening of religious practice. Nazir, the national vice-president for youth, expressed a strong sense of personal accountability, stating, *"As vice president, I have to be a role model to our youth and adults. I try to be as perfect as I can be... I am responsible for living by and exemplifying the teachings of Islam Ahmadiyya"*. His perception of office-bearing as a moral and spiritual obligation acts as one of the major factors contributing to his continued engagement and self-development.

Reflecting diverse motivations through their roles, office-bearers in Fiji demonstrate a dynamic engagement with their faith. Striving to meet the high criteria of ethical conduct outlined by their community's guidelines, this commitment imbues their everyday activities with a spiritual significance, connecting them to a larger purpose and instilling a sense of greater fulfilment. These varied motivations, along with those discussed below, underscore the multi-layered nature of Fijian Ahmadis' vigorous and ongoing involvement in Jama'at's bureaucratic roles.

### Exclusive Opportunities in Serving the Jama'at

While many Fijian Ahmadis expressed fulfilment in advancing the mission of Ahmadiyya Jama'at through their roles, my observations indicate that some were equally driven by more “mundane” motivations, such as ordinary social engagements or fulfilling unmet (career) ambitions.

Nasreen shared with me that her role as the national president of *Lajna Ima'illah* of Fiji is “*the most precious and the biggest blessing*”. As a housewife with two grown, married sons, Nasreen’s primary focus during the day, apart from cooking, is her work for the Jama'at. As someone who finds great fulfilment in caring for others, she sees herself as a “*guardian and caretaker of all Ahmadi ladies and girls in Fiji*”, and her role as president provides her with meaningful opportunities to utilise her nurturing talents. This role provides her with a structured daily routine and predictability in following official directives and regularly reporting to headquarters to comply with them. It also offers space for endeavours, such as shopping for gift rewards for the *Ijtima* religious competitions or delivering a speech at the *Lajna Ima'illah* Centenary event.

Despite limited autonomy in decision-making, office-bearer roles allow Fijian Ahmadis to practice skills such as teamwork, communication, people management, and public presentation, and provide recognition for their contributions. While this is true for both men and women, I observed that stay-at-home women, in particular, appreciate this. Alisha, who served as president at the Nadi branch for three terms, a total of fifteen years, disclosed to me that acquiring such a role at a young age initially challenged her to find confidence in leading more mature and experienced *lajnas* than her. She disclosed to me how she had learnt to overcome these challenges and felt this was acknowledged when she was recently rewarded for her contribution to the Jama'at during the *Lajna Ima'illah* Centenary celebration at the Civic Centre in Suva. Being recognised in front of around 80 *lajnas* from all over Fiji brought her immense satisfaction, as evidenced by her blushing facial expression as she conveyed the news of her reward.

For some Fijian Ahmadi women without conventional jobs or formal higher education, executive roles in Jama'at seemed to enhance their confidence and self-esteem. Humaira revealed her gratitude for her official roles, which extend her everyday activities beyond the traditional tasks of a stay-at-home mother, “*If you are a housewife, then our Jama'at gives you the opportunity to express yourself. The opportunities that I get as an*

*Ahmadi woman, like the presentation I did in Suva... I love all those things. And I would not normally be able to do them elsewhere*". Humaira is the national and regional secretary for *nasirat*, overseeing the development of girls aged 7 to 15, and she is also the national executive for exhibitions and arts for *nasirat*. During the *Lajna Ima'illah* Centenary in Suva, she coordinated the placement of Jama'at promotional decoration panels and a display of *nasirats'* calligraphy drawings on a small table and delivered a brief speech during the event. Humaira valued her office role as an opportunity to apply her skills and as what she perceived to be a uniquely inclusive and empowering space for women - something she, like many Fijian Ahmadi women I met, believed was absent in other communities.

The office-bearer roles allow Fijian Ahmadi, such as Humaira, Alisha, and Nasreen, to expand their typical housewife routines by developing new skills outside the home within the secure environment of like-minded women. This, together with prestigious titles of their positions, appeared to enhance their self-confidence and sense of satisfaction. Office-bearers regard their roles as an honourable expression of religious duty, enabling them to engage in meaningful activities that demonstrate their commitment to the Jama'at. In doing so, the Ahmadiyya bureaucracy links administrative rigour with members' emotional and spiritual experiences. Rather than existing in tension, bureaucracy and emotions are mutually reinforcing, motivating Fijian Ahmadi toward community goals, sense of belonging and personal fulfilment.

However, the Jama'at bureaucratic framework acts as a two-way benefit. While members gain from their roles in terms of personal development, community engagement, and possibly social status, the Jama'at headquarters profits from the effective local management that these roles provide, as the members' volunteer work helps to sustain communal cohesion and continuity. Additionally, assigning important office-bearer roles to regular members may deepen their religious and community commitment, which the Jama'at leadership can strategically leverage to integrate new or less engaged members. One such example is Babar, a Christian convert from Kiribati. During our conversation, Babar reminisced about his first office-bearer role in the 1970s, when the local national president appointed him, without any election, as secretary of *Tarik-e-Jadeed* and *Waqf-e-Jadeed*, schemes for the propagation of Ahmadiyya Islam. Babar shared with me that before becoming an office-bearer, he drank alcohol, contrary to Islamic teachings, and lacked deeper religious knowledge; however, his appointment motivated him to a personal transformation to give up

drinking and engage profoundly in studying Ahmadiyya faith. Even though such tactical appointments can also backfire if the assigned member diverts from the organisation's ethos, Babar proved an excellent choice for the role. Alongside his wife, he introduced Ahmadiyya teachings to people in Nauru and Kiribati, where he worked as a doctor. Additionally, since 1997, he has dedicated himself to translating the Qur'an into the Kiribati language, a challenge he hopes to complete soon.

In Nadi, office-bearer roles often remain with those already experienced in them, and many serve a maximum of three terms in more office roles, which creates a highly effective, small, exclusive group that manages the local Jama'at. During my stay with Nasreen's family, I told them that I felt more like I was living in an Ahmadiyya parliament, rather than a typical household. This was because each family member held at least one or more official position within the Jama'at. The Jama'at's extensive administration, which is consistent across countries, coupled with the smaller membership of the Fijian Jama'at, results in Ahmadis in Nadi frequently taking on multiple roles simultaneously. Unlike larger Ahmadiyya communities in Auckland or Sydney, where office-bearers constitute a minority, the Fijian Jama'at presents an inverse pattern, with office-bearers often significantly outnumbering regular members at local gatherings.

Scholar of Religion Amna Mahmood (2023), who studied the Ahmadiyya Jama'at in Scandinavia, observed that in relatively small communities, such as those in Fiji, members are often expected to assume multiple office roles. Mahmood (2023) argued that role integration preserves a tight-knit community and reflects the necessity to manage its modest size. She highlighted the advantages of holding multiple office roles, such as enhancing collective identity, fostering leadership and personal growth, and enhancing Jama'at's resilience through the diverse skills of its members. Further, Mahmood (2023) posited that individuals with multiple roles can better adapt to community needs, thereby increasing personal and organisational flexibility.

Likewise, in the context of the Fijian Ahmadiyyat Jama'at, multiple role holding has some benefits, such as more active members covering additional tasks, particularly in remote locations with a genuine lack of human resources, which underscores the potential for personal growth and aligns with the Jama'at's ideal of its members serving as dutiful role models. On the other hand, this small group of experienced Nadi office-bearers risks ending up managing itself only; as per my findings, ordinary members in Nadi participate only

marginally. Assigning office roles to less engaged and less disciplined members might disrupt the precision of Jama'at's established operations. Meanwhile, this approach could broaden and encourage the engagement of other members within the Jama'at, as illustrated, for instance, by Babar's appointment, mentioned above, where the then national president prioritised inclusivity over perfection to support the Jama'at's growth.

Office-bearers that I met in Fiji described their roles as deeply rewarding and frequently regarded them as an honour. Nonetheless, it may be particularly significant in a specific way to some Fijian Ahmadi women who perceive that similar opportunities beyond their domestic roles are scarce in other Fijian communities. Office-bearers in Fiji embrace serving Jama'at with a sense of stern dutifulness to promote Ahmadiyya Islam but also with gratitude for having what they see as a purposeful opportunity for self-expression, personal development and interactions that they believe are exclusive to their Jama'at.

### **Strict Adherence**

While the consolidation of multiple office roles can strengthen the organisational coherence and identity of the Fijian Jama'at, it may simultaneously limit broader member participation. During my involvement in numerous Jama'at events in Nadi, it was rare for me to meet an adult Ahmadi who was not serving as an office-bearer and was not deeply involved in the Jama'at's bureaucracy.

This points to a dichotomy where members are either fully engaged or completely disengaged from the community, with little middle ground. Such an arrangement seems preferable to some Fijian Ahmadis, who prioritise rigorous adherence to rules and pursuit of perceived correctness over the broader inclusivity of less dutiful members. Imran, who served as an office-bearer for the last twenty years in multiple roles, shared with me a perspective that encapsulates Fijian Ahmadis' commitment to comply with rules, *"It is not easy to be an Ahmadi. You must follow all the rules based on Islamic teachings. We do not compromise with any rules when you are an Ahmadi Muslim"*. The stringent expectations required of Fijian Ahmadis underscore a serious dedication to ensure members' persistent adherence to established religious norms and practices. Further, Imran implied that Ahmadiyya faith is logically sound and morally structured, and therefore, if one truly understands it, there would be no reason not to follow its commands, *"There are only two types of people who leave Ahmadiyya Islam - those who fail to understand it and those who fail to abide by its rules"*.

Recognising that not everyone may be able or willing to uphold the Jama'at's rigorous standards, Imran drew on a familiar analogy, "*If you have a rotten potato in a bag, it will infect all the other potatoes*", and suggested that members who lack commitment should leave to prevent weakening the resolve of other members. However, some Fijian Ahmadis may challenge Imran's view that allowing less-observant members to leave the Jama'at is an adequate solution. As discussed later in this chapter, many consider some use of social and psychological pressure as an appropriate means of reinforcing adherence to Jama'at norms among less observant individuals.

The steadfast Fijian Ahmadis that I have met endeavour to exemplify their faith practices by assiduously striving to serve as devoted role models - maintaining distinct principles and furthering an image of Jama'at's identity of virtuous, orderly Muslims. Fijian Ahmadis appear to believe that their strict adherence to prescribed norms, rather than broader inclusivity or relaxation of stringent standards, best enhances their Jama'at's resilience and cohesiveness. For them, the Jama'at bureaucracy instils discipline and compliance with established rules - qualities they regard as fundamental and prioritise over greater flexibility in their religious adherence, curiosity, and receptivity to new ideas. This perspective is reinforced by their idealised, enchanted bureaucratic engagement, through which they derive reassurance from direct interactions and perceived supervision by the Khalifa. Fijian Ahmadis seem to willingly refrain from seeking more autonomy from the community's centralised power in London. To them, the Jama'at's bureaucracy, which promotes uniform religious practice, is regarded not as a limitation but as a guiding system that reinforces moral order and spiritual governance. Their active engagement in the community's administration is seen as a means for personal growth and religious expression, enabling them to align more closely with the Khalifa and the collective ethos of the community. In doing so, Fijian Ahmadis perceive themselves as making a meaningful contribution to the Ahmadiyya expansive spiritual mission.

## II. BLESSED BY SELF-SACRIFICE

Like many other religions, Islam has deep-rooted traditions of altruism that are central to its teachings and widely practised within Muslim communities (Lieberman & Rozbicki, 2017; Harpci, 2017). Whereas charity in Islam aims to foster social responsibility,

economic solidarity and harmony, Muslims believe it also offers rewards in the hereafter (Al-Ani, 2019). Believers can earn “treasure in heaven” through their charitable actions, as the Qur’an states that these contributions transform into a different form of wealth, shifting value from the material world to the spiritual (Benthall, 2016, p. 17). According to Lieberman and Rozbicki (2017), Islamic charity extends beyond offering temporary relief to those facing hardships; it involves a sustained distribution of assets aimed at economically uplifting the poor to gradually enabling them to contribute to the cycle of charity themselves.

The spectrum of Islamic philanthropy comprises obligatory and voluntary charity (Al-Ani, 2019).<sup>81</sup> While obligatory donations ensure a structured contribution towards community welfare, voluntary acts promote personal growth and societal harmony, emphasising the link between faith and generosity in Islam. The global Ahmadiyya Jama’at adheres to Islamic practices of mandatory financial contributions, including *zakat* and *fitrana*<sup>82</sup>, as well as voluntary *sadaqah*<sup>83</sup>. Apart from incorporating *sadaqah* as part of their regular spiritual practice by donating to the poor, a few Fijian Ahmadis disclosed to me that they offer *sadaqah* after distressing dreams to avert misfortune, and following positive dreams as an expression of gratitude.<sup>84</sup>

In addition to *zakat*, *fitrana* and *sadaqah*, Ahmadis worldwide contribute to their global Jama’at through an extensive and elaborate system of additional payments referred to

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<sup>81</sup> Obligatory philanthropy in Islam consists of *zakat* and *fitrana*, voluntary includes the *sadaqah* and *waqf* institutions (Al-Ani, 2019).

<sup>82</sup> Another obligatory charity is *fitrana*, (i.e., *zakat al-fitr*), which is collected before the end of Ramadan to ensure that the less fortunate can participate in the celebrations of Eid-al-Fitr, completing the fasting month. The amount to be given as *fitrana* should ideally equal the cost of a basic meal for one person or more, depending on the donor’s capacity. The prescribed amount payable for *fitrana* is the same for all Muslims, regardless of their income or wealth (Al-Ani, 2019).

<sup>83</sup> *Sadaqah* is a voluntary charity that can be given at any time and that depends on a person’s goodwill to contribute to others without obligation (Harpci, 2017). Accordingly, *sadaqah* encompasses any positive action, with kind words, good deeds, and acts of self-restraint all regarded as forms of charity (Harpci, 2017; Awang et al., 2017). Many Muslims believe *sadaqah* averts misfortune and earns them merit for the afterlife, but it also serves as atonement for sins in this life by “covering over, removing, or wiping away of sin” (Harpci, 2017, p. 69).

<sup>84</sup> Although Fijian Ahmadis acknowledged dreams as meaningful, regular dream interpretation was uncommon. Contrary to my initial expectations before the fieldwork, while dream interpretation, i.e., oneiromancy is recognized within the Ahmadiyya Jama’at (Balzani, 2020), it is not widely practiced among Ahmadis in Fiji. During my research in Nadi, I encountered only an occasional dream practice among the older generation of local Ahmadis. Imam Naeem from the Aqsa Mosque in Nadi explained to me, that this is due to the complexities of accurate dream interpretation but also the belief among Fijian Ahmadis that bad dreams should not be shared. Nonetheless, he suggested that sometimes a dream message might correlate with the Islamic meanings of people’s names if they appeared in one’s dream. For example, dreaming of a person named Mubarak, which signifies blessings or Bashir, which means a bearer of good news, is a reassurance of positive prospects.

Duryaab was the only Fijian Ahmadi who reported engaging in a specific dream ritual prayer called *Istikhara*, which she performed for three nights before choosing a bride for her son. She shared, that on the third night, she dreamt of receiving a smelly wedding dress. After discussing this dream with her husband, they decided to rely on what they perceived as a divine message, called off the engagement and searched for another bride. When they found their son’s current wife, Duryaab performed *Istikhara* again, and this time, she allegedly dreamt of the fourth Khalifa visiting their home. This reassured the family of the good choice, and they proceeded with the marriage.

as *chanda*. Beyond financial contributions, the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at also highlights the value of human resource sacrifices. This comprises members' involvement in the community's bureaucracy through unpaid office roles and includes participation in the *Waqf-e-Nau* scheme, which involves dedicating one's children's lives to the Jama'at and the cause of Ahmadiyya Islam. Additionally, many Fijian Ahmadis subscribed to the *Wasiyyat* scheme, becoming Musis - i.e., members who willingly make further financial donations and are regarded as custodians of the Ahmadiyya faith's legacy. Thus, sacrifices, whether material or in the form of their active participation in the Jama'at, are reflective of specific commitments and extensive responsibilities that Fijian Ahmadis are expected to fulfil.

### ***Chanda***

Islamic views on financial sacrifices vary across different contexts and are shaped by a combination of religious doctrine, cultural practices, and socio-political circumstances (Al-Ani, 2019; Benthall, 2006; May, 2013; Zaman, 2016).<sup>85</sup> For the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at, the revival of its interpretation of Islam is a fundamental goal that requires sacrifices (*An Introduction to Financial Sacrifices*, 2005). Therefore, in addition to paying mandated charity governed by Islamic law, Ahmadis pursue a distinct duty to financial contributions, called *chanda*. Together with other additional payments, *chanda* supports local and global Ahmadiyya Jama'at activities.

During the time I stayed with Nasreen's family in Nadi, there was a printed paper on their fridge that belonged to her son, Nazir and looked like a receipt, with name, date and ten points, each marking a different type of financial sacrifice of Ahmadiyya Islam: 1. *Zakat*, 2. *Chanda Wasiyyat*, 3. *Chanda 'Am*, 4. *Jalsa Salana*, 5. *Tahrik-e-Jadid*, 6. *Waqf-e-Jadid*, 7. *Sadqa*, 8. *Mosque*, 9. *Literature*, 10. *Local*. One day, I noticed that only two payments, *Chanda Wasiyyat* and *Jalsa Salana*, had been marked as paid for that respective month (per one person), and the total sum already amounted to 800 Fijian Dollars (approximately 350 USD).

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<sup>85</sup> In many parts of the Middle East, Islamic philanthropy improves the social welfare system by offering healthcare and disaster relief and helps to reduce economic disparities. Additionally, it funds mosques, schools, and cultural centres, supporting education and preserving the region's Islamic heritage, thereby reinforcing societal ethics (Zaman, 2016). In Oman, the Islamic financial sacrifices are vital elements of social responsibility, regarded not only as acts of faith but also as crucial components of social justice and community care. Observed at all times but especially during holy month of Ramadan, these forms of charity significantly contribute to communal welfare and support of the less privileged (Al-Ani, 2019). In Indonesia, *zakat* acts as a social safety net and is often integrated with local customs and governance, which deepens its impact on community solidarity (Benthall, 2006). In Pakistan, monetary contributions extend beyond private religious charitable obligation; they serve as a tool for political expression and action, demonstrating the inseparability of religious practices from a country's political dynamics (May, 2013).

When I expressed my astonishment over such a high amount, Nasreen's husband Bilal explained to me that these were "only" regular payments; there were many more.

The global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's regulations on financial sacrifices are outlined in a 200-page document, *An Introduction to Financial Sacrifices* (2005), which defines obligatory and 21 non-obligatory *chanda* schemes, encouraging Ahmadis to support various initiatives.<sup>86</sup> Regular members are obliged to contribute two *chandas*: *Chanda 'Am*, paid monthly at the rate of 1/16 of one's income (equivalent to 6.25%), and *Chanda Jalsa Salana*, paid once a year at the rate of 1/10 of monthly income (equivalent to 0.83% of annual income). As per the Jama'at's regulations, housewives without a steady income are not required to contribute at the set rate; instead, they should give according to their circumstances and capabilities (*An Introduction to Financial Sacrifices*, 2005).

The diverse financial offerings within the Jama'at reflect a structured collective dedication to sustaining its spiritual, organisational, and missionary objectives. Such contributions embody members' commitment to advancing the local and international goals of their community, while the interconnected framework promotes communal cohesion and reinforces the Fijian Ahmadis' affiliation with the global Jama'at. Furthermore, it also reaffirms their self-perception as exemplary Muslims who fulfil the philanthropic obligations prescribed by Islam and surpass these expectations through additional support for their Jama'at.

### Financial Participation

According to Ahmadiyya Jama'at rules, every adult Ahmadi is financially responsible to the community. Members who exhibit more passive, financially weak or entirely non-

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<sup>86</sup> **Eid Fund** - Supports the celebrations and activities associated with Eid. **Chanda Tahrik-e-Jadid** - Funds initiatives for propagating Ahmadiyya faith and the community's activities. **Chanda Waqf-e-Jadid** - Supports the development and maintenance of mosques and other religious infrastructure. **MTA (Amanat Tarbiyyat)** - Funds for the community's religious educational and moral training programs. **Imdad Tulaba** - Provides financial assistance to students. **Imdad Maridan** - Offers support to needy patients requiring medical help. **Chanda Buyutul Hamd** - Initiated the provision of free accommodation to one hundred poor families in Pakistan. **Yatama Fund** - Dedicated to the care and support of one hundred orphans. **Ta'mir Buyutul Dhikr** - Focuses on the construction and maintenance of places of worship. **Sadqa/Fidya** - For individuals who are unable to fast during Ramadan due to illness or travel, enabling them to pay Fidya as a form of compensation. **Maryam Shadi Fund** - Provides financial assistance for marriage-related expenses. **Sayyidna Bilal Fund** - A general charity fund. **Local Funds** - Supports local community needs and projects. **Sacrifice of Animal Hide** - Involves the collection and sale of animal hides, with proceeds going to various charitable causes. **Fund for the Construction of Mission Houses in Europe** - Supports the establishment of community centres and mission houses across Europe. **Baitul Futuh London** - Funds associated with the Baitul Futuh Mosque in London. **Tahir Foundation** - Focuses on various charitable activities and projects. **Guest House Qadian** - Supports the maintenance and operations of a guest house in Qadian. **Darwaish Fund** - Supports members of the community who dedicate their lives to religious service. **Al-Fadl International** - Supports the publication and distribution of community literature. **Review of Religions** - Funds the publication of a magazine focused on religious education and discourse (*An Introduction to Financial Sacrifices*, 2005).

contributing behaviours are actively targeted by the Jama'at's interventions, encouraging a shift towards their greater economic engagement. In Fiji, Bilal, who serves as a financial secretary for the Nadi branch, is responsible for managing the funds and collecting members' monthly payments, all of which have specific due dates. His duties also require him to educate Fijian Ahmadis about their financial obligations and follow up on payments, which sometimes necessitates making home visits to those who are behind schedule, commonly referred to as "lazy members". Whereas among Fijian Ahmadis, adhering accurately to their financial obligations is viewed as a measure of one's virtuosity and righteousness, a "lazy member" label subtly implies a diminished status within the Jama'at, which distinguishes the nonpayers from other members who fulfil their financial obligations on time. To address members who fail to reliably contribute and steer them back towards dedicated involvement, the Ahmadiyya Jama'at has established transparent internal processes. Only upon the Khalifa's permission and in exceptional circumstances are members permitted to pay *chanda* at a reduced rate. The nonpayers receive reminders, including in-person home visits, are excluded from important meetings, and are ineligible for election as office bearers or for assignment of duties (*An Introduction to Financial Sacrifices*, 2005).

These internal mechanisms impede members from remaining passive participants in the Jama'at's bureaucracy. Consequently, Fijian Ahmadis' practices of financial payments pose a challenge to Schielke's (2022) critique of anthropological studies for focusing mainly on highly active members within the Muslim communities. By systematically discouraging passivity, the Jama'at's framework promotes engaged participation among Ahmadis. Therefore, in the context of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at, the (anthropological) research focus on active members may not indicate selection bias, but rather reflect the actual community's internal dynamics. Consequently, Schielke's (2022) evaluation may not be fully applicable to groups like the Ahmadiyya Jama'at, where structures are designed to encourage active participation. This remains the case despite my observation, noted earlier in this chapter, that the incidence of "lazy members" among the Fijian Ahmadis appears relatively high. As highlighted by Müller and Steiner (2018) in their study on the bureaucratisation of Islam in Southeast Asia, even the act of rejecting bureaucracy is a response that the bureaucracy itself provokes. Despite resistance, actors are compelled to engage with the bureaucratic system, thus inadvertently supporting its existence and influence (Müller & Steiner, 2018). Therefore,

even the initially passive demeanour of “lazy members” paradoxically results in their interaction with the Jama’at, as their behaviour evokes a response from other members.

In this manner, unless members make a deliberate decision to formally exit the community, the Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s bureaucracy ensures that all members remain involved in it, to some extent. Whereas being born into or converting to the Ahmadiyya faith entails a lifetime financial duty to the Jama’at, non-compliance with these obligations is treated as a debt owed by the member to the community. Accordingly, the bureaucracy of financial responsibility in Ahmadiyya Islam sustains the active participation of its members, whether by accurately fulfilling payment obligations or by remaining indebted to the Jama’at.

### **Musis - The Righteous Ones**

In the Ahmadiyya Jama’at, Musis embody the highest standards of spiritual and financial dedication, pledging to adhere to the demands of the *Wasiyyat* scheme, which was designed to uphold principles of righteousness and sacrifice, emphasising commitment to the Jama’at’s welfare and the objectives of Ahmadiyya Islam (Ahmad, 2023). Musis’ role as custodians of the community’s spiritual and moral legacies positions them as figures who sustain and inspire the Jama’at values among fellow members (*Wasiyyat Rules*, 2015; Al Islam, 2022, “Essence of Taqwa”).

The *Wasiyyat* scheme was established by the community founder Ghulam Ahmad in 1905. He detailed the initiative in his book, *The Will*, a compulsory reading for every Ahmadi who wishes to become a Musi, i.e., “The one who makes the Will” (Ahmad, 2023, p. 51). Ghulam Ahmad viewed Musis as fated to uphold divine laws, endure spiritual trials, manifest God’s prophecies, and advance Ahmadiyya Islam (Ahmad, 2023).

Musis assume significant financial responsibilities, including a monthly *Chanda Hissa Amad*, which equals at least 1/10 up to 1/3 of their monthly income.<sup>87</sup> Additionally, Musis contribute through *Chanda Hissa Ja’idad*, where they allocate a portion of their property, vehicles, or jewellery, valued from 1/10 to a maximum of 1/3, to the Jama’at. This payment is realised upon their death; however, if any assets are sold during their lifetime, 10% of earnings are paid to the Jama’at instantly (*Wasiyyat Rules*, 2015). Further, Musis also contribute *Chanda Ai’lan-e-Wasiyyat* for administrative expenses related to the publication

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<sup>87</sup> Housewives without any income who become Musis donate the equivalent amount that is calculated from the pocket money they receive from their husbands. Many Fijian Ahmadi women commonly do not have their own bank accounts and prefer to rely on their husbands to manage major household financial activities.

and propagation of the *Wasiyyat* scheme and *Chanda Shart Awwal* to cover costs associated with the maintenance of the special cemetery assigned to them (*Wasiyyat Rules*, 2015). In recognition of their sacrifices, Ghulam Ahmad granted Musis the honour of burial in a separate cemetery, referred to as Heavenly Graveyard (*Bahishti Maqbarah*), reserved for righteous members believed to be destined for heaven. The designated cemetery for Musis in Fiji is located in Maro, approximately 50 kilometres from Nadi.

Musis must yearly declare their annual income to the Jama'at. In case they cannot fulfil their commitments, they can apply for adjustments or cancellations of their *Wasiyyat*; however, this process requires formal approval by the *Majlis Karpardaz*<sup>88</sup> and is not automatic (*Wasiyyat Rules*, 2015). Nevertheless, becoming a Musi is generally regarded as a lifelong commitment, and notably, I did not encounter any cases in Fiji of Musis seeking to withdraw from their *Wasiyyat*, underscoring the intense dedication of Fijian Ahmadis to this scheme.

According to Zakaria, approximately 40 Ahmadis in Fiji are now Musis, that is a significant rise from two decades ago, when allegedly only a few, mainly the children of Pakistani missionaries, held this status. He explained that the 2008 Golden Jubilee of the Ahmadiyya khilafat marked a turning point, as the current Khalifa's global call for Ahmadis to join the *Wasiyyat* scheme prompted a noticeable rise in engagement among Fijian Ahmadis. Zakaria and several other members I met shared that the Khalifa's appeal strongly resonated with them, encouraging their decision to become Musis in the years that followed.

Among Fijian Ahmadis, Musis are regarded as exemplars of compliance with Ahmadiyya Islam's tenets. As guardians of the community's values of righteousness and self-sacrifice, Musis are expected to inspire and reinforce the principles of the Ahmadiyya faith, encouraging others to elevate their own practices and contributions to the Jama'at.

### ***Taqwa and Rizq***

Musis are to conduct their lives in the highest standards of *pardah* and the Islamic concept of *taqwa* (*Wasiyyat Rules*, 2015; Al Islam, 2022, "Essence of Taqwa"). Whereas *taqwa* translates as "fear of God" (Ahmad, 2023, p. 2), in his sermons, the Khalifa refers to it as righteousness (Al Islam, 2022, "Essence of Taqwa"). The founder of the Ahmadiyya community, Ghulam Ahmad, described *taqwa* as "a root without which everything is meaningless" (Ahmad, 2023, p. 10), suggesting that believers should engage in spiritual self-

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<sup>88</sup> The executive committee managing the Bahishti Maqbarah cemetery and related matters (*Wasiyyat Rules*, 2015).

reflection to align their intentions with Islamic commandments, seeking to please Allah and fearing His disapproval (Ahmad, 2023).<sup>89</sup>

Among most Musis that I met in Fiji, the emphasis appeared to be less on fearing Allah and more on their belief that their financial sacrifice and righteous conduct attract divine blessings. Abida told me how being Musi motivated her to observe a rigorous spiritual and moral routine and brought her deep fulfilment, *“I feel very, very, very religious, I feel very, very right”*. She articulated her belief that when she gives, she receives back, and often, the rewards are multiplied in unexpected ways - be it material, spiritual or emotional, *“Every time you pay something, you feel blessed. And Allah gives more in many ways”*. Apart from financial sacrifices, Abida also expressed her willingness to sacrifice her life for the Ahmadiyya Jama’at, if ever needed.

For many Musis that I met in Fiji, *taqwa* embodied both personal virtues and a shared responsibility to uphold the highest standards of their faith. Farah shared with me that being a Musi requires *“a lot more sacrifice in all aspects of life”*, including being at *“the best starboard of faith”*. She disclosed that the real test starts when one’s status elevates by joining the *Wasiyyat*, *“There are more responsibilities that you have to fulfil and live up to. I try to be more devoted, more pious. Because I am a Musi, I care more about how I conduct myself”*. Farah’s identity as a Musi compelled her to uphold stricter moral conduct and religious duties, reflecting a conscious effort to meet the responsibilities associated with Musis in the Jama’at. Similar to Abida and Farah, other Fijian Musis whom I met associated their role and obligations with overwhelmingly positive emotions. Through their diligent adherence to the community’s principles, those Musis fulfil their faith obligations, while also deriving a sense of significance from contributing to a perceived broader culture of excellence within their Jama’at. This suggests that *taqwa* reinforces both personal commitment and the Jama’at’s continuity by motivating Fijian Ahmadis to align individual virtue with the principles of Ahmadiyya faith.

Imran, another Musi, revealed prevalent perception among Fijian Musis that their financial sacrifices also served as an investment in eternal devotional rewards, *“Being a Musi is just a great honour for Hereafter”*. For Imran, adopting *Wasiyyat* fostered personal

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<sup>89</sup> Ghulam Ahmad expressed strict view of *taqwa*, *“...if you have an iota of worldly adulteration in your intentions, all your worship is in vain. In such a case, you do not follow God. Rather you follow Satan. Never ever expect that when you are in such a condition God will help you... Rather He will be happy to destroy you”* (Ahmad, 2023, p. 10).

transformation and a profound understanding of one's life purpose, which he closely linked to the spiritual aims of Ahmadiyya theology and securing enduring divine favour.

Intertwined with self-cultivation, *taqwa* unites Fijian Musis in a collective endeavour to realise the visions of the global Jama'at. While Nazir regarded being a Musi as a means of fulfilling his religious duties and cultivating spiritual discipline, he related his personal growth to the Jama'at's advancement viewing financial sacrifices fundamental to its expansion, "*The more financial sacrifice I make for the betterment of Islam Ahmadiyyat, the more I will grow and have success... and the more our Jama'at will grow*". Nazir's perception suggests that his own betterment is correlated with his financial contributions to the Jama'at, highlighting the interconnectedness between personal sacrifice and the Jama'at's accomplishments. Furthermore, consistent with the Ahmadiyya community's value of self-sacrifice associated with righteousness, Nazir expressed a commitment to sacrificing his finances for the Jama'at rather than expecting the Jama'at to sustain him, "*I really give the accurate chanda... I just don't care what my needs are. If I have to cut down my needs, I will, but I will not decrease the chanda amount*". Nazir's statement underscores the primacy of loyalty to the Jama'at and reflects the broader view among Fijian Ahmadis that personal success is inseparable from their community's stability and prosperity. As Fijian Ahmadis invest more in their Jama'at, they envision the progress of both their individual circumstances and the community.

The immense dedication to self-sacrifice among Fijian Musis may also relate to their awareness of living in a remote geographic location. Many highlighted the importance of their financial contributions through the *Wasiyyat* in growing Ahmadiyya Islam, particularly in isolated places. They often referred to Fiji as the "*corner of the world*", echoing Ghulam Ahmad's alleged prophecy, "I will cause thy message to reach the corners of the earth" (*Ahmadiyyat in Fiji*, 2000, p. 14), which deeply resonates with them and which they see themselves personifying. By upholding concepts like *taqwa*, embodying what they perceive as righteousness, Fijian Musis believe they remain under God's grace and favour for achieving the community's foretold destiny. In the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at, *taqwa* fosters spiritual accountability, moral discipline, and communal unity, guiding members to act in accordance with Ahmadiyya principles and uphold a shared sense of purpose.

Whereas *taqwa* refers to moral and spiritual self-discipline and the observation of religious commandments, *rizq*, on the other hand, emphasises the belief that everything one possesses is from God. In Islam, *rizq* refers to the divine provision that encompasses material

items such as food and wealth, but also talents, knowledge, and opportunities (Demuth, 2016). Therefore, all forms of blessings Muslims receive are also considered gifts from Allah (Harpci, 2017).<sup>90</sup>

Among many Fijian Ahmadis, yet especially among the Musis, the concept of *rizq* was prominently illustrated when they directly attributed their professional, financial, academic or any other personal achievements to their participation in the *Wasiyyat* scheme. Musis' acknowledgement of *rizq* as a divine provision highlights their gratitude towards God, solidifying their belief that their realisations and opportunities are blessings derived from their spiritual dedication and moral behaviour.

In conversations with me, Fijian Ahmadis frequently expressed gratitude for holding office-bearer roles, owning thriving businesses, and also for living in Fiji, which affords them religious freedom. Their expression of appreciation, "*It is all Allah Talla's grace upon us*"<sup>91</sup>, and the conviction that they were "*reaping the benefits of the khilafat*" was especially prominent among Musis. Many disclosed examples of how their professional and personal lives have transformed positively, which they unequivocally regard as evidence of God's favour resulting from fulfilling their commitments as Musis. Imran shared with me how everything aligned for his family after all its members became Musis; within two years, all four of his daughters married well-established Ahmadi men. As Imran pointed out, in Fiji, many Muslim and Hindu parents see having four daughters as a financial challenge. However, he shared his belief that becoming Musis helped the family overcome such cultural pressures and improved their personal lives. Similarly, a few Fijian Ahmadi men disclosed to me that before committing to *Wasiyyat*, they struggled to find jobs, but after signing up for this scheme, they secured well-paid, stable positions and significant career promotions.

Fijian Ahmadis view self-sacrifice as honourable, and those who become Musis perceive their ability to join *Wasiyyat* with a mixture of gratitude and prestige that facilitates their personal spiritual growth and worldly success, thereby enhancing their commitment to the Ahmadiyya faith's principles. Fijian Ahmadis often revealed a deep sense of

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<sup>90</sup> Islam's teachings in the Qur'an and Hadith encourage Muslims to recognise all forms of *rizq* as divine blessings, thus cultivating gratitude and reliance on God and guiding believers to share their talents and resources, promoting generosity. Therefore, imparting knowledge, providing moral support, and performing acts of kindness also fulfil Muslim charitable obligations (Harpci, 2017; Demuth, 2016).

<sup>91</sup> Fijian Ahmadis commonly use both the English word "*God*" and the Arabic word "*Allah*" interchangeably to refer to God. Further, many of them frequently refer to Allah as "*Allah Talla*." They explained that "*Talla*" signifies "the highest", and by using this term, they shared they aimed to express deep reverence, recognizing Allah's ultimate greatness and superior status above all.

acknowledgement of divine grace in their life, perceiving their good fortune as God's repayment for their compliance with sacrifices.

### **Reconciling Wealth with Sacrifice**

The concept of sacrifice, as per Ahmadiyya teachings, highlights that Ahmadis must choose between devotion to Allah and material wealth. As stated by the community founder, Ghulam Ahmad, "It goes without saying, that you cannot love two things at the same time: it is not possible for you to love wealth as well as to love Allah. You can love only one of them" (*An Introduction to Financial Sacrifices*, 2005, p. 13). Despite recognising that the primary focus of the *Wasiyyat* is spiritual rewards in the afterlife (Ahmad, 2018), wealthier Fijian Musis commonly reconciled their economic prosperity with the belief that commitment to their Jama'at also brought monetary blessings in this life.

Praising non-material values, according to many Fijian Ahmadis that I met, those who face (material) hardships are seen to be on a spiritually endorsed path. This was illustrated by the popular saying among members, "*God tests those He loves the most*", through which challenges are understood as divine support in strengthening one's faith and character. However, while Fijian Ahmadis interpret enduring (financial) difficulties as a kind of noble pursuit, this may put wealthy, devoted members into a dilemma - how to reconcile their material wealth with the ideal of modest spiritual devotion, given that their community founder stated that those two aspects were mutually exclusive? Some Fijian Ahmadis, particularly Musis, benefit from building upon well-established businesses inherited from their ancestors or as a result of their own efforts. Many of those well-off members were eager to share stories of their youthful financial, professional, and even moral struggles, which seemingly resolved almost mystically as soon as they joined the *Wasiyyat* scheme. For instance, another Fijian Musi, Azhar, disclosed to me his conviction that God blesses those who demonstrate hard work and active participation within the community, "*If you want to be blessed, you have to sweat. You have to sacrifice... You really have to physically move and work for the Jama'at. In return, you get the blessings. God is never in debt. He repays. We feel that... We see that*". Azhar recounted how in his youth, he neglected religious duties and struggled at work. However, after allegedly self-disciplining himself towards deeper religious involvement, becoming a Musi, praying regularly and writing to the Khalifa, he noticed a change in his surroundings. He credits his achievement in establishing a business with five

branches across Fiji and around 60 staff with becoming Musi, “*It is all the blessing of khilafat and special favours upon us by God... It is as if everything is happening automatically in our favour*”. Similar narratives of overcoming through faith and hard work embody the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s principles of resilience, sacrifice, and reward, further underscoring members’ belief that their success is tied to their religious participation. To reconcile their material assets with the non-materialistic values of their faith, wealthier Fijian Ahmadis portrayed their previous hardships as a divine test. Having surmounted God’s trials, they see their subsequent prosperity as a divine reward.

Like Azhar, numerous Fijian Musis conveyed to me that their financial sacrifices led to an increase in their personal wealth, often returning proportionally or even more generously compared to what they contributed to the Jama’at. As I listened to them, it seemed that *Wasiyyat* payments to them were not so much a sacrifice as they were (spiritual) investments yielding substantial returns. This belief, however, is not restricted to Fijian Ahmadis and aligns with research, for instance, among Muslims in Pakistan, which found that although charitable donations may initially reduce capital, many believers view them as promoting wealth circulation (Abdullah & Abdul, 2011). In this regard, the economic practices of Fijian Ahmadis share similarities with those described under the concept of Market Islam, and, by extension, also with the Prosperity Gospel prevalent within specific Christian denominations (Coleman, 2000). There are some parallels between the Fijian Ahmadis’ practices and Market Islam, particularly in terms of the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s efficient centralised bureaucratic structure, which resembles corporate productivity, global outreach and media presence, similar to how Market Islam leverages global networks and modern media (Rudnycky, 2009). However, unlike Market Islam, which often emphasises Islam through the language of consumerism that is marketable to a broader audience (Rudnycky, 2009), Fijian Ahmadis predominantly maintain an isolationist focus on their Jama’at functioning and theology. Like the followers of Prosperity Gospel movements, Fijian Ahmadis shared convictions that enhanced religious devotion brings them economic success through divine intervention. Nonetheless, when discussing faith and success, the majority of Fijian Ahmadis tended not to equate faith with personal financial gains; instead, their primary motivations for financial self-sacrifices seemed related to promoting the collective goals of their Jama’at.

As expressed by Fijian Ahmadis and supported by findings among other religious groups, making financial donations is simultaneously considered a sacrifice and a means to increase material wealth. To them, God's love and rewards are believed to manifest as both material prosperity and hardships, with the latter seen as trials that encourage personal growth and development. While many Fijian Ahmadis perceive their success and prosperity as signs of divine favour for their involvement in the Jama'at, this further motivates their active engagement in its bureaucracy and their support for the Ahmadiyya faith's objectives through significant financial and personal sacrifices and time investment.

### **Honourable Status**

The *Wasiyyat* scheme is presented by the global Jama'at as egalitarian due to its universal accessibility to all righteous members, regardless of lineage or social standing. Despite that, it may create hierarchy within the community. While for Fijian Ahmadis, participating in the *Wasiyyat* was regarded as a great honour, some disclosed to me that they felt inadequate to join what they saw as a prestigious scheme. Meanwhile, the expectation to lead by virtuous example appeared to encourage some members to perceive themselves as occupying a higher status.

A few Fijian Ahmadis expressed concern about their ability to meet the elevated spiritual standards expected of Musis. For instance, Farkhanda disclosed to me how she focused on self-improvement and prayer to address her alleged shortcomings, *"If I want to be a Musi, I have to be perfect. Inshallah, I will. But before that, I want to be in that perfect mould to be Musi"*. Similarly, her husband Tahir was not a Musi, as his native Fijian Hindi proficiency was insufficient for reading the Qur'an, which was one of the prerequisites for joining the *Wasiyyat* scheme. He articulated his hope that one day he might gain such a skill, *"I have to pray for God so that I can learn to read it (Qur'an). If God gives me the chance, then I can become a Musi"*. Knowing that Farkhanda and Tahir's family used to struggle with finances, I enquired whether Musis' relatively high financial contributions might also be a factor. However, Tahir firmly reassured me that it was not the case, *"If you become a Musi, God gives you so much back that all your financial problems will be gone"*. Farkhanda and Tahir shared immense pride and satisfaction that their eldest son, 18-year-old Umair, had become the first Musi in their family just a year ago, and they continue to pray for their other two children to follow in his footsteps. If a child joins the *Wasiyyat*, parents view this as a

testament to having successfully fulfilled their duty of providing the correct moral upbringing. As discussed further in this chapter, within the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at, the children's successes and failures are directly linked to parents' efforts to instil community values.

For some Fijian Musis, the expectation to serve as role models seemed to intensify their moral responsibilities, which they appeared to pursue with devotion and humility; while others might see themselves elevated over their peers. In Fiji, Musis ranged from the formally uneducated to university graduates and those financially relatively stable to the affluent. A member of the Jama'at shared with me that wealthier Musis sometimes displayed a hierarchical attitude toward others. While I have not personally witnessed overt hierarchical behaviours among Jama'at members, I did notice occasional ostentatious exalted expressions of thankfulness among certain affluent Fijian Ahmadis, which led me to believe that they may base their self-worth on their financial status and consequently attempt to manifest a sense of self-importance over others. In the meantime, judging others' sense of superiority solely on their visible ample resources is superficial. Meanwhile, many Fijian Ahmadis also looked unconcerned with the wealth of fellow members. Paradoxically, even some Musis from less affluent families demonstrated flamboyant gratitude for their own perceived prosperity. For example, Umair shared with me a sincere sense of achievement in how, even throughout the financially challenging COVID-19 pandemic, his family was "*blessed to have a variety of food on the table*" during Ramadan. This underscores distinct appreciation among Fijian Musis and also indicates subjectivity in perceiving wealth, increasing the complexity in evaluating the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of the *Wasiyyat* scheme.

Fijian Musis appeared to form a heterogeneous group, comprising members who pursued their role with humble piety and idealistic commitment to righteousness, and others whose sense of moral distinction seemed more rooted in their financial ability to join the scheme. *Wasiyyat* creates a hierarchy within the Jama'at not just because of one's financial ability and perceived moral standing to maintain their membership, but also because Musis hold the privilege of burial in separate graveyards, which officially elevates their status among other Ahmadis. According to the Jama'at's guidance, it is one's righteousness that determines eligibility to become a Musi (*Wasiyyat Rules*, 2015). However, evaluating individuals' morality involves complex challenges, as actions that seem ethical might be driven by self-serving motives, while those that appear wrong could stem from honest intentions. Therefore, judging Musis' righteous behaviour is far more complicated than evaluating their financial

donations to the scheme. Overall, the status of Muslims within the Jama'at is subtly shaped by processes of differentiation and the implicit evaluation of moral standing in relation to others.

### ***Waqf-e-Nau – A New(born) Endowment***

In addition to financial contributions, many Fijian Ahmadis invest human resources in their Jama'at. Apart from taking up office roles, some also participate in the *Waqf-e-Nau* scheme, whereby parents dedicate their unborn or born children to lifelong service to Ahmadiyya Jama'at. This initiative, established in April 1987 by the fourth Khalifa, aims to groom future generations of Ahmadis for religious service and fulfil the Jama'at's long-term needs in various service fields (Ahmad, 2018).<sup>92</sup> The *Waqf-e-Nau* scheme can be regarded as one of the notable successes of the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at, as by 2016, it was reported that the number of *Waqf-e-Naus* worldwide had exceeded 60,000 (Ahmad, 2018). Khan (2015, p. 83) noted that this initiative has effectively supplied the community with "an unending labour force at virtually no expense".

Fijian Ahmadis commonly use the term "*to waqf*" a child, which means to dedicate the child to the *Waqf-e-Nau* scheme. One of the very first child *waqfed* in Fiji was Rahat's and Nida's son. Rahat recalled that their son was just a few months old when, in 1988, the local missionary visited the family to inform them about the Khalifa's new initiative. Rahat allegedly agreed to it without hesitation, disclosing to me that it felt "*as if God had spoken from my heart*". His son successfully graduated from the Ahmadiyyat University (*Jaami'ah*) in London and currently serves as a missionary on the island of Guam, to the immense pride of his parents.

Among the *Waqf-e-Naus*, whom I met in Fiji, I noticed a recurring expression of heightened obligation, directed both towards the Jama'at and their parents, who had raised them with the expectation that they would serve Ahmadiyya community. Imam Asad of the

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<sup>92</sup> According to Khan (2015), the *Waqf-e-Nau* scheme builds upon earlier initiatives introduced already by the second Khalifa, who, among multiple recommendations on how to support Jama'at, encouraged Ahmadis to eat just one meal a day and donate the savings to the community's *Tahrik-i Jadid* scheme for the propagation of Ahmadiyya Islam. To expand the number of Ahmadiyya missionaries, the second Khalifa encouraged them to dedicate themselves as living endowments (i.e., *waqf*) and to serve the Jama'at for minimal pay. He also encouraged parents to guide their children towards committing their lives to the Jama'at by enrolling them in Ahmadi seminaries for missionary training. Further, prominent Ahmadis were encouraged to deliver speeches and publish works for the Jama'at and students were recommended to consult the Khalifa when choosing their higher education in order to ensure their studies aligned with the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's needs (Khan, 2015).

Rizwan Mosque in Lautoka, who is *Waqf-e-Nau* and also *Waqf-e-Zindagi*<sup>93</sup> expressed enormous dedication to his roles, family and the community, as he conveyed to me, “*At any time, in any condition and even if I had nothing to eat, I will serve Jama’at with all my abilities*”. He also shared how “*not to let his parents down*” significantly contributed to his resolve. This kind of pledge by Imam Asad suggests a strong sense of sacrifice for the Jama’at’s collective welfare, as well as obedience to parents and the ideals of selfless service inherent in the *Waqf-e-Nau* role.

In her study of Ahmadiis in Scandinavia, Mahmood (2003) noted that the *Waqf-e-Nau* scheme is implemented universally across Ahmadiyya communities. At around the age of 15, *Waqf-e-Naus* are asked to confirm whether they wish to continue their involvement in the scheme (Mahmood, 2023). According to my findings, Fijian Ahmadiis follow the same process, and I have not encountered or heard of any Fijian *Waqf-e-Nau* who has chosen to opt out of the scheme. Whereas this adherence likely relates to *Waqf-e-Naus*’ strong commitment to the Jama’at, it also derives from their practised compliance with authority, which is instilled in them as a part of their moral upbringing from a young age (discussed later in this chapter) and reinforces children’s reverence for parental decisions.

After *Waqf-e-Nau* renews two pledges at the ages of 15 and 21, they are anticipated to undergo rigorous moral and religious education and follow the Jama’at’s guidelines about appropriate career paths, such as missionary work, medicine, engineering or paramedical staff (Ahmad, 2018). *Waqf-e-Naus* are encouraged to choose occupations that meet the Jama’at’s practical needs and fulfil its spiritual and service-oriented goals. Hina explained to me that being *Waqf-e-Nau* directly influenced her decision to become a doctor, a profession where she believes she can best serve others, “*The Khalifa said that as long as we are doing service for mankind, it serves our purpose... I have to serve the people so that God is happy with me... I am doing a duty to God*”. Hina articulated that helping the needy is an act of worship, and therefore, being a doctor is a way for her to live out her dedication to Ahmadiyya Islam through both professional and personal commitment to broader community service.

For parents, dedicating their child to *Waqf-e-Nau* is seen as one of the most significant expressions of self-sacrifice. As Hina is soon expecting her first child, I asked whether she and her husband plan to dedicate him to the scheme. She mentioned that they

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<sup>93</sup> Through *Waqf-e-Zindagi* (i.e., Life endowment), adult Ahmadiis dedicate their own lives to serve their faith and community (Ahmad, 2018).

considered it, as she viewed being *Waqf-e-Nau* as highly beneficial, *“I think it really elevates your chances of success”*. Meanwhile, she also acknowledged the challenges associated with such a decision. For instance, to *waqf* a child could mean he or she might be assigned far from home as per the Jama’at’s needs, possibly not being around when the parents grow old. Moreover, Hina shared that choosing *Waqf-e-Nau* career over a conventional profession would impact her child’s financial stability, *“their financial status would be tested”*. She highlighted how *Waqf-e-Naus* are taught to prioritise their faith above worldly matters to achieve a high level of spirituality and closeness to God. However, despite her emphasis that *Waqf-e-Naus’* financial situation might be more difficult and austere, she, being a doctor, expects to be among the best-paid professionals in Fiji. This illustrates a nuanced relationship between some Fijian Ahmadi’s faith values and financial realities. While prioritising spiritual rewards over material wealth is a highly valued principle within the global Jama’at, it appears that Fijian Ahmadi’s elevate the spiritual and moral significance of such sacrifices, even when the actual financial hardship may not align with this narrative.

Like Musis, *Waqf-e-Naus* are expected to lead by example and demonstrate high moral and spiritual behaviour standards to inspire other members (Ahmad, 2018). A university student, Sanam, is a *Waqf-e-Nau* and also a Musi, reflecting the broader pattern I observed in Fiji, where *Waqf-e-Naus* frequently participate in the *Wasiyyat* scheme. Sanam expressed to me that an awareness of her roles compelled her to maintain conduct aligned with the Jama’at’s highest moral and spiritual expectations, *“As a Waqf-e-Nau, I do have a more imperative duty than other Ahmadi children, to be a role model... I try my best to be an example for others who may look at me and try to correct themselves”*. When I shared with Sanam that *Waqf-e-Nau* seemed to me like golden children, who are considered more precious than others, she laughed. She recalled one *Ijtema* religious competition in Fiji (described later in this chapter), which once featured a separate category for *Waqf-e-Nau* participants. While she admitted that it was nice to be recognised in that context, she denied that being treated as special was her goal, *“I would just be very proud that I am able to guide others according to our teachings. I would be happy if people come towards religion because of me”*. Sanam, like other *Waqf-e-Naus* whom I met in Fiji, demonstrated intense dedication to service within the Jama’at, embedding a strong sense of duty and aiming to serve as role models for other members.

Despite one of the *Waqf-e-Nau*'s parents suggesting that these children are more loved by the Khalifa than other Ahmadi kids because of their dedication status, throughout my fieldwork, I did not observe any attitudes of superiority of *Waqf-e-Nau* towards other Jama'at members. They often seemed quiet and focused on their duties to the Jama'at.

Reviewing these various forms of financial and social sacrifice, it is clear that Fijian Ahmadis view self-sacrifice within their Jama'at's structure as a multifaceted commitment, encompassing, apart from consistent financial contributions, also (mostly unpaid) administrative roles, and sometimes dedication of their own children to lifelong community service. To Fijian Ahmadis, these sacrifices symbolise their commitment to the propagation of Ahmadiyya Islam and are thus regarded as noble within their personal spiritual and communal ethos. While the acts of sacrifices are seen as a demonstration of members' righteous commitment to their religious duties, they are not only about meeting obligations and pursuing personal spiritual growth. Fulfilment of those duties is framed as a means to set an example for other members to follow, thus contributing to the collective Jama'at's mission.

In my observations, Ahmadis in Fiji, like their counterparts elsewhere, fulfil their community's financial requirements and participate in various Jama'at schemes, reflecting their consistent alignment with the global Jama'at's practices. This uniformity underscores the efficiency of the community's bureaucracy and shared values, maintaining remarkable global cohesion. In their geographically isolated location, the Fijian Ahmadis' vigorous compliance is sustained by deep faith, a collective sense of a destined mission, and strong engagement with the community's bureaucratic framework, facilitated by office roles and various schemes that provide systematic ideological and structural affirmation. This continuous reinforcement nourishes the devotion of Fijian Ahmadis and keeps their aspirations closely aligned with the ideals of the Ahmadiyya faith.

### III. EDUCATED TO COMPLY

For Fijian Ahmadis, religious and moral education (*tarbiyyat*) is essential to their identity. While they often emphasised their self-perception as being educated, some also expressed a conviction that their level of knowledge distinguished them from other Fijian communities. Additionally, some Fijian Ahmadis tended to equate *tarbiyyat* with general

education, typically referring to someone well-versed in Ahmadiyya interpretations of Islam as well-educated, regardless of their formal secular training.

Through the Jama'at's bureaucracy, *tarbiyyat* is actively instilled in members, emphasising the community's core values such as prayer, sacrifice, obedience, discipline, education, and brotherhood. The guiding principles, illustrated by slogans such as *No nation can progress without educating its women* or *Discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishments*, were displayed on signboards during Fijian Jama'at events and *Lajna Ima'illah* meetings as a reminder to members of their commitment to these ideals. Through its organisational structure, the Jama'at facilitates a systematic approach to *tarbiyyat* via regulated activities, thereby linking individual development to the community's collective progress.

### ***Tarbiyyat***

Within the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at, the concept of *tarbiyyat* refers to moral and spiritual training aimed at nurturing members to know and fulfil their religious duties and uphold the values of Ahmadiyya faith. Through *tarbiyyat*, the community emphasises the importance of sacrifice as an act of worship and encourages Ahmadis to set moral and spiritual examples by fulfilling their pledges and spiritual practice, ensuring that their actions are directed towards pleasing God. This holistic approach to *tarbiyyat* aims to enhance individual improvement and strengthen the community's collective faith and unity (Al Islam, 2016, "Essence of Tarbiyyat"; Al Islam, 2016, "Urdu Khutbah Juma"). According to Mahmood (2023), the ultimate goal of *tarbiyyat* is to develop well-rounded individuals who adhere to the principles of Ahmadiyya Islam and actively contribute to their local Jama'at and the broader society.

The overall emphasis on education within the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at (Evans, 2020; Valentine, 2008) stems from the conceptions of its founder, Ghulam Ahmad, who championed the revival of pure Islam through intellectual methods that he termed the "jihad of the pen" (Hanson, 2007, p. 84). In line with this concept, Ahmadis emphasise that engaging with the world through logical and rational discourse is the most effective approach for representing and growing Ahmadiyya Islam (Friedmann, 2003).

Many Ahmadis worldwide view *tarbiyyat* as a means of engaging with other (spiritual) communities to defend and promote their faith, aligning it with *tabligh*

(proselytisation) through the dissemination of religious beliefs and practices (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2006; Mahmood, 2023). Whereas Ahmadi women globally typically regard *tarbiyyat* as essential for passing down religious and cultural values to their children (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2006; Mahmood, 2023), there may also be local variations in how this is expressed. Professor of Women's Studies, Huma Ahmed-Ghosh (2006), who researched Ahmadi women in Southern California, noted that they place additional weight on understanding Christianity, suggesting that this aspect of their education is twofold. While it helps local Ahmadi women to challenge Christians over their belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which contradicts Ahmadiyya theology, according to which Jesus did not die on the cross, *tarbiyyat* also supports Ahmadi women's efforts to convert Christians in the West (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2006).

Within the Ahmadiyya Jama'at, missionaries (imams) and mothers share the primary responsibility for *tarbiyyat*. Whereas imams provide broad community moral training, mothers are expected to focus on the early religious education of their children at home and among other women. This dual approach is intended to ensure a complementary and comprehensive upbringing, integrating education within the formal communal context alongside learning within family settings (Mahmood, 2023). Studies among Ahmadiyya communities in the US, Switzerland, and Scandinavia documented that Ahmadi women, in particular, play a crucial role in the Jama'at's educational framework, acting as critical instructors and transmitters of cultural and religious values within their families and the community (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2006; Beyeler, 2012; Mahmood, 2023). These studies indicate that *tarbiyyat* empowers Ahmadi women to participate in their local Jama'at and equips them with the knowledge to conduct interfaith dialogues, address misconceptions about Islam and navigate potential anti-Muslim sentiments (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2006; Mahmood, 2023). For instance, in Switzerland, *tarbiyyat* provides Ahmadi women with skills and confidence to defend their religious practices amid scrutiny, while also helping them maintain their dual identities as Jama'at members and Swiss residents, without assimilating into a mainstream non-Muslim culture that they often view as morally deficient (Beyeler, 2012).

Similar to many Ahmadi women globally, Fijian Ahmadi women rely on *tarbiyyat* to preserve their distinct spiritual and cultural identity within a Christian-dominated Fijian society. Through the Jama'at's auxiliary organisations and office-bearer roles, *tarbiyyat* is consistently reinforced, promoting the integration of community values and practices, such as *purdah*, into members' daily lives, encouraging regular mosque attendance and participation in community events

with didactic settings, such as the annual religious competition *Ijtema* (discussed later in this chapter). Additionally, *tarbiyyat* is central to educating young Fijian Ahmadi on the importance of marrying within the Jama'at (examined in Chapter 4).

### Religious Education as Women's Empowerment

Among Fijian Ahmadi women with whom I interacted, *tarbiyyat* was particularly understood as a way of their emancipation. However, in contrast to some Ahmadi women in California who channel *tarbiyyat* towards interfaith engagement, my findings suggest that in Fiji, Ahmadi women primarily draw on *tarbiyyat* as a source of empowerment, enhancing their self-esteem and status within their own Jama'at. Studies among Californian Ahmadi women also revealed that they regarded *tarbiyyat* as a means of cultivating themselves as “good” wives, “enlightened” mothers, and community leaders (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2006, p. 46), which is consistent with my observations. As the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at upholds a traditional view of women's roles within the domestic sphere, *tarbiyyat* holds particular significance for mothers, who assume the responsibility of principal educators tasked with the moral and spiritual upbringing of their children.<sup>94</sup>

Marriage and parenthood are expected roles among Fijian Ahmadi. All adult Ahmadi women I met in Fiji were married with children, except for one aged over 25 years, who was still single.<sup>95</sup> She told me that, being 26, she was considered “*too old*”, and her parents were already “*exhausted*” searching for her husband. Many Ahmadi women and men in Fiji and New Zealand, whom I met, conveyed to me their belief that “*Heaven lies under the feet of your mother*”, referencing the Qur'an and Hadith that affirm the esteemed position of motherhood in Islam (Tremayne, 2022). As Farkhanda explained to me, “*Everything comes from mother. We, mothers, set the foundations for Ahmadi principles. We are the ones who educate our children from an early age*”. Consequently, the respected status of mothers among Fijian Ahmadi is closely tied to their contribution to strengthening the Jama'at through the *tarbiyyat*. The pressure exerted by the Jama'at on women to marry and have children early, along with the stigmatisation of those who remain unmarried, underscores the

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<sup>94</sup> Research on women's roles in Islam indicates that mothers are often expected to instil religious and ethical values in their children and ensure the transmission of Islamic knowledge, practices, and continuity within households and communities (Tremayne, 2022; Joseph et al., 2013; Metcalf, 2009). Anthropologist Soraya Tremayne (2022) noted how in Iran, Muslim women's identity is closely linked to marriage as motherhood remains a crucial component of a woman's societal value. Whereas the identity of a married woman and a mother is always clear, an unmarried woman is viewed as a failure who remains in limbo in her social interactions (Tremayne, 2022).

<sup>95</sup> According to my findings, Ahmadi women in Fiji typically marry between early to mid-twenties.

belief in the vital role of mothers in nurturing the growth of the Ahmadiyya community and children's upbringing.

Fijian Ahmadi women that I have met seemed firmly committed to the Jama'at's educational endeavours, perceiving *tarbiyyat* as recognition of their revered maternal role as primary instructors. This assertion was reinforced by the popularly quoted proverb among them, *"If you educate a man, you just educate a man, but if you educate a woman, you educate a whole nation"*, which some Fijian Ahmadi women appeared to interpret literally viewing it as evidence of their widely held belief that Islam grants women a superior status over men.

Among the key motivations Fijian Ahmadi women disclosed to me for pursuing *tarbiyyat* was a sense of duty in inspiring their children and setting standards through their personal conduct. Farkhanda articulated the imperative for mothers to consistently pursue spiritual knowledge, emphasising the regular mosque attendance as a critical aspect of this obligation, *"The most important education our children get is from mothers. If the mother does not go and learn in the mosque, how will the children be taught?"*. Similarly, Hanya highlighted personal effort and visible religious practice as essential to guiding her children's upbringing, *"I am teaching my children, taking them to the mosque. I want to be a role model for them; I am setting an example they can follow. I am trying my best"*. In expressing these views, Fijian Ahmadi women affirmed their dedication to *tarbiyyat*, viewing it as essential for their own growth and maternal role, hoping to influence their children to emulate their devotion.

Consequently, through their involvement in *tarbiyyat*, Fijian Ahmadi women uphold the community's gender norms by assuming responsibility for the moral and religious upbringing of children. These norms also shape women's own educational pursuits, encouraging them to acquire the knowledge necessary to transmit the values of Ahmadiyya faith within the Jama'at. *Tarbiyyat* initiatives, strategically employed by the Jama'at's bureaucracy, formalise and institutionalise the expectation that women serve as moral educators, aligning their caregiving domestic roles with the community's broader objectives. In small, geographically isolated communities like Fiji, where external influences are limited, this structured reinforcement of gender norms through *tarbiyyat* ensures the Jama'at's internal consistency and cohesion, albeit at the expense of women who might wish for alternative paths.

Although *Lajna Ima'illah* operates under the directives of the Khalifa, Fijian Ahmadi women expressed conviction that their participation in this perceived women-led organisation symbolised their autonomy from male authority. While many Fijian Ahmadi women that I met remain financially dependent on men as the primary “breadwinners”, they viewed their involvement in *tarbiyyat* as a testament to their Jama'at's unique support for women's emancipation. Studies conducted among Muslim women in Indonesia, Germany, and France have indicated that many perceive their engagement in spiritual education as a form of empowerment (Amrullah, 2011; Jouili & Amir-Moazami, 2006). While a scholar of genre and Islam Anna Piela (2013) observed that in the UK, study groups referred to as *halaqas* provided Muslim women with a space for self-expression and even resistance against patriarchal narratives and leadership of their communities, research from Egypt, Indonesia, Germany, and France (Joseph et al., 2013; Jouili & Amir-Moazami, 2006) showed that Muslim women's spiritual education in these contexts typically did not challenge established religious authorities. Instead, these Muslim women used acquired knowledge to navigate their lives within the bounds of accepted interpretations, often reinforcing the status quo of religious hierarchy (Joseph et al., 2013; Jouili & Amir-Moazami, 2006).

Similarly, Fijian Ahmadi women approached *tarbiyyat* not as a means to challenge the Jama'at's conventions, but as a way to reinforce and uphold them. As they described, participation in their community's educational activities enabled them to apply Ahmadiyya teachings in ways they believed affirmed their agency and identity while remaining aligned with traditional gender roles. For many Fijian Ahmadi women, engagement in *tarbiyyat* supports their conviction that Ahmadiyya Islam grants women superior rights to those of men, a belief that, as they explained, further enhances their confidence in their faith.<sup>96</sup> Expressing deep contentment with their esteemed status and role within the Jama'at, many Fijian Ahmadi women affirmed that they had no desire to challenge existing structures, instead seeking to uphold their position as primary moral educators.

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<sup>96</sup> Likewise, research by Rozario (2011; 1998) indicates that the belief that Muslim women have more rights in Islam than men is prevalent among young Bangladeshi and Australian Muslims. Additionally, consistent with Rosario's findings (2011; 1998), Ahmadi women in Fiji contended that any oppression of Muslim women stems from cultural practices rather than the teachings of Islam.

As I attended the 100-year celebrations of *Lajna Ima'illah* in Auckland in June 2023 and also in Suva in September 2023, during both functions, which were exclusive to women and focused on celebrating Muslim women's rights and positions within Islam, presentations criticised the patriarchal structures of pre-Islamic tribal societies. They referenced Qur'an verses perceived to confirm that it was, in fact, Islam that established protections and esteemed roles of women and presented notable achievements of distinguished Ahmadi women.

### Obedience and (non)Compulsion

Within the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at, *tarbiyyat* goes beyond learning the doctrine; it involves developing perceived virtues such as humility, self-discipline, truthfulness, and diligence - moral traits that, according to community teachings, require considerable personal self-restraint (Al Islam, 2016, "Essence of Tarbiyyat"). I observed that, particularly, the cultivation of obedience was consistently promoted among Fijian Ahmadis as an essential aspect of religious commitment and personal development.

The global Jama'at places strong emphasis on compliance within family relationships, adherence to the Khalifa's and community's leadership, and obedience to laws and governmental authorities more broadly (Al Islam, 2014, "Essence of Obedience and Submission"). During one of his Friday sermons in London in 2004, the Khalifa reminded Ahmadis that submission to the khilafat is a part of love for religion, "To disobey the Amir (Ahmadiyya Jama'at's national president) is to disobey me, and to disobey me is to disobey Allah" (Al Islam, 2014, "Essence of Obedience and Submission"). In doing so, the Khalifa asserted that disobedience to his authority constitutes a violation of divine will. Valentine (2008) highlighted that while Ahmadis are not expected to know every detail of their Jama'at's regulations, they are expected to follow the guidance of those in leadership positions. Fijian Ahmadis with whom I interacted appeared to keenly embrace submission to authority not only as a part of their spiritual practice but also as a marker of belonging to a well-educated community. Furthermore, they demonstrated a clear preference for the kind of compliance that involves following strict and explicit rules. Hanya shared with me her complaint that when she was young, nobody "*forced and disciplined her*" to read the Qur'an or any Jama'at literature. Hanya's perception reflected a widely held belief among Fijian Ahmadis that, alongside emphasis on religious discipline, structured learning, and early exposure to faith-based teachings, moral and spiritual development requires active guidance and, at times, enforced discipline, rather than being left to explore personal preferences at a young age.

Many Fijian Ahmadis I spent time with in Nadi upheld high standards of compliance, aspiring to serve as role models within their community. This was particularly exemplified in discussions about mosque attendance. Although Fijian Ahmadi women frequently expressed pride in their right to attend the mosque - a privilege they said to me was not extended to women from other Fijian Muslim communities - some acknowledged that other Fijian Muslim women actually can attend mosques. Nonetheless, Farkhanda articulated her critique that

mosque attendance is non-mandatory for other Fijian Muslim women, *“They have a choice. If they want to go, they can; if they don’t want, they don’t go”*. The absence of obligation and the perceived deficit in discipline resulting from the freedom to choose was precisely what Farkhanda viewed negatively. Further, she clarified her stance, *“Rules are there to be followed. We, Ahmadis, do follow our rules and commands. We are made to follow them from a young age. That’s why I am thankful to be in our Jama’at”*. Her statement illustrates how submission, compliance, and obedience are cultivated among Fijian Ahmadis through *tarbiyyat* from early childhood and framed as essential virtues within the Jama’at. To many Fijian Ahmadis that I met, being “forced” to attend the mosque and lacking the freedom to opt out was regarded as highly favourable. Consequently, the requirement to comply with rules was embraced by them as a spiritual practice to aspire to and as a testament to their community’s privileged and advanced moral and spiritual identity.

As many Fijian Ahmadis seemed to prioritise conformity to collective Jama’at norms, some individuals I engaged with viewed building relationships to influence others’ thoughts and behaviours as not only ethical but essential. While those members discussed using methods to persuade others through *tarbiyyat*, they simultaneously emphasised the Islamic teaching of “no compulsion in religion”.<sup>97</sup> For instance, Nasreen, the national president of *Lajna Ima’illah* in Fiji, highlighted the necessity of incorporating *tarbiyyat* in the Ahmadiyya bureaucratic structure, which supports children when parental upbringing allegedly falls short. She disclosed to me that if, by age 18, a community member has not received what is regarded as adequate religious and moral guidance from their parents, the designated Jama’at office-bearers intervene to provide *tarbiyyat* on a monthly or weekly basis. Meanwhile, she emphasised that since Ahmadiyya Islam adheres to the principle of non-compulsion, educating others was challenging for her as a leader as it required a specific approach, *“We don’t force people. We just convey a message... We make friends with them and very lovingly tell them... And only gradually, we try to put the ideas in them so that they should realise themselves”*. Nasreen admitted that this can be hard because, as she shared, some, particularly young members, *“are very rebellious”*. While this seemingly non-coercive

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<sup>97</sup> The concept of “no compulsion in religion” from the Qur’an verse Al-Baqara 2:256 that usually refers to conversion and apostasy is interpreted differently across various Islamic thought schools and regions. The principle underscores, that while Muslim community members can share their beliefs and try to influence others, such influence should not escalate to the point of coercion (Laskowska, 2016). Some scholars argued that the concept of “no compulsion” supports unconditional religious freedom and that faith must be chosen freely without coercion. Others maintain a conditional view, suggesting that while entering Islam must be a free choice, once someone is a Muslim, they cannot leave the faith without facing severe consequences (Laskowska, 2016).

manner may reflect gentle persuasion for some, it is also a covert imposition of beliefs under the guise of education.

While Fijian Ahmadis outwardly strongly advocated for non-violence and peace, I observed that psychological pressure was generally not perceived as harmful or violent. This norm appeared to be present among some Ahmadis in New Zealand as well. During a *Lajna Ima'illah* event in Auckland, I met a young Ahmadi woman who shared with me her sadness over her thwarted aspiration to study medicine at the University of Otago in Dunedin. She explained that her family opposed the idea of her, as a single, unmarried woman, studying alone in a city without an Ahmadiyya Jama'at presence, citing concerns about potential negative social influences she might encounter on campus. As a result, and to her disappointment, which she disclosed to me, she was contemplating alternative subjects available at universities in Auckland, even at the cost of abandoning her dream of studying medicine. This highlights how the practice of obedience within the Ahmadiyya community is closely tied to the normalisation of emotional pressure among some members.

Among Fijian Ahmadis, *tarbiyyat* provides a shared social and spiritual framework that not only cultivates personal compliance with established rules but also legitimises the enforcement of obedience onto others, underscoring the centrality of submission to God, the Khalifa, the parents, and authority more broadly, in shaping Ahmadiyya identity and spiritual practice. The Jama'at's bureaucracy fosters compliance with its directives through *tarbiyyat*, presenting emotional and psychological pressures as religious and moral obligations rather than coercion. This enables the subtle regulation of members' behaviour and the preservation of normative values without overt enforcement.

### ***Ijtema* – National Religious Competition**

The Ahmadiyya Jama'at's annual religious competition, *Ijtema*, is a significant event that fosters the value of *tarbiyyat* and strengthens members' sense of belonging and collective identity. In Fiji, *Ijtema* is held each year over two days in various parts of the country.

In the weeks preceding the *Ijtema*, Ahmadis of all ages in Nadi, among whom I was residing, engaged in intensive study sessions to prepare for the various competition disciplines. During this period, Hanya and her teenage daughter frequently visited our house, bringing along "100 Pearls" - a compilation of poems composed by the Ahmadiyya khalifs and

the community's founder, Ghulam Ahmad. As practice aids, those women also used YouTube videos featuring Pakistani religious performers who recite Qur'anic verses or sing Islamic devotional melodies. Hanya's daughter would strive to replicate the tunes, and Hina would assist her by correcting her intonation and Urdu pronunciation. Meanwhile, Hanya rehearsed her Qur'an recitation under the supervision of Hina's mother. This multi-generational engagement in *tarbiyyat* facilitates the transmission of religious values while strengthening solidarity within the Jama'at. Through practices of mutual surveillance, women collectively promote adherence to religious texts and norms, balancing empowerment and communal control. Reflecting on this dynamic, Hina praised the Jama'at for providing teachings and support that extend beyond the immediate family, noting, "As an Ahmadi, you always have others to guide you". For the Fijian Ahmadi I met, such interdependence in religious and moral teachings, as well as cooperative knowledge-sharing, sustained a sense of care and fulfilment.

In 2023, I attended the local *Ijtema*, held at the premises of the Ahmadiyya Mahmood Mosque in Maro, Sigatoka. Around two hundred Ahmadi from Suva, Nadi, Lautoka, and other locations in Fiji gathered there, with many spending the night on the mosque grounds. While Ahmadi men competed inside the mosque, women occupied the nearby *Lajna Ima'illah* hall. For competitions, women were divided into two age-based groups: the first category, *Miyar Awwal*, was for girls above 7 years old, and the second, *Miyar Dom*, was for those from the Form 6 education level, which means from 16 to 17 years old and above.

The core disciplines of *Ijtema* included Qur'an *Tilawat* (recitation), Qur'an memorisation, and Qur'an reading, all in Arabic. The jury, selected from the *Lajna Ima'illah* office-bearers, referred to the three A4 pages of the syllabus, which detailed the marking criteria for *Tajweed*, i.e., a set of rules and etiquette for reciting the Holy Qur'an in the way Ahmadi believe it was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Each competing woman was assessed based on her ability to maintain accurate sound and rhythm, as well as adherence to the phonetics of the Arabic language, which required knowledge of when to pause, stop, or continue reading.

Other competition disciplines involved 4-5 minutes of speeches in Urdu and English on selected topics, such as "Ahmadi Women as Guardians of Faith", "Lajna Ima'illah Connection with Khilafat", or "Progress of Lajna Ima'illah". During the discipline in impromptu

speech, competitors were provided with topics on the spot and marked according to content, references to relevant Islamic sources, precise vocabulary, pronunciation, style, delivery, as well as eye contact with the jury and audience. Lastly, the *Naat* discipline involved reciting Islamic poetry, and the *Bait Bazi* discipline featured teams of three members from each *majlis* (branch) competing in an Islamic poetry relay.

For their performances, women meticulously adjusted their appearances; some changed into heels, enhanced their mascara and eyeshadow, and refreshed their lipstick. Most of the women continued to wear headscarves even within the exclusively female environment. During presentations, competitors maintained a steady gaze towards the jury, standing upright with their chins high and articulating almost every word precisely. Their posture often reflected a dramatic expression that turned the speech into a highly emotional performance, which I interpreted to express unwavering support and loyalty to their faith and Jama'at values. Those who did not perform sat quietly on the mattresses on the floor and relished listening to the competitors. The passionate, urgent, overpitched intonation of the speeches unexpectedly evoked overwhelming sentiments in me, transmitting me to my childhood in communist Czechoslovakia, where at schools, we recited poems celebrating the dictatorship of the Soviet proletariat, heroism of coal mine workers and the completion of the five-year plan already in three years with similarly potent rhetoric of the only allowed official truth.

I stepped out of the *Lajna Ima'illah* hall onto the sheltered veranda outside, where the youngest girls, *nasirat*, competed in *nazms*. Sometimes, overwhelmed with stage fright, they become momentarily speechless until they got friendly support from others after the long, awkward, silent pauses. Meanwhile, the elder girls practised answers for the quiz, which, in 39 questions, tested their general knowledge of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at and Fiji.<sup>98</sup> The group of teenage girls shared with me that they were not allowed to compete in Qur'an reading because they were menstruating. They were still permitted to engage in the discipline of memorised Qur'an recitation; however, if they wished to compete in Qur'an reading, they were required to read from printed paper and forbidden to touch the Qur'an itself physically.

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<sup>98</sup> The quiz included questions such as: Who proposed the concept of *Lajna Ima'illah*? What does the white minaret represent in the Ahmadiyya flag? What was the first magazine publication for the education and training of Ahmadi women? When was the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at established in Fiji? Who is the Minister of Women, Children, and Poverty Alleviation in Fiji? Name the first ship which transported Indian indentured laborers to Fiji? What is Sigatoka Valley, also known as in Fiji?

This adaptation allowed them to continue their practices in a way that respects the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at beliefs, which consider menstruating women ritually impure.<sup>99</sup>

The second day of *Ijtema* was remarkably light-hearted, also called a “fun” or “sports” day. While men played volleyball and football on the field outside and competed in short-distance walks and runs, women remained inside the *Lajna Ima'illah* hall, engaging in interactive games. One of their activities was to run and obtain a randomly selected item, such as a hairpin, medicine, or anklet, from other women in the hall. Whoever got the item first won. During other activity, women formed pairs and held a ball between their foreheads. A pair had to transport the ball from one side of the hall to the other and back without dropping it on the floor. The non-competing *lajnas* cheered and clapped, supporting the competitors, celebrating their wins, or just enjoying the thrill of the game.

Around 1 p.m., the jury announced the results of religious competitions, recognising the first, second and third top performers in each discipline. The winners received award trophies - black and white statues that combined Arabic calligraphy with the Ahmadiyya flag, and Certificates of Merit stating the discipline name and the year of the *Ijtema*, 2023. In most Fijian Ahmadi homes that I visited, I saw those trophies prominently displayed as reminders of members' notable achievements. The young girls, *nasirat*, each received golden medals featuring the Fijian and Ahmadiyya flags in the centre, bordered with the slogan: *A nation cannot be reformed without the reformation of its youth*. Apart from trophies, winning women also received gifts, ranging from practical household items to personal accessories such as baking moulds, muffin pans, bed sheets, cloth hangers, picture frames, coffee plungers, kitchen knives or knee braces, underscoring their domestic role within the Jama'at.

While the *Ijtema* endorses Fijian Ahmadi's dedication to their religious practice through formal competitions, it simultaneously serves as a vital social gathering, bringing together members from across Fiji and providing a space where they articulate and reaffirm their collective identity and communal values.

The meticulous preparation evident in many aspects of the competition, including weeks of consistent practice to perform at one's best ability, highlights the resolve, pride, and self-discipline that Fijian Ahmadi's associate with *tarbiyyat*. The trophies and Certificates of Merit serve as tangible acknowledgements of members' dedication, reflecting their status

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<sup>99</sup> As per Aru Bhartiya (2013, p. 523), with the exception of Sikhism, there are groups from within all religions - Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism or Buddhism, that refer to menstruating woman as “ritually unclean”.

within the Jama'at and their commitment to its principles while also symbolising the community's appreciation for their efforts. Receiving these awards validates members' endeavours within the Jama'at and encourages their continuous active involvement. For many Fijian Ahmadiis I encountered, the *Ijtema* was seen as evidence of their community's high educational standards. Additionally, women highlighted that their participation in religious competitions demonstrated the Jama'at's commitment to enhancing women's autonomy.

### **The Privileges of Moral Upbringing**

For many Fijian Ahmadiis, *tarbiyyat* provided a shared social and spiritual framework, fostering a sense of distinction rooted in their moral and religious training. Numerous Fijian Ahmadi women conveyed to me their belief that the community's emphasis on *tarbiyyat* sets them apart from other Fijian religious groups and provides what they see as an exclusive opportunity to deepen their understanding of sacred texts and refine their spiritual practice. Consequently, while many Fijian Ahmadiis turned to *tarbiyyat* as a means of promoting personal growth, it also reinforced their identification with a knowledgeable and spiritually guided community, and thereby strengthened their connection with their faith.

For many Fijian Ahmadiis, *tarbiyyat* was regarded not only as a spiritual duty nurturing self-development but also as a privileged pathway to social mobility, as exemplified by Hanya's experience. Born into an Ahmadi family in a remote area of Vanua Levu, Hanya described to me the logistical challenges of reaching the mosque as a child, which involved a bus ride of over an hour and a risky crossing of a frequently flooded river. Hanya conveyed feelings of awe when discussing the transformative effect of education on her circumstances, "*Being part of Ahmadiyyat and getting educated makes my life full... Learning to read the Qur'an changed my whole life*". This is no overstatement from Hanya, who emotionally recalled a moment when an Ahmadiyya missionary, Imam Tariq, visited her family and, in line with the community's norm of *purdah*, his wife started to teach her to read the Qur'an in Arabic. Shortly after mastering this skill, Hanya received a marriage proposal from the parents of her husband, Azhar, that ultimately led her to join him and his affluent family in Navaka village near Nadi. She gratefully remarked that education saved her from "*staying in a jungle*". Hanya's experience, where her religious training led to personal development and a notable social advancement, reinforced her dedication to the Ahmadiyya faith.

One of the reasons many Fijian Ahmadis seemed less keen on living off-grid or in more remote areas of the country was their preference for community togetherness. Deeply rooted collectivist values inherent in Islamic teachings (Ahmad, 2011; Gregg, 2007) are supported by research demonstrating that the well-being of Muslims significantly correlates with their family and community life, which offers support and moral guidance (Adam & Ward, 2016; Munawar & Tariq, 2018). To Hanya, who shared experiences of hardship in her childhood due to inadequate transportation and extreme weather conditions that obstructed her access to a mosque, relocating to Navaka, in addition to increased physical comfort, also offered better social and educational opportunities centred around the community's mosque in Nadi. Therefore, more than acquiring material wealth or status, Hanya valued the escape from social isolation, which she endured in a rural environment that had restricted her participation in Jama'at activities. And it was religious education that became a means of liberation from her previously difficult circumstances.

Further, within the Fijian Ahmadiyya community, with a high preference for arranged marriages, *tarbiyyat* also seemed to enhance matrimonial prospects, especially for women. To Nazir, *tarbiyyat* was vital when choosing his wife, Abida. Although his mother allegedly arranged several potential matches from Pakistan for him, his aunt discovered his future wife in Qadian, India, the birthplace of the community's founder, Ghulam Ahmad. Nazir shared with me that he was drawn to Abida precisely because she was raised in a place with strong Ahmadiyya faith values, *"I trusted that because Qadian is a blessed place, and the level of education and upbringing is very high there. It is a very Islamic environment. That's what I wanted"*. Consequently, for a young Fijian Ahmadi woman, her investment in *tarbiyyat* may enhance her attractiveness as a potential marriage partner, a future nurturing mother, and an educator to her child.

For numerous Fijian Ahmadi women, *tarbiyyat* offered prospects for enhanced social status, improved marriage opportunities, financial stability, or urban advancement. These valued outcomes were intertwined with and appeared to reinforce a primary motivation centred on Fijian Ahmadis' adherence to Ahmadiyya teachings and the promotion of social engagement within the Jama'at, facilitated through *tarbiyyat*. Therefore, by integrating *tarbiyyat* with collective interpersonal activities within the communal social structure, the Jama'at bureaucracy fosters a more engaging and fulfilling religious experience for its members.

### Interpretations of Education

Among Fijian Ahmadis, distinctions between formal and religious education were sometimes blurred. The global Jama'at emphasis on *tarbiyyat*, sustained by the Khalifa's calls for Ahmadis to lead by their own virtuous example appeared to inspire Fijian Ahmadis to actively participate in the Jama'at's educational activities and also to perceive themselves as educated, resulting in a strong internalized expectation that being part of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at is inherently linked to being perceived as educated. Specifically, I observed that some Fijian Ahmadi women, despite having limited formal education, nonetheless self-identified as "well-educated". Over time, I came to understand that their use of the term did not necessarily correspond to formal or comprehensive academic education, nor, generally, to being broadly intellectually inquisitive and pursuing learning, creative, or artistic interests beyond their engagements within the Jama'at's bureaucratic framework, eventual professional training or cooking. For many Fijian Ahmadi women that I met, being educated was related to their disciplined spiritual adherence, vigorous participation in Jama'at bureaucracy, and required consistent attendance at the mosque. At times, the Fijian Ahmadis' tendency to conflate religious education with formal or broader education made their strong emphasis on being well-educated appear somewhat at odds with the practical realities of understandably limited exposure and opportunities characteristic of life on a small, remote Pacific island.

Anthropologist Eva Amrullah (2011) observed that while Indonesian Muslim women in the *Tabligh* Jama'at movement were enthusiastic about religious proselytisation, their engagement was sometimes superficial due to their lack of deeper religious education. These women found excitement in the movement's social aspects and the opportunity to discuss religion in a casual environment. However, they displayed limited ability or confidence to engage in more complex religious discussions beyond the basic teachings (Amrullah, 2011). What I observed among Fijian Ahmadis partially aligns with these findings. Particularly, Fijian Ahmadi women were keen to present their ardent religious beliefs to me; however, some were more hesitant about doing so during formal, recorded interview settings. To ease their concerns, I shared the interview questions beforehand. However, apart from some responses that seemed uniformly rehearsed, when I sought more detailed individual insights during an interview, some members remained focused on affirming the correctness or incorrectness of specific beliefs rather than explaining the underlying principles. Accordingly, it seemed to me

that Fijian Ahmadis' self-portrayal of being well-educated was almost automatic, as if the notion of potentially being uneducated was inconsistent or even unacceptable within the Jama'at's self-image and communal identity.

Notably, educated self-perception was more often emphasised by Fijian Ahmadi women than by men. This tendency may reflect efforts to assert credibility and social standing within a community that regards education as a defining attribute of an exemplary member. It may also serve as a means for those women to enhance their self-esteem and strengthen their authority within the community. As such, although the eager participation in religious activities among some Fijian Ahmadis is high, the depth of spiritual knowledge nonetheless occasionally remains superficial.

Additionally, for some Fijian Jama'at members, there seemed to be tension between secular and religious learning. Farkhanda expressed her conviction that *tarbiyyat* was essential for nurturing future generations and shaping personal and community life, suggesting that formal education was complementary to, and possibly secondary to, religious instruction, *"I am not talking about school, that's okay, but about Islamic education. It is free. You go to the mosque; there are so many of us who teach each other... We can only educate our children correctly when we are educated in an Islamic way"*. Farkhanda's view confirms a strong community-based approach to religious education, emphasising its accessibility in the mosque. Her perspective also implies an egalitarian angle in which one can become a virtuous member without formal education, promoting the idea that personal development and social status are available to everyone.

Studies by anthropologists Starrett (1998) and Hefner (2008) suggest that in some Middle Eastern Muslim communities, the preference for religious over formal education stems from the belief that spiritual teachings are essential for understanding and adhering to Islamic principles, which are considered foundational to personal and societal well-being. This prioritisation underscores the central role of religion in guiding life and positions religious education as critical to moral and spiritual development (Starrett, 1998; Hefner, 2008). Further, Hefner (2008) noted that some Muslim communities favour religious education for its role in instilling discipline, moral values, and a sense of community, aspects that they perceived as either absent or not sufficiently addressed by formal educational systems.

Among some Fijian Ahmadis, I observed a similar concern about the perceived declining prioritisation of moral values. According to Nasreen, the national president of *Lajna*

*Ima'illah* in Fiji, one of the local Jama'at's main challenges involved the young, university-educated members, who allegedly tend to deviate from the community's norms, "When they reach the university level, they get engrossed so much in the study life... or the bright life, that they sometimes go astray. Some are still on the right path and are fully committed to the Jama'at, but some, on the way they get lost. So that is my biggest concern". The new experiences and freedoms associated with university life are perceived by Nasreen as problematic, as they may divert students from their prior dedication to the obligations and values of the Jama'at.

While adherence to religious teachings and active participation in the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at is considered the (only) correct path to being an exemplary member, community leaders like Nasreen might struggle with individuals who, through secular education, acquire different perspectives and potentially shift from the uniform mainstream practices. As a shrinking minority in Fiji, some Ahmadis in Nadi seemed particularly focused on preserving their Jama'at's cultural and spiritual identity through *tarbiyyat*, promoting cohesion and unity by encouraging disciplined compliance among its members.

For Fijian Ahmadis, participation in the Jama'at's bureaucratic structure, which regulates many aspects of their everyday lives and demands sustained engagement, creates a parallel world that offers them comfort and a sense of belonging comparable to that of an extended family. They perceive the Jama'at as both a supportive framework for spiritual and personal development and an essential avenue for social interaction. Despite the Fijian Jama'at's small size and remote location, to its members, partaking in a global centralised bureaucratic framework affirms their equal significance and connects them with the global Jama'at and the Khalifa. In this manner, the Ahmadiyya bureaucratic framework effectively maintains its worldwide cohesion and upholds its values and ideology in diasporas.

According to my fieldwork findings, many Fijian Ahmadis tend to equate education more with conformity than independent critical thinking. This understanding aligns with the community's emphasis on submission, as members' engagement within Jama'at's administrative structure is tightly controlled and mandated, with processes in place to enforce adherence in cases of non-compliance and deviations. By aiming to uphold high moral standards and promote a distinct religious identity, the global Ahmadiyya bureaucracy perpetuates a sophisticated image of the progressive community. The notion of "educated role models" appears to resonate with Fijian Ahmadis, who strive to embody this ideal, some

less humbly and self-reflectively than others. For many Fijian Ahmadis whom I met, the association of knowledge with discipline and categorical obedience to authority serves as a source of honour and reinforces their self-perception as culturally advanced.

### Reflection

The Fijian Ahmadiyya community offers its members numerous opportunities to aspire to be exemplary Muslims through diligent involvement as office-bearers, participation in obligatory financial charity and various benevolent schemes, or by being a mother who strives to educate her child in meticulous alignment with Ahmadiyya faith and morals. For Fijian Ahmadis, commitment to the Jama'at's values serves as a motivation for personal development. Striving to adhere to principles of duty, righteousness, discipline, and self-sacrifice, they derive a sense of fulfilment, believing their efforts help shape communal attitudes and behaviours while advancing the mission and growth of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at. In addition, they anticipate this will bring them rewards both in this life and the afterlife. The collective spirit not only appears to deepen the individual faith of Fijian Ahmadis but also cultivates a community bound by shared objectives, further enhancing its members' active dedication within its framework. While the intense focus of Fijian Ahmadis' on internal community roles and obligations immerses them in the free service to the Jama'at, it dominates most aspects of their lives, distancing them from broader societal realities, restricting their capacity to engage with diverse perspectives, and limiting opportunities to pursue other interests.

During one of the Khalifa's online broadcast debates with *lajnas* (Voice of Khilafat, 2024), he was asked by a young woman for advice on how to cope with postnatal depression. Initially, the Khalifa brushed off her question by responding, "If you remember Allah, you will not experience this". However, the *lajna* did not thank the supreme leader of her community for his simplistic response. Instead, she politely yet firmly reminded the Khalifa of the difficulty and confusion that this period can pose for women and demanded that he take her question seriously. The Khalifa's facial expression swiftly changed from a jovial smile of a leader unaccustomed to any opposition to a more focused look as he subsequently presented *lajna* with specific recommendations worthy of his leadership status.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Firstly, the Khalifa recommended that *lajnas* should ask their husbands for support; secondly, they should pray to Allah; thirdly, to aid their sleep, they should take 10 drops of Passiflora homeopathic medicine; and finally, if their difficulties persisted, they were to write to the Khalifa directly for further individual assistance (Voice of Khilafat, 2024).

The behaviour of that *lajna* diverged from the perceived ideal I have observed among Fijian Ahmadi, where any critical evaluation of the Khalifa's views and directives was absent. Judging by the Khalifa's surprised expression in the video, it appeared that the *lajna* who did question his initial guidance might be an exception. From my findings, both in official Jama'at YouTube videos featuring Ahmadi imams and among Fijian Ahmadi, when members deviated from the rules or when outsiders critiqued aspects of Ahmadiyya teachings, their opinions were commonly dismissed on the grounds of "not understanding correctly". As the Jama'at strives to bureaucratise and regulate members' practices by eliminating ambiguities and providing clear directives, this process is appreciated by many Fijian Ahmadi, who perceive it as enhancing their emotional and spiritual lives and willingly embrace their subordinate role within the Jama'at's framework.

Meanwhile, the example of a young *lajna* also illustrates that, without individuals like her who possess the bravery to challenge the Khalifa's absolute command to "hear and obey", the guidance of the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at may risk becoming stagnant and insensitive to the needs of some of its members. Even so, without actively reflecting on the universality or timelessness of their community's centralised positions, many Fijian Ahmadi in Nadi find reassurance in their implicit reliance on the Jama'at's bureaucratic structure and guidance, while continuing to perceive themselves as distinctly progressive.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Among “Less Privileged”

The official website of the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at presents the community as a tolerant faith that champions peace, justice, and universal human rights. Aiming to revive Islam, the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at claims its members to be among the most educated and engaged Muslims in the world and that “only Islamic *khilafat* can peacefully unite humanity” (Al Islam, 2004, “Ahmadiyya Muslim Community”). This chapter explores how the task of portraying the Ahmadiyya faith as inclusive and humanistic is lived out among Fijian Ahmadis through their interactions with broader Fijian society. In particular, this chapter focuses on Fijian Ahmadis’ interactions and evaluations of two other Fijian groups - local Muslims (mainly of Indo-Fijian ethnicity) and indigenous Fijians, iTaukei (predominantly Christians).<sup>101</sup>

In Fiji, Ahmadis intentionally contribute to their social isolation by asserting the uniqueness of their beliefs and morals, setting them apart from the wider society. They underscore this distinction by upholding the preeminence of Ahmadiyya Islam’s teachings and positioning themselves as fundamentally more qualified to instruct others spiritually. Pursuing self-imposed separation due to the alleged higher standing of their community’s theology shapes Fijian Ahmadis’ interactions with other Fijian believers, particularly Muslims and Christians (who often follow their faith alongside indigenous cultural traditions).

This chapter analyses how Fijian Ahmadis strive for their community’s ideal of social harmony through rigorous adherence to the tenets of Ahmadiyya faith, which, I suggest, inherently restrict their capacity to embody the broader unity (and pan-Islamic solidarity) that the global Jama’at publicly promotes. Ahmadiyya Islam’s teachings challenge other faiths, particularly non-monotheistic spirituality, intrinsic to iTaukei’s ancestral customs that many Fijians pursue together with Christianity.<sup>102</sup> Despite repeatedly speaking of tolerance, some Fijian Ahmadis framed inclusive acceptance as contingent upon others aligning with the principles and values of their faith, habitually labelling those Fijians who diverge from

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<sup>101</sup> The interactions between Fijian Ahmadis in Nadi and other groups, such as Indo-Fijian Hindus, including followers of Hare Krishna, and smaller communities like South Korean members from Grace Road Church, according to my observations, primarily revolved around economic interactions, with limited cultural exchanges.

According to Koya (2014), Muslim-Hindu relationships in Fiji are complex, marked by some tensions but also cooperation, economic competition and some disputes over resources for schools and worship places.

<sup>102</sup> Sociocultural anthropologist Matt Tomlinson (2009, p. 45) explored how Christianity integrated into Fijian traditional beliefs, demonstrating that Methodist practices were adapted while indigenous spirituality persisted in rituals and daily life, noting that “ancestral phantoms never died in people’s thoughts, flickering in ritual life just beyond the gaze of many missionaries”.

Ahmadiyya Islam’s doctrinal and moral standards as “unfortunate” or “unable to see the truth.”

In the first part of this chapter, I argue that although many Fijian Ahmadis articulated a mission to defend Islam’s doctrinal purity (as interpreted by their Khalifa) and spread Ahmadiyya interpretations of Islam in Fiji, this was not consistently pursued through direct preaching among local Muslims and proselytising among the broader Fijian population. Instead, I suggest that Fijian Ahmadis generally tend to pursue revivalism (and indirect proselytising) more through a personal embodiment of Ahmadiyya moral and spiritual values. This distinguishes Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama’at from some local Muslim missionary movements, such as *Tabligh* Jama’at, which actively seeks grassroots interactions to revive Muslims’ faith. The revivalism of Fijian Ahmadis, pursued through their more inward-looking personal conduct, not only contrasts with certain Islamic revivalist groups that centre on public engagement to educate Muslims to spiritual self-reformation but also attests to aspects of the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s self-isolation within broader Fijian society.

Fijian Ahmadis often present themselves as targets of Muslim hostility worldwide, citing exclusion and even persecution in several regions. While many Fijian Ahmadis attribute their global marginalisation to doctrinal differences, I argue that in Fiji, where they experience religious freedom, tensions between Ahmadis and Muslims extend beyond theological discrepancy. Ahmadis’ belief in another prophet - embodied in their community’s founder and prophet, Ghulam Ahmad - is a sticking point and, indeed, offensive to many Muslims’ beliefs, which has led to the exclusion of Ahmadiyya Jama’at from the global Muslim community by mainstream Islamic representatives and scholars worldwide. However, the tensions with Fijian Muslims also stem from some Fijian Ahmadis’ implying the virtuous shortcomings of Muslims and asserting that the Ahmadiyya movement is the *only* true sect of Islam, rather than recognising it as part of Islam’s internal plurality. I suggest that some Fijian Ahmadis appear to accept, and at times even find meaning in, the disapproval they reportedly face from local Muslim communities. This opposition reinforces Fijian Ahmadis’ self-perception as guardians of “true” Islam’s essence and contributes to the very foundation of Ahmadiyya Islam’s *raison d’être*, which, I argue, in part, relies on the perceived shortcomings of *other* Muslims. Despite the global Ahmadiyya leadership’s public assertions of seeking to unify Muslims (as discussed in Chapter 1), Fijian Ahmadis demonstrate minimal interest in

cultivating this unity. Instead, the division and perceived deficiencies of Muslims are utilised by Fijian Ahmadis to accentuate their own virtuosity and devotedness in contrast.

Secondly, in contrast to often disparaging Fijian Muslims in their discussions, Fijian Ahmadis frequently adopt a strategic tone of flattery and conciliation toward iTaukei Christians. As the majority and indigenous ethnic group, iTaukei, through the politics of autochthony, hold considerable influence over Fijian affairs, and the safety of Indo-Fijians, including Ahmadis, largely depends on their goodwill (as discussed in Chapter 2). Self-identifying as Muslims, Fijian Ahmadis remain a socially vulnerable minority within a predominantly Christian society, where Islam and its followers are generally viewed with scepticism. Fijian Ahmadis, therefore, experience the substantial challenge of, on the one hand, holding to Ahmadiyya Islam’s doctrinal nonacceptance of (iTaukei’s) polytheistic traditions, which fundamentally resist Ahmadiyya rationalist religiosity and orthodoxy and, on the other hand, being motivated to remain in the good graces of iTaukei. Despite challenges in aligning Ahmadiyya faith with some Fijian indigenous traditions and spiritual beliefs, Fijian Ahmadis find it necessary to gain the acceptance of the iTaukei, who are politically dominant. This points out the contradictory dynamics between the Fijian Ahmadis’ public apolitical identity and the unavoidable impact of national politics on them.

To navigate acceptance, many Fijian Ahmadis present themselves as cultivated progressive advocates for the moral development and well-being of iTaukei, whom they portray as innocent victims of their own outdated traditions. iTaukei’s “backward” and “unreasonable” cultural practices are presented in contrast to the lifestyle shaped by the professed rational, efficient, modern, centralised leadership and monotheism of Ahmadiyya Islam. Emphasising their perceived God-bestowed duty to “lead others from darkness into light”, many Fijian Ahmadis find deep fulfilment in fostering the identity of possessing an inherent capacity for moral guidance. In this context, maintaining a view of themselves as a morally and spiritually superior minority, surrounded by a population they deem in need of guidance, Fijian Ahmadis find Fiji to be an ideal environment for reinforcing both their commitment to Ahmadiyya Islam and their sense of distinction.

Thirdly, I suggest that for some Fijian Ahmadis, their religious identity tends to take precedence over their national identity. The Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama’at afford primacy to the preservation of its distinct spiritual affiliation over deeper societal integration, which is most prominently evidenced by its practice of maintaining community “purity” through in-group

marriages. Whereas most Fijian Ahmadis adhere devotedly (and are educated from a young age) to marry within their community, paradoxically, this practice further weakens the already shrinking numbers of the local Jama’at members. The limited availability of Ahmadi partners in Fiji leads many young Fijian Ahmadis to seek to marry Ahmadis abroad and subsequently emigrate, prioritising allegiance to the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at over their belonging and ties to Fiji. Contributing to the research on global and strategic citizenship, the practice of Fijian Ahmadis migrating through marriage to Western countries situates them within broader discussions on flexible and pragmatic utilisation of citizenship.

Furthermore, I also compare the commitment of Fijian Ahmadis to practising distinctiveness from broader society with that of other global faith minorities in Fiji, specifically the Mormons (LDS Church), Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Bahá’ís. I note that the ways of maintaining a community’s unity and (dis)engaging with broader Fijian society vary among those faith groups, even though they share some moral principles and organisational values with Fijian Ahmadis.

In the next section of this chapter, I examine how Fijian Ahmadis position themselves in relation to Muslim groups in Fiji, highlighting how theological differences, perceptions of religious truth, and the pursuit of distinctiveness shape their interactions and contribute to maintaining boundaries within the broader Muslim community.

## I. CONTROVERSIAL GUARDIANS OF ISLAM

In Fiji, the Ahmadiyya Jama’at coexists with several Muslim sects, predominantly Sunni, united under the umbrella of the religious and community organisation of the Fiji Muslim League<sup>103</sup>; with various subsects, including *Ahl-i-Hadith*<sup>104</sup>, *Miladis*<sup>105</sup> and *Tablighis*<sup>106</sup> (Ali, 2004). According to Imam Naeem from the Aqsa Mosque in Nadi, there are

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<sup>103</sup> Fiji Muslim League was established in 1926 to promote Islam and safeguard and pursue the rights and interests of (Sunni) Muslims in Fiji (Fiji Muslim League, 2024).

<sup>104</sup> *Ahl-i-Hadith* is a branch derived from the Wahhabi movement, advocating for a return to what they consider the purest form of Islam, relying heavily on the Qur’an and Hadith and rejecting later interpretations and practices not found in these texts (Ali, 2004).

<sup>105</sup> *Miladis* are a Sunni Islam sub-sect known for celebrating the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday and other occasions with loud chants (Ali, 2004).

<sup>106</sup> *Tabligh* Jama’at put emphasis on puritanism, cultivating a strong Islamic identity through grassroots community engagement and education among Muslims globally (Ali & Sahib, 2022).

also a few Fijian followers of Shi’a Islam<sup>107</sup> and a few members of the *Lahori* Ahmadiyya sect, which emerged from the Ahmadiyya movement split in 1914. Together, Fijian Muslims represent about 6% of the country’s population (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2024).<sup>108</sup>

Fijian Ahmadis engage with local Muslims (and broader Fijian society) based on their conviction that Ahmadiyya Islam is a universal faith destined to spiritually and morally reform Muslims worldwide and lead others (including non-Muslims). Some Fijian Ahmadis also believe that they represent the *only* true Islam sect, instead of seeing their community as one of Islam’s diverse and meaningful interpretations.

### **Pursuit of “True” Islam: Revival and Rationalist Movement**

The global Ahmadiyya Jama’at defines itself as a revival movement, and like Muslim revival sects<sup>109</sup>, Ahmadis aim to “purify” and rejuvenate Islam by returning to its original teachings and practices (Khan, 2015; Hyder, 2023). Although Islam’s revivalist movements vary in their methods, political engagement, and views on violence, they share a common goal to align the lives of Muslims more closely with the teachings of the Qur’an and Hadith (Waardenburg, 2015).<sup>110</sup> Islamic revivalism among Fijian Ahmadis appeared distinct in some respects. Except for community imams, rather than actively engaging in outreach to local Muslims, Fijian Ahmadis seemed to prioritise living out their interpretation of Islam as a form of spiritual renewal. Meanwhile, their conception of religious revivalism often appeared contingent on Muslims adopting Ahmadiyya interpretations of Islam.

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<sup>107</sup> Shi’a Muslims represent around 10-15% of the world’s Muslim population. In contrast to Sunnis, who accept the legitimacy of the first four caliphs as successors to the Prophet Muhammad, Shi’a Muslims hold that leadership should have stayed within the Prophet’s family, specifically appointing Ali and his descendants as the divinely guided leaders, known as Imams (Malbouisson, 2007).

<sup>108</sup> The Muslim population in Fiji has seen a consistent decline over the past decades. Muslims represented around 8% in 1996 but dropped to 6.3% by the 2007 census (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

<sup>109</sup> The key Islam revivalist movements with global influence include Wahhabism, Salafism, the Muslim Brotherhood, *Jamaat-e-Islami*, the Deoband movement or *Tablighi* Jama’at (Ingram, 2018; Rosyad, 2007; Lapidus, 1997; Ali, 2018; Khan, 2015). Some of the revivalist Islam movements with regional focus include the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (Ingram, 2018), Indonesia’s *Nahdlatul Ulama*, *Muhammadiyah*, and PERSIS (Rosyad, 2007), Jadidism in Central Asia (Moosa & SherAli, 2015), *Al-Nahda* in Tunisia, Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria (Lapidus, 1997), as well as Shi’a groups in Lebanon like *Amal* and *Hizbullah* (Lapidus, 1997).

<sup>110</sup> Islamic revivalism represents a global phenomenon that emerged as a defensive response to the challenges affecting Muslim communities (Dekmejian, 1995; Ali, 2018). Revivalist groups remain influential within their socio-political contexts, promoting Islamic values, Muslim interests and advocating for traditional family roles and community-based solutions to social issues (Waardenburg, 2015; Rosyad, 2007; Lapidus, 1997). The Professor of Islamic History Ira Lapidus (1997) sees those movements as frameworks for developing a modern society, presenting an ideological and political alternative to liberalism, socialism, and communism, as they offer comprehensive systems of moral guidance, social justice, solidarity and cooperation (Lapidus, 1997). He sees them as forward-looking, suggesting that “Rather than a reaction against the modernisation of Muslim societies, Islamism is a product of it” (Lapidus, 1997, p. 448).

Imam Asad from the Rizwan Mosque in Lautoka shared with me his concerns about what he perceived to be prevalent syncretism within the Fijian Muslim community, “*There is a big big challenge... People here, they just mix religions into each other. Here, it is normal that our Muslim brothers and sisters do not have the basic religious knowledge... Not like us (Ahmadis)*”. He recounted a conversation with a local Sunni Muslim about Islam that left him shocked, as when they spoke about the meaning of *Surah Al-Ikhlās*, which Imam Asad described as fundamental to Islamic belief in the oneness of Allah, the Sunni Muslim man was allegedly unaware of it, “*I asked him, what kind of Muslim are you?!... You say you are a Muslim, but this is the basic pillar of the Muslim faith!*”. While Imam Asad questioned the sincerity of the man’s religious identity, he also revealed frustration over the proliferation of misinformation about Islam due to doctrinal ignorance, “*If people don’t have knowledge about their religion, what kind of lies are they spreading?!... That’s why, because we are Ahmadis, we have a lot of responsibilities*”. Like many Fijian Ahmadis that I have met, Imam Asad voiced commitment to safeguarding Islam’s theological exactness and highlighted Ahmadis’ perceived role in rectifying the erosion of the accurate observance of Muslims’ obligations, as they are interpreted and deemed essential by Ahmadiyya faith.

Nonetheless, according to sociologist of religion Jan Ali (2004, 2018), who studied Islam in Fiji, including its revivalism through the grassroots *Tabligh Jama’at* movement<sup>111</sup>, it was the *Tablighis* who drove a major de-syncretisation of Fijian Muslims since the 1970s. Islam first arrived in Fiji in the late 19th century with Indian labourers employed in sugar cane plantations under the British indentured system, known as the Girit system (Ali, 2004; Thornley, 2008). Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Fiji’s early Muslims, influenced by their Indian heritage, gradually distanced themselves from Hindu traditions and underwent a process of purification to form a more distinct Islamic identity (Ali, 2004, 2018).<sup>112</sup> Like *Tablighis*, who focus on Muslims’ moral reformation (Ali & Sahib, 2022; Ali, 2018), Ahmadis aim for believers’ internal “purification of the heart and soul” (Khan, 2015, p. 6). But in addition to introspective orientation, Khan (2015) argues that the Ahmadis’ revivalism extends to external transformation, aiming to unify Muslims under Ahmadiyya Islam.

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<sup>111</sup> Translated as Convey message of Islam Group (Ali, 2012).

<sup>112</sup> Ali (2018) argues, that under *Tablighis*’ influence Fijian Muslims abandoned traditional Indian attires in favour of Arabic outfits and *hijab* and removing syncretistic elements from religious practices and aesthetics led to a rise in local Muslims’ spiritual consciousness and the great espousal of Islamic culture and values in Fiji. The *Tablighis*’ push for Fijian Muslims’ de-Indianisation and Islamic revivalism in Fiji was also motivated by their concern that secularisation and Westernisation failed to address poverty and inequality and led to a state of *jahiliyyah* (ignorance) instead (Ali, 2018).

This, to some extent, contrasts with the situation in Fiji. As I further explore in this chapter, the Khalifa explicitly instructed Fijian Ahmadis to redirect their proselytising efforts away from local Muslims toward the iTaukei population. Moreover, based on my observations, Fijian Ahmadis tended to pursue their objective of “spreading a message” in a largely passive manner, thereby revealing a specific approach to religious outreach. Despite their strong emphasis on the missionary role of the Ahmadiyya faith, their endeavours for spiritual revival among mainstream Muslims as well as proselytising among iTaukei Christians appeared limited and contrasted with their otherwise vigorous observance of religious practices. Aside from Ahmadiyya imams’ spiritual teaching initiatives and the Jama’at stall set up annually near the Nadi fruit and vegetable market, distributing free literature on Ahmadiyya interpretations of Islam, most Fijian Ahmadis with whom I interacted showed little engagement in consistent preaching or proselytising, with only a few exceptions. The Fijian Ahmadis’ approach to revivalism was generally more reflective and expressed through self-modelling of their idea of virtue. For example, as Umair explained to me, he was “*praying for other Muslims*” to recognise the “truth” and convert to Ahmadiyya Islam. Similarly, many Fijian Ahmadis seemed to adopt a subdued posture, claiming the role of guides to religious “truth” for anyone wishing to follow their faith and assuming that only those who are spiritually capable will embrace it.<sup>113</sup>

As many Fijian Ahmadis seemed to direct their preaching efforts away from local Muslims, I suggest that this reveals a paradox within the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama’at, wherein its goal of Islamic revival presupposes the existence of *other* Muslim communities perceived as in need of reform. Misbah Hyder (2003) noted that while the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at seeks to distinguish itself from other Muslim groups, Ahmadis emphasise that they are not the only Muslims. Given that Ahmadiyya Islam’s core tenet is the rejuvenation of the faith (Al Islam, 2024), indicating a need to correct perceived spiritual deviations, the existence of “failings” in Muslims is, to an extent, essential for defining the Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s identity. Thus, the presence of “flawed” *other* Muslims justifies and sustains Ahmadiyya Islam’s purpose to guide them toward the “correct path”. This, in part, may ironically contribute to

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<sup>113</sup> A few Fijian Ahmadis invited me to consider converting to Ahmadiyya Islam, and Imam Naeem provided me with a printed *Bai’at* Declaration of Initiation required to be read and signed by new converts. When asked, I explained my lack of interest in conversion, citing my differing views on self-sacrifice, spiritual authority, and strict *purdah* practices. My response was met with immediate and complete acceptance. Farah, in particular, emphasised that I should only join their faith if “*my heart told me so*”. However, from other Jama’at members, I sensed that their respectful stance might have stemmed more from a perception that I did not meet the community’s high moral standards and thus would not be especially welcomed in any case.

the Fijian Ahmadis' apparent lax efforts to reform Muslims spiritually and redefine Ahmadiyya Jama'at's interpretation of Islam's revivalism, which does not necessarily target Muslims to deepen their faith.

A few Fijian Ahmadis shared with me their interpretations of Islam's scriptural predictions that among the 73 Islam sects, only the one adhering closely to authentic doctrines would be genuine, which, in their view, was Ahmadiyya Islam. According to a theologian of Islam, Kadir Gömbeyaz (2018, p. 248), the Hadith, claiming that all but one single "saved sect" is doomed to Hell, remains influential across many Islamic groups.<sup>114</sup> Gömbeyaz (2018) noted that this belief often reinforced sectarian identities and exclusivist attitudes and sometimes manifested in the marginalisation of other Islamic sects. The Fijian Ahmadis I spoke with believed they held the true interpretation of Islam, which often led them to view deviation from Ahmadiyya principles as flawed.

Fijian Ahmadis often emphasised the rationality of Islam's sacred texts, asserting that these scriptures affirmed the Khalifa's leadership as the defining mark of the true Islamic sect. As expressed by Sajjad, "*Holy Qur'an says that there will be a Jama'at which will have a Khalifa and since our Jama'at is the only Jama'at that has a Khalifa, so it is a true Jama'at*". To him, fulfilling this criterion confirms Ahmadiyya Islam as the rightful group among other Muslims. Further, Sajjad also directly linked the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's professed rationality with its authenticity, "*There are a lot of facts that Ahmadiyyat teaches - It teaches you a true Islam*". Although Fijian Ahmadis' emphasis on their faith being logical reinforces their belief in its authenticity and theological correctness, such a focus on rationalism does not distinguish Ahmadis from many other Muslims. According to Professor of Development Studies Masooda Bano (2020, p. 55), rationalism stands as one of the most influential movements within today's Muslim world, attracting young, elite, educated Muslims who engage with classical Islamic texts, "bringing Islamic rationalism back to the centre of the popular understanding of Islam", aligning Islamic teachings with modern science, and even with rationalist interpretations of the concept of God (Moosa & SherAli, 2015; Waardenburg, 2015).

Additionally, Fijian Ahmadis appeared to see adversity against their global Jama'at as a confirmation of the truth of their faith. Despite the majority of the Fijian Ahmadis that I have

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<sup>114</sup> Despite this, the concept has been interpreted differently by scholars, some taking number of 73 sects just metaphorically. Both Sunni and Shi'a sects like *Isma'iliyya*, *Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jama'a*, *Zaydiyya*, *Ibadiyya* or *Mu'tazila* are among those who use this Hadith to validate their theological and ideological exclusivist claims to religious truth and salvation (Gömbeyaz, 2018).

met sharing that they experienced little to no hostility from Fijian Muslims, their sense of representing a “true” Islam was shaped by their belonging to the group ostracised in some other countries.<sup>115</sup> The views of Fijian Ahmadis on anti-Ahmadi violence seemed to align with Ahmadis in India (Evans, 2017) and Canada (Nijhawan, 2016)<sup>116</sup> but also with some of the Shi’a Muslims, for example, Ismailis, who see their persecutions as part of a broader struggle between truth and falsehood (Virani, 2007; Nasr, 2016)<sup>117</sup>. Similarly, Fijian Ahmadis with whom I interacted interpreted the suffering of their faith adherents (including their own everyday struggles) as a testament that they were on the correct path. Reassuring me that “*Every Prophet and truth are met with opposition*”, Imam Naeem from the Aqsa Mosque in Nadi illustrated a prevalent understanding among Fijian Ahmadis that anti-Ahmadi sentiments paralleled the trials of Islam’s prophets, who endured opposition while decisively upholding the truth. Many Fijian Ahmadis seemed to draw upon opposition to demonstrate their own religious righteousness, and as Hyder (2023, p. 29) noted, for Ahmadis worldwide, “the accusation of heresy itself continues to be their measure of piety”. Consequently, the Fijian Ahmadis I encountered expressed a deep sense of meaning in the hostility their members face in some other countries.

Fijian Ahmadis’ common framing of criticism and antagonism toward their faith as a natural outcome of embodying religious truth seemed to reinforce their alignment with their understanding of orthodoxy. Meanwhile, the belief among Fijian Ahmadis in the universal and rational preeminence of their religious interpretation appeared so resolute that those who did not share their values or deviated from Ahmadiyya interpretations of Islam were often

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<sup>115</sup> In Pakistan, Indonesia and Bangladesh, adherents of Ahmadiyya Islam face legal discrimination and persecution (Saeed, 2017; Qasmi, 2015, 2023; Schäfer, 2018; Iqtidar 2012; Burhani, 2014; Haron, 2018; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021).

The conflicts that Fijian Ahmadis described to me, involving local Muslims, were relatively minor incidents. Several Fijian Ahmadis have mentioned that local Sunni Muslims typically avoided eating meat slaughtered by them, attributing this to the Sunni belief that Ahmadis were non-Muslims, and therefore they didn’t consider their meat as *halal*. Additionally, Imam Naeem from Nadi recounted that during Ramadan, Radio Fiji 2 typically allocated a few minutes for *daras* (lectures) from each local Muslim sect. He shared, that one-year, Fijian Muslim groups allegedly pressured the radio program manager to exclude the Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s broadcasting. However, the program manager, who happened to be Indo-Fijian Hindu, didn’t yield to their pressure.

<sup>116</sup> The reliance on the adversity’s validation of the truth was observed by Evans (2017, p. 494), among Ahmadis in Qadian, India, who allegedly conveyed to him, “Now that you have seen the opposition, you can really begin to understand why we are true”. Similarly, according to Nijhawan (2016), Ahmadis in Toronto regarded adversities on their members globally as signs of their unique divine favour and prophecies.

<sup>117</sup> Vali Nasr (2016), a scholar on Shi’a Islam, asserted that Shi’a Muslim minorities, who are marginalised and persecuted in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Syria, Pakistan, and Iraq, often connect their persecution to the theological significance of Imam Husain’s martyrdom at a battle of Karbala - a central element of Shi’a identity and spirituality, commemorated annually with mourning processions by Shi’a communities. According to Nasr (2016, p. 42), for Shi’a Muslims, “martyrdom is the highest testament to faith”, and consequently, suffering and hardships are viewed as tests of faith that strengthen their commitment to their religious identity.

regarded as lacking in some way - either in capacity to “understand correctly” or ability to perceive the “truth.” This understanding may help explain the limited emphasis on overt proselytisation among Fijian Ahmadis, as many appear to regard their principal religious obligation as exemplifying what they perceive to be the true practice of Islam through their own conduct.

### **Chosen to Guide the World**

Fijian Ahmadis derive a sense of their community’s distinction from their belief that they have an obligation to lead others. As articulated by the Khalifa during one of his online speeches, “Remember, you are the people who are to guide the world” (Farhad, 2022), urging Ahmadis to uphold high personal standards and lead by their own example. Upon reviewing multiple presentations and messages by the Khalifa on the Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s YouTube channels and website, where he underscored the heightened responsibilities of Ahmadis as virtuous leaders committed to preserving Islam, I also noticed one remarkable absence. In none of his speeches did the Khalifa explicitly affirm the equality of Ahmadis with other believers or humans. This omission aligns with Ahmadis’ view on religious truth, which holds that their community possesses the highest level of religious knowledge, credibility, and spiritual insight. Consequently, the Khalifa’s directive for his followers to serve as “universal advisers” to those considered morally inferior implicitly conveys spiritual superiority and has manifested among Fijian Ahmadis as a complex interplay of humble duty and exclusivity.

Umair disclosed to me that for him, being part of the spiritually privileged community of Ahmadiyya Islam carried obligations towards those who had not had the opportunity to follow the same path, *“The blessings were meant for every Muslim, but we were blessed to follow and to live by the bloodline of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad... They were unlucky... So, the responsibility is first on us to pray for all those people who are not lucky enough to be in our Jama’at”*. Umair’s statement reflects both spiritual superiority and empathy, as he sees himself as assisting Muslims. Nonetheless, other Fijian Ahmadis disclosed a more self-serving desire regarding seeking the recognition of Ahmadiyya Islam as a theological truth and divinely favoured to lead. For example, Azhar shared his view, *“Everything God is doing... all advancement is for the benefit of Ahmadiyya Jama’at... One day, the whole world will acknowledge that, and our Khalifa will be the supreme Khalifa, and he will lead the world”*. Azhar’s view aligns with the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s aim to “safeguard Islam through

(Ahmadiyya) khilafat” (Al Islam, 2004, “Ahmadiyya Muslim Community”), demonstrating the Fijian Ahmadis’ confidence in their community’s values, which they perceive as the universally ideal way of life.<sup>118</sup> At the same time, this perspective may underappreciate alternative religious and cultural leaderships in Fiji, as well as the plurality of lifestyles and value systems.

According to many Fijian Ahmadis that I spoke to, Ahmadiyya Islam offers a pathway to broad societal harmony and a world without wars. As expressed by Imam Naeem, “*Ahmadiyya Islam is a universal religion, and it is a true religion, and because of that, we are getting unity, love and peace*”. Viewing themselves as guardians of universal values, Fijian Ahmadis commonly utilise terms about their perceived duties conveyed and infused with a specific emotive intensity, such as, “*We have been tasked with the service to truth...*”, “*My obligation is to serve mankind...*” or “*I am bound by a moral imperative to lead...*”. Among Fijian Ahmadis, such elevated rhetoric underscores their community’s perceived divine mission, contribution to civilizational, and exceptional identity.

In a sociological analysis of the *Tabligh* Jama’at’s texts, Rizwan Sahib (2022) explored how this Muslim revivalist preaching group strategically influences its members, aligning their emotions with profound religious objectives through five kinds of emotion work: reflexivity, entrustment, micro shock, compensation, and transcendence. By enhancing members’ sense of duty, providing compelling insights to spur immediate action, alarming Muslims through shocking ideas of Islam being destroyed, and highlighting spiritual rewards and connections to the noble religious goals that transcend material existence, the *Tabligh* Jama’at seeks to deepen their commitment to religious renewal and outreach (Sahib, 2022). Many Fijian Ahmadis have similarly expressed to me that their alleged task of guiding others was immensely emotionally rewarding, and their esteemed spiritual position, as “being chosen” to follow the true faith, instilled in them a deep sense of responsibility towards others whom they generally perceived as less fortunate than themselves. However, despite this rhetoric, my observations indicate that many Fijian Ahmadis opted for a somewhat isolationist approach rather than actual public involvement with the broader external community.

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<sup>118</sup> The global Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s revival of khilafat differs from the majority of mainstream Muslims. According to the historian of Islam, Mona Hassan (2017), for mainstream Muslims, the khilafat is primarily a symbol of historical cultural legacy and the perceived greatness of Islamic civilisation that brings nostalgia for Muslims’ glorious past. Nevertheless, they do not generally consider khilafat to be a viable or preferable system of governance in the present day. With the exception of certain extremist groups, such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, that advocates for the revival of the caliphate as a global Islamic state, seeking to unite all Muslims under a single political and religious authority (Syaoki, 2021). While both *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and the Ahmadiyya Jama’at advocate non-violence and intellectual dialogue, their visions of khilafat differ; the Ahmadiyya Jama’at emphasises a spiritual caliphate, whereas *Hizb ut-Tahrir*’s vision is explicitly political.

Research on Ahmadiyya Islam commonly depicts Ahmadis as being rejected by mainstream Muslims due to their doctrinal beliefs (Balzani, 2020; Evans, 2017; Qasmi, 2015; Saeed, 2017; Valentine, 2008; Friedmann, 2003). The situation in Fiji, where Ahmadis do not face any legal discrimination based on their religion, enables this research project to transcend the perception (and popular self-presentation) of Fijian Ahmadis as passive victims. I argue that, in parallel to some irreconcilable theological differences, tensions between local Muslims and Ahmadis may also be exacerbated by Fijian Ahmadis' self-positioning as divinely appointed correctors of Islam. Whereas mainstream Islam rejects aspects of Ahmadiyya orthodoxy, Fijian Ahmadis mirror this rejection by judging Fijian Muslims as being comparatively less devout and theologically inaccurate, dismissing their spiritual adherence as faulty. While some Muslims worldwide accuse Ahmadis of "hijacking Islam" (Khan, 2015, p. 302) by promoting their beliefs that significantly diverge from conventional Islam's doctrines as Islamic, Fijian Ahmadis often denounce mainstream Muslims as erroneous and undisciplined in their spiritual practice.

Fijian Ahmadis frequently used largely indiscriminate comparisons with mainstream Muslims to highlight their own devotedness by contrast. Imam Naeem articulately described a perception of local Muslims prevalent among Fijian Ahmadis, *"Other Muslims forget the true teachings and the practice of the Prophet Muhammad. Ahmadiyya Muslims are trying their best to follow the practice and the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad and try to spend every moment of their life according to that teaching"*. This self-image was likewise conveyed by Ahmadis in India, *"To be an Ahmadi is to have seen a truth to which other Muslims remain blind"* (Evans, 2017, p. 494).

Many Fijian Ahmadis with whom I interacted viewed local Muslims as comparatively less faithful to Islam, who allegedly *"don't follow the Holy Qur'an to the letter"*. Hina contrasted the perceived confusion of mainstream Muslims who may follow multiple imams with the alleged clarity of Ahmadiyya Islam's guidance, stating, *"We are not like headless chickens finding our way in this world"*. Nasreen reflected a widespread belief among Fijian Ahmadis in their superior religious knowledge, *"As Ahmadi Muslims, we understand the religion of Islam in depth and much, much, much better. That's a fact. Other Muslims, they don't know what is in the Holy Qur'an"*, and further, Humaira shared her conviction, that Sunni Muslim women lacked awareness of their faith, *"They are actually not fully aware of why they are Muslims... they're not aware why they're different from us. Whereas we Ahmadis, we*

*know why we are different*". Dismissing the perspectives and practices of *other* Fijian Muslims was not done arbitrarily; rather, mainstream Muslims' perceived deficiencies served to reinforce Fijian Ahmadis' own religious identity, allowing them to position themselves as a group endowed with correct doctrinal guidance. Such views also appeared to strengthen some of the Fijian Ahmadis' confidence in their faith.

I observed variations among individual Fijian Ahmadis in how they addressed or highlighted what they perceived as shortcomings in mainstream Muslims, which generally manifested through two distinct approaches. The first approach was to correct Muslims and appeared rooted in the Fijian Ahmadis' aspiration to guard the religious beliefs and practices they considered sacred. From this viewpoint, in their efforts to protect what they treasured, Fijian Ahmadis have critiqued those Muslims whom they viewed as disregarding the core tenets of Islam. Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) suggested that societies rely on concepts of pollution and taboo to serve as mechanisms for expressing a shared social order and systematising it. By "separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions" (Douglas, 1966, p. 5), these concepts reinforced boundaries between what is deemed pure and acceptable and what is not, acting as a form of social control. Douglas contends that while these mechanisms guide and compel individuals to act according to established norms and values, they also coerce conformity to accepted standards. While Fijian Ahmadis expressed concerns about preserving what they regarded as the authentic practice of Islam, they were nonetheless expecting mainstream Muslims to follow Ahmadiyya Islam's interpretations of religious standards. This expectation was evident in the reaction of Imam Asad from the Rizwan Mosque in Lautoka, mentioned earlier in this chapter, whose facial expressions conveyed emotional distress as he recounted the supposed theological carelessness of a Fijian Muslim man, who was unfamiliar with what Ahmadis view as a fundamental belief.

The second approach in Fijian Ahmadis' dealing with what they viewed as deficiencies in local Muslims seemed openly driven by the alleged theological superiority of Ahmadiyya faith, indicating some members' apparent preference for asserting doctrinal dominance rather than fostering religious dialogue. As per Gömbeyaz (2018), Muslim sects which regard themselves as the sole correct interpreters of Islam frequently reinforce in-group and out-group dynamics, where the sects outside their own are depicted as fundamentally mistaken and theologically flawed. Among Fijian Ahmadis, the distinction between these two manners - first intending to positively correct Fijian Muslims' religious

expression and second to point out Muslims' assumed inaccuracy for its own sake - was unclear, as they may have overlapped in practice.

Whereas many Fijian Ahmadis shared with me their awareness of being disliked by mainstream Muslims, in their descriptions of interactions with them, they appeared oblivious that their own theological beliefs and actions were potentially offensive to some Muslims. Babar described to me a tense encounter with a Fijian Muslim missionary from the *Ahl-i-Hadith* group, whom he had known. Upon accidentally meeting in the domestic airport transit, Babar allegedly greeted the man with the common Muslim salutation, "*Asalam wa alaikum*", to which the *Ahl-i-Hadith* missionary supposedly replied briefly, with "*Alaikum*". Babar perceived this as "*very rude*" and shared with me how he confronted the man, "*Hey, what's wrong with you? You are not giving me the blessings... Are you another Muslim? That seems like you still have something against us (Ahmadis). What have we done to you? Ohhhh what? You call us the outcast?*". In response, the *Ahl-i-Hadith* missionary allegedly responded to him, "*You (Ahmadis) have your own Qur'an, you created another Prophet. That is totally wrong*", to which Babar replied, "*Ohh, good on you! As long as I know what I'm talking about is the truth, then why should I be worried to say the true in front of others. I am a Muslim, I took the same oath that you took!*". The *Ahl-i-Hadith* missionary's brief greeting suggests to me his refusal to recognise Babar's Muslim identity, reflecting his acknowledgement of Ahmadiyya faith as outside Islam. Meanwhile, Babar's defence of his beliefs challenged the opposing views and, according to his own retelling, escalated the tension. This seems to indicate that while some Fijian Ahmadis are offended by the refusal of Fijian Muslims to recognise them as Muslims, the presentation of Ahmadiyya doctrines and interpretations as representative of Islam may likewise be perceived as offensive to the religious sensibilities of some Fijian Muslims.

Additionally, this encounter also revealed the imperative for Fijian Ahmadis to affirm Muslim identity publicly rather than maintaining "merely" a private connection to it. Despite Fijian Ahmadis conveying assertions of their Muslim affiliation to me, Babar's reaction exposed a need to validate his Muslimness overtly to a mainstream Fijian Muslim. Hence, paradoxically, despite generally adopting an isolationist stance within Fijian society, Fijian Ahmadis insist on public recognition of their faith and Muslim identity. This contrasts with some Muslims, who pursue a more private form of religiosity, and whom the Australian scholar of Islam, Milad Milani (2017, p. 47), described as "cultural Muslims". According to

Milani (2017, p. 48), those moderate Muslims, whom he believes embody “the silent majority” of Muslims within Western societies, retain their Islamic identity through cultural and ethnic connections to their faith. While mindful of their religious and cultural heritage, those Muslims may often be non-practising and lead a mostly secular life, maintaining private expression of their faith. In contrast, for some Fijian Ahmadis, the public assertion of Muslim identity seemed crucial for them to adopt the role of correctors of the behaviours of Muslims who do not adhere to the standards of Ahmadiyya Islam (whether Fijian Ahmadis actively engage in corrective measures or simply assume the role of the correctors). In this way, Fijian Ahmadis’ sense of being divinely chosen to guide others not only reinforces their internal community identity but also influences their engagement with the broader Muslim community, reflecting a combination of spiritual duty, perceived superiority, and the aspiration for public affirmation of their self-understood Muslim identity.

### **Polarising Righteousness**

Cultivating unity with mainstream Muslims in Fiji did not appear to be a priority to many Fijian Ahmadis. As discussed in Chapter 1, although the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at consciously builds its image as an arbiter of interfaith harmony and human rights, and succeeded in being perceived by some as “peacemakers... dedicated to uniting Muslim divisions” (Dahlan, 2021, p. 5), in my observations, while the pursuit of Ahmadiyya orthodoxy often led Fijian Ahmadis to diminish the religiosity of local Muslims, when they spoke of them, their focus on own alleged accurate practice seemed to take precedence over seeking common ground with wider Muslim community.

In her study of Ahmadis in Indonesia, political scientist Saskia Schäfer (2018, p. 17) argued that both critics and defenders contribute to their exclusion from the Islamic mainstream, as overlapping political agendas reinforce what she termed a recurring “exclusionary mechanism”. Notably, as even human rights advocates may portray local Ahmadis as fundamentally distinct from mainstream Islam, Schäfer (2018, p. 30) concludes that this dynamic results in Indonesian Ahmadis being “pushed to the margins of and even excluded from both the Indonesian (Islamic) *umat* and (secular) nation”. In my observations of Ahmadis in Fiji, as well as in the self-presentation of the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at leadership and the Khalifa (as discussed in Chapter 1), Ahmadis themselves actively seek to distinguish their community from mainstream Islam. For instance, Umair from Navaka village

shared with me that he was the only Ahmadi among about twenty Muslim boys at his school and often led the prayer, stating, “We do not pray behind any non-Ahmadi. They pray behind me, but I wouldn’t pray behind them”. Umair explained to me that he refused to pray behind non-Ahmadi students because of their rejection of the Promised Messiah (as Fijian Ahmadi referred to Ghulam Ahmad), and his position on this matter aligned with the Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s global guidance (Al Islam, 2025, “Prayer Services”). However, if a non-Ahmadi student led a prayer, Umair waited to pray alone afterwards, though he shared that mainstream Muslim students had no objection to praying behind him. Umair’s stance reflects a firm commitment to doctrinal purity, as opposed to the relative inclusivity of Fijian Muslim students in this context. Whereas such inclusivity may not apply universally<sup>119</sup>, Umair’s strict adherence underscores the pursuit of a distinction, rather than unity, with Fijian Muslims.

According to Professor of Political Science Richard Dekmejian (1980), Islam often acts as a unifying force that drives revivalism when Muslim communities feel threatened, politically, economically, or culturally. When these external pressures intensify, Dekmejian (1980) suggests that Islam does not just remain a private faith but transforms into a collective identity and mobilising ideology that can drive widespread revivalist (or even revolutionary) movements and unite disparate Muslim groups under the banner of a shared religious identity. Thus, as Dekmejian (1980, p. 169) puts it, Islamic revivalism can become “a ‘medium of salvation’ for the dispossessed masses and alienated counterelites”. However, in Fiji and possibly beyond, theological differences between Ahmadiyya theology and mainstream Muslim interpretations tend to frame Islam more as a point of division. Consequently, Ahmadiyya Islam faces a dual challenge - a broader threat to Islam from non-Muslims and opposition to Ahmadiyya orthodoxy from mainstream Islam. In navigating these twofold pressures, Fijian Ahmadiis seek to differentiate themselves from mainstream Muslims by fervently advocating Ahmadiyya faith as the sole correct Islam sect. In doing so, many deliberately pursue a path of self-exclusion.

One of the most unfortunate forms of self-alienation from mainstream Muslims that I observed among Fijian Ahmadiis is the *manner* in which they pursue advocacy for peace - promoted as one of the cornerstone principles of Ahmadiyya Islam. On its website, the global

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<sup>119</sup> As described in Chapter 2, during a funeral near Lautoka, a Fijian Muslim woman from the Miladi sect chose not to pray alongside the Ahmadiis because her community does not accept the prophethood claim of the founder of Ahmadiyya community. Nonetheless, she attended the funeral to honour the deceased, who, as she shared with me, she respected as a “good man” for his consistent observance of his prayers.

Ahmadiyya Jama’at presents itself as a “leading Islamic organisation to categorically reject terrorism” and claims that its founder “taught Muslims to defend the faith with a nonviolent method”, through the diplomatic concept that he termed “jihad of the pen” (Al Islam, 2004, “Ahmadiyya Muslim Community”). The suggestion of Ahmadis teaching nonviolence to *other* Muslims appears overstated, given that Islamic tradition prohibits Muslims from harming civilians, killing fellow Muslims, or killing themselves by committing suicide (Hafez, 2011), and the concept of jihad is interpreted by the majority of Muslims worldwide as a peaceful practice of a spiritual struggle (Jahanbegloo, 2018; Pal, 2011; Jalabi, 2018; Mezrigui, 2015).<sup>120</sup> I had assumed that explicitly stating a commitment to non-violence is usually unnecessary. However, in the context where global media antagonism towards Muslims and deliberate overplayed linking Islam with extremism is well evidenced (Al Wekhian, 2016; von Sikorski et al., 2017; Khawaja, 2016; Castelli & Jakobsen, 2004; Lane et al., 2020), when one (minority) group like Ahmadiyya Jama’at makes fervent public non-violent claims to assert itself as the authentic representation of Islam, it may automatically imply that the majority of Muslims do not explicitly denounce violence.<sup>121</sup>

Rather than emphasising that globally Muslims are not more violent than adherents of other faiths (Gleditsch & Rudolfson, 2016; De Soysa & Nordås, 2007; Castelli & Jakobsen, 2004), the Khalifa presents himself as a “Man of Peace” and a Muslim leader who promotes inter-religious harmony and justice in a way which might suggest that commitment to peace among Muslims is almost unique to followers of Ahmadiyya Islam. The Fijian Ahmadis, diligently perpetuating the Khalifa’s stance, seemed driven by an underlying aim to assert Ahmadiyya faith’s moral and spiritual superiority, which leaves them contradicting the very spirit of compassion and unity that the community publicly advocates.

I have not found any studies that have linked Muslims in Fiji to religious violence. Nonetheless, some Fijian Ahmadis’ emphasis on their own non-violence may contribute to portrayals of local Muslims in a less favourable light, thereby reinforcing, rather than challenging, prevailing stereotypes. While the global Jama’at’s strong emphasis on Ahmadiyya

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<sup>120</sup> In contrast to Ahmadiyya Islam’s founding principle of nonviolence, Ahmadis, under the leadership of the second Khalifa, fought alongside the Pakistani army during the 1930s Kashmir crisis (Khan, 2015).

<sup>121</sup> Although elements of violence exist in nearly all religions (Reichberg & Syse, 2014), research globally indicates that Muslims are not more violent than adherents of other faiths (Gleditsch & Rudolfson, 2016; De Soysa & Nordås, 2007; Castelli & Jakobsen, 2004). De Soysa and Nordås (2007) found that during the final two decades of the 20th century, Catholic-dominated countries engaged in more violent internal repression than Muslim-majority states. For that matter, Jakobsen (2004) argued that modern secular states have been responsible for greater violence than religious groups, often under the guise of maintaining peace.

nonviolent identity reinforces its virtuous public image, it simultaneously serves to distinguish Ahmadis from *other* Muslim communities. The effect of this leadership on Fijian Ahmadis was evidenced by Sajjad, who, stressing his own community’s ethic of peace, directly attributed the violence to *other* Muslims, *“Our Jama’at teaches not to fight and have the best relationship with our neighbours, but there are other Muslims in this world... who are killing innocent people. We don’t do that! Islam teaches peace!”*. Instead of, for instance, condemning systematic state violence against Muslims in India, Myanmar or China<sup>122</sup>, Sajjad chose to highlight the actions of a minority of Islamist radicals. While it is generally considered commendable to denounce extremism, he did so by undermining *other* Muslims’ peaceful intentions, thus raising questions about his commitment to the broader Muslim community.

Remarkably, some Fijian Ahmadis’ understanding of peace-oriented principle did not appear absolute or was nuanced by their practical responsibilities. I was surprised when Rahat, a proud father of an Ahmadi missionary, disclosed to me that he had worked for four years in the U.S. Air Force as a Weapons Specialist. Although he acknowledged that the military was not exactly the right career for him, citing the Jama’at’s principle of nonviolence, he commended his experience in the military for strengthening his discipline. This approach contrasts, for instance, with Jehovah’s Witnesses, who refuse to engage in military service, yet do not identify as pacifists (Marley, 2019).<sup>123</sup> By comparison, while Fijian Ahmadis publicly uphold a commitment to peace, often used as a distinction from mainstream Muslims, their understanding of pacifism may not be categorical and allow for personal variations.<sup>124</sup>

Fijian Ahmadis’ emphasis on their distinct righteous identity revealed how their enthusiastic vocal endorsement of their community’s ideals might create internal conflicts within the broader Islamic community. As expressed by Sajjad, *“Sunnis and other Muslims, they are totally against us. They speak against us, put false allegations... Our policy is love for all, hatred for none. So, if we condemn them, it means we are not following our principles”*. Despite his potentially well-meant call for adhering to the community’s value of non-hatred, while Sajjad criticised Muslims, he appeared oblivious or otherwise ignored that his

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<sup>122</sup> Rohingya in Myanmar, Uighurs in China or Muslims in India are subjects of ongoing state repression (Nasir, 2022; Bakali, 2021; Waller & Albornoz, 2021; Jasmin, 2021; Parwez et al., 2024; Hakeem et al., 2012).

<sup>123</sup> Marley (2019, p. 136) suggests, that Jehovah Witness see themselves as “conscientious objectors” who refuse military service because they believe Jehovah’s war at Armageddon will be the ultimate battle and God will destroy all earthly governments.

<sup>124</sup> Some Fijian Ahmadis that I interacted with consider covert psychological manipulation in order to influence other members to comply with Jama’at norms and practices, particularly in regard to in-marriage, as non-violent (as discussed later in this chapter).

statements were equally antagonistic in perpetuating allegations towards them. This underscores an imperative to evaluate religious communities (and individuals) who publicly emphasise high moral values based on their actions rather than rhetoric.

Despite their claims to exceptionalism, in my own experience living among Muslims of diverse denominations globally, I observed no significant difference in Fijian Ahmadis’ condemnation of violence, which aligns with Islam’s guiding principle of peace. However, some Fijian Ahmadis distinguished themselves by portraying pacifism as if it were a defining characteristic unique to their community’s interpretation of Islam. The concern is not the Fijian Ahmadis’ endorsement of nonviolence and righteousness but their framing of these qualities as distinct from those of mainstream Muslims. For anthropologists studying religious groups in the Pacific, this highlights how Fijian Ahmadis cultivate a distinct spiritual identity by attributing commonly valued virtues exclusively to their own Jama’at. In doing so, they reaffirm their internal sense of moral and theological distinction while simultaneously influencing the dynamics and boundaries between Muslim groups in Fiji.

## II. SUBDUED BY ITAUKEI

Fijian Ahmadis frequently emphasised in conversations with me that Fiji was a multinational country where they enjoyed religious freedom. Some depicted their coexistence with other Fijians, particularly with indigenous iTaukei, almost as an idyllic, tight-knit community, such as illustrated by Azhar’s statement, *“We are brought up together... we are very open to each other... we understand other religions, their beliefs, do’s and don’ts. Moreover, they understand ours”*. However, as I explain in the following section, such optimistic statements might be wishful thinking or promotional in nature, serving primarily as self-reassurance for Ahmadis in light of their potentially precarious minority position in Fiji. As members of the Indo-Fijian ethnicity and identifying as Muslims, Fijian Ahmadis are not particularly favoured by the predominantly Christian indigenous Fijians.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Padmini Gaunder (2007) argued, that peaceful coexistence among Fijian ethnicities lasted until the 1920s. From then onwards, indigenous Fijians became increasingly cautious of the local Indian population. Gaunder attributes the increase in local inter-racial wariness to socio-economic and political changes that occurred during that time, primarily the abolition of indentured labour in 1920. This led to an increase in the Indian population in Fiji, who stayed to work in various economic sectors, particularly agriculture, heightening competition for land and jobs. Additionally, as Indo-Fijians sought greater political representation, tensions arose over perceived threats to the traditional and colonial governance structures, that favoured indigenous Fijians (Gaunder, 2007).

## Fijian and Melanesian Muslims

In Fiji, as in other Melanesian countries, Islam exists alongside the dominant faith, Christianity.<sup>126</sup> Although there is no systematic discrimination against Muslims in Melanesia (Flower, 2012; Tabani, 2020, 2021; Ali, 2004; Garrette, 1990), they are not broadly welcomed in regard to political and social life.<sup>127</sup> A study by social psychologist Aiyana Willard (2018), for example, revealed biases among Fijian Christians against local Muslims, suggesting underlying tensions or prejudices within the Fijian communities along religious and ethnic lines.<sup>128</sup> While Fijian Ahmadis self-affiliate with Islam, they likely face similar biases from the predominantly Christian population as those experienced by local mainstream Muslim communities.

The historical, political, and socio-cultural dynamics of Fiji have significantly shaped the experiences of its Muslim community, whose presence traces back to the arrival of the Indian indentured migrant workers since the 1870s, and whose descendants continue to navigate their position within Fiji’s diverse religious and cultural landscape (Ali, 2004; Thornley, 2008).<sup>129</sup> Ethnic violence and coups in Fiji in the late 1980s, 2000 and 2006 were driven by tensions between the indigenous iTaukei Christians and Indo-Fijian communities (Hindu and Muslims), and these conflicts arguably served to reinforce the political dominance of the iTaukei. Discussing Fiji in the 1980s, historian John Garrett (1990, p. 105) described Fijian Muslims as publicly quiet, displaying “certain nervousness” and cautiously and pragmatically continuing their religious practices despite political turmoil. My observations of Fijian Ahmadis align with those of Garrett regarding this careful and practical approach. Fijian Ahmadis seemed vigilant in their words and actions around (and about) iTaukei, demonstrating a deliberate intent to avoid discord with them.

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<sup>126</sup> The Fijian Christian community comprises of Methodists, Catholics, Seventh-day Day Adventists, Assembly of God and Anglicans (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

<sup>127</sup> Australian anthropologists Debra McDougall (2009), researching Muslims in the Solomon Islands, and Scott Flower (2012), studying Islam in Papua New Guinea, confirmed local Christian communities’ fear that Islam would undermine their cultural practices and threaten national unity and, in both nations, the Christian opposition urged their governments to prevent non-Christian religions constitutionally (Flower, 2012; McDougall, 2009). However, in some parts of Melanesia, Islam shows some cultural adaptability. In places like Tanna, in Vanuatu, some communities accepted Islam alongside their traditional beliefs (Tabani, 2020). Similarly, Malaitan converts in Honiara, Solomon Islands, embraced Islam due to its perceived resonance with Malaitan customs and their disillusion with Christianity (McDougall, 2009).

<sup>128</sup> In research experiment, participants were tasked with dividing money between themselves and other Fijians from a different religious or ethnic group. Results indicated that while iTaukei Christians allocated less money to Muslims (but not to Hindus), Indo-Fijian Christians allocated less money to both Muslims and Hindus (Willard, 2018).

<sup>129</sup> In contrast to Fiji (and New Caledonia), in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea, the introduction and growth of Islam resulted from missionary proselytising among the indigenous population (Flower, 2012; McDougall, 2009; Tabani, 2020, 2021).

### An Interfaith Encounter

Nasreen's mother, Duryaab, was admitted to a Nadi hospital with Dengue fever.<sup>130</sup> During my time living among Muslims in South Jordan, I observed a deeply held belief and practice in which family support played a crucial role in a patient's recovery, as demonstrated by the large gatherings of community members staying in the hospital alongside those recuperating. Similarly, in Fiji, Duryaab received daily visits from Ahmadiyya Jama'at members, with her daughter, Nasreen, remaining constantly by her side, and others attending during the designated visitors' hour from 6 to 7 pm. Upon arriving at the women's ward, a large number of *lajnas* in *purdah*, visiting Duryaab, made me feel more like I was in some hospital in Pakistan than in Fiji. It took me a while to catch sight of Duryaab in bed amid the crowd of extended family members surrounding her. This was markedly different from the sparse visitors of the two other iTaukei ladies' patients, who were accommodated in the same room. Duryaab's bedside table was overflowing with homemade food, juice, and a small battery-powered portable fan (the main air cooler hung at the room's ceiling was not functioning well). Ahmadi visitors first approached Duryaab to greet her, and afterwards, they silently caught up in everyday conversations, almost as if at any family gathering. Women assisted and comforted Duryaab as she occasionally got nauseated, and Hina, the doctor, followed up with the nurses on her medication. After Imam Naeem arrived at the hospital room, he stood at the feet of the bed and prepared the homoeopathy medicine, which Ahmadis, whom I met in Fiji and New Zealand, commonly used alongside conventional medicine. After that, he led a short *dua* (prayer).

As soon as Imam Naeem left, I noticed four iTaukei who entered the room - three ladies dressed in typical wraparound Fijian *sulu jaba* printed dresses and traditional Afro hairstyle, and a little boy around eight years old. Initially, I thought they were relatives of other iTaukei patients, but it turned out they belonged to a Gateway Seventh-day Adventist Church, who volunteered at the hospital to visit the sick. They briefly and quietly prayed at the bedside of other patients before making their way towards Duryaab. This surprised me because the attire of the Fijian Ahmadis who gathered near her clearly marked her as a Muslim. However, I assumed these Adventists wished to extend the same blessing to all patients as a gesture that transcended religious differences. They quickly surrounded

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<sup>130</sup> A mosquito-borne viral infection, that is common in tropical regions.

Duryaab’s bed, grasped both her hands and ear lobules, placed their palms on her belly and started chanting in the iTaukei language, gradually increasing the volume. While the chant intensified, the Adventists became more energised, speeding up the tempo, sliding their hands over Duryaab’s body in unified up-and-down moves and entering a more dramatic, possibly trans-state. Their intense involvement stood in stark contrast to the discrete and private exchanges I had previously observed them having with the other two patients in the room.

As I looked at Fijian Ahmadis gathered around, their faces mirrored nothing short of dread. Despite my presumption that some of them would interrupt the Adventists’ ritual, explaining that the patient had already received spiritual care from her own faith’s imam, Fijian Ahmadis remained frozen in visible agony, frowning, blushing, looking downwards or to the side as if they wished not to be there. The only one lacking diplomatic restraint was Hanya’s daughter, who, with a typical teenager’s grimace, whispered to me through the curled lip and rolling eyes, *“This is so weird... That’s scary... This is not allowed for us... This is shirk<sup>131</sup>... It is a sin!”*. When the rite, during which Duryaab seemed to fall asleep, finally ended, Nasreen approached Adventists and talked to them gently, *“We are Ahmadiyya Muslims and we do not believe that Jesus is returning”*. (During discussions with me and iTaukei, Fijian Ahmadis consistently claimed that both Christians and Muslims continue to await the return of the Promised Messiah mistakenly, as the founder of Ahmadiyya Islam, was in fact the fulfilment of that prophecy<sup>132</sup>). In response to Nasreen, one volunteer handed her a Gateway Seventh-day Adventist Church leaflet and said that they were well aware of Muslims’ beliefs because one of their priests used to be a Muslim. Later that evening, when we sat at home in the kitchen, sipping instant milk coffee, I asked Nasreen why she hadn’t stopped the Adventists in the hospital. She exhaled in evident discomfort, explaining that Ahmadis were guided to be tolerant of other faiths and always follow their community motto - *Love for all, hatred for none*. However, she then expressed regret for not intervening, *“It was a big, big, big mistake... I feel so guilty”*. Around a month later, when Duryaab was home from the hospital, I was cautious not to bring this incident up in our conversation as I had observed the

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<sup>131</sup> In Islamic theology, *shirk* refers to the act of associating partners with God (i.e., idolatry or polytheism), which the Qur’an deems the gravest doctrinal sin because it contradicts the fundamental belief in Allah’s uniqueness (Linnhoff, 2020).

<sup>132</sup> While Islam’s theology acknowledges Jesus as a prophet (though distinctly separates him from divine status) and predicts his physical return to Earth at the end of times (Paul, 2022), according to Ahmadiyya faith, Jesus will not return physically (Rashid, 2024; Friedmann, 2003). Ahmadis believe that their community’s founder, Ghulam Ahmad, fulfilled the role of the Promised Messiah, embodying a unifying figure who sought to reconcile religious traditions through peace, compassion, and rational discourse (Rashid, 2024).

discomfort it caused to Nasreen and others. Nonetheless, Duryaab addressed the issue herself, stating, "*I did not agree with that. I told that Christian lady not to do anything, but I was too weak, and she did not listen to me*".

According to Evans (2017), Ahmadis are led by the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at to respond to any form of public confrontation, argument and aggression, including physical violence, with serenity. While Fijian Ahmadis commonly expressed that they have to love even their enemies, I maintain that their passive stance in the hospital was influenced by more factors than just the community's commitment to non-resistance. One of the factors was the absence of Imam Naeem, who might have acted more decisively in his capacity as a community leader. Another factor was my presence as a researcher, which may have prevented Fijian Ahmadis from reacting out of concern about being perceived as intolerant. However, beyond these possible influences, I propose that the Fijian Ahmadis' lack of response to the Adventists' unsolicited religious ritual - conducted on a patient of another visibly different faith without her consent, and exceeding the unspoken expectation of discretion - underscores two significant aspects of the contradiction in which Ahmadis are placed by their theological beliefs and social position. First, it revealed some inconsistencies in the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's guidance if followed rigorously. While Fijian Ahmadis, as good Muslims, condemn *shirk*, simultaneously, they strive to adhere to the Khalifa's direction to be exemplars of religious tolerance. However, by firmly complying with both of those Jama'at principles, they risk being exposed to the inability to reconcile the paradox - how to tolerate what fundamentally challenges their faith? The second attribute, which may have influenced Fijian Ahmadis' paralysing indecision in the hospital, points to their wariness of iTaukei, despite their simultaneous assertions that the iTaukei are harmless and their relationships with them are overly positive.

### **iTaukei - The Landowners Compatible with Islam**

For Fijian Ahmadis, maintaining good relationships with iTaukei is strategic and necessary to ensure their safety in Fiji. iTaukei hold around 87% of land in Fiji (Regan et al., 2024), and as a political group and the indigenous landowners, they substantially control national affairs, acting as "the owner of Fiji in the same way the owner of a house protects

his interests in his house” (Norton, 2000, p. 103).<sup>133</sup> A succession of ethnically driven coups since the 1980s in Fiji has demonstrated that the iTaukei have decisive power over the country’s political and security matters, potentially making other groups feel marginalised in these areas, particularly those of Indo-Fijian ethnicity, to which Fijian Ahmadis belong. Fijian Ahmadis’ awareness of the iTaukei’s dominance likely influenced them in consistently portraying iTaukei in a positive light, with different members of the community voicing comments to me such as, “*The native Fijians are very loving... very soft-hearted people*”; “*Indigenous Fijians are the humblest people here*”, or “*iTaukei are good at heart, compared to the other races that we find in Fiji*”. Apart from practising admiration, by emphasising the perceived positive qualities of the iTaukei, the Fijian Ahmadis may also try to reinforce peaceful coexistence and mitigate potential hostility.

Although many Fijian Ahmadis claimed to have close and friendly interactions with iTaukei, my observations suggest that these were more casual or professional exchanges rather than deeply intimate friendships. Several Ahmadi families in Nadi and Navaka village employed iTaukei women as maids. During an interview with one of these families, the Fijian Ahmadi lady described her iTaukei maid, who had been with her for about 20 years, as “*her own family*”. However, after the interview, when I returned from the kitchen with a glass of water and left my bag unattended, she advised me to check its contents, cautioning that she could not guarantee its safety since the maid had been around it. This ambiguous attitude revealed that the stated deep emotional connection with the maid co-existed with a lack of trust. Apart from intricate dynamics between employers and domestic workers, this might point to some biases towards iTaukei. Meanwhile, it can also demonstrate the Fijian Ahmadis’ ability to reconcile the imperfections of human nature and relations; despite acknowledging that the Fijian Ahmadi lady cannot fully trust her iTaukei maid, she still manages to foster what she sees as a close bond with her. Therefore, alongside genuine affection for iTaukei, Fijian Ahmadis appear also driven by the desire (and to some extent, the necessity) to maintain positive relations with iTaukei, acknowledging their dominant indigenous status.

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<sup>133</sup> The 2013 Constitution of Fiji affirms iTaukei rights as landowners, reinforcing their unique legal status in the country. It ensures that iTaukei land remains in the hands of customary owners and cannot be sold, only leased under specific conditions. This arrangement provides a significant cultural and economic foundation for iTaukei communities, underpinning their social and financial stability (Regan et al., 2024).

Other Fijians, seen by iTaukei as guests (*vulagi*), are allowed to participate in decision-making but are expected to acknowledge iTaukei’s authority just as tenants should not anticipate equal rights with the property owner (Norton, 2000).

Some Fijian Ahmadis claimed that they saw similarities between Fijian cultural values and Islamic principles, suggesting that iTaukei naturally align with Islam and that “*Fijian culture is very Islamic*”. The belief that Islam is compatible with local traditional culture has also been reported among Muslim converts across Melanesia (McDougall, 2009; Flower, 2012; Tabani, 2020, 2021).<sup>134</sup> By emphasising shared values, Fijian Ahmadis aim to foster acceptance of Ahmadiyya faith within the Fijian society, mitigate cultural and religious tensions, and highlight its harmony with indigenous traditions. Azhar disclosed that he saw Islam’s influence in iTaukei’s character, “*They are innocent people. There are a lot of Islamic things I can see in iTaukei... The teaching of Islam is naturally built in them*”. Similarly, depicting native Fijians as paragons of sincerity and hospitality, Sajjad shared his conviction of their resonance with Islam, which contrasted with his criticism of local Hindus, “*Native Fijians, they come to you, they say Bula... Hi... They talk to you. Those things come from the heart, not like Indians. Hindu, they say it is very good... very good, but it does not come from their heart. Fijians, even though they have little food, they are still willing to share*”. In such descriptions, Fijian Ahmadis highlighted common values, such as ethics, community orientation, and hospitality, to demonstrate and promote the alignment of iTaukei with their community and faith. However, I noted that the iTaukei’s acclaimed generosity does not seem to extend to land sharing. The same Fijian Ahmadis who praised the iTaukei for their kindness complained to me that iTaukei landowners have refrained from leasing land to them, instead choosing to leave it unused. This suggests a preference that excludes some groups, possibly due to religious or ethnic differences, even if, as interpreted by Fijian Ahmadis, it means that the land does not generate income or serve any productive purpose. Anthropological studies have shown that, within the iTaukei’s understanding, the land is viewed as an extension of the self, embodying the interconnectedness of people, culture, and spirituality, and serving as a cornerstone of national identity and socio-political authority in Fiji; implying a dominant

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<sup>134</sup> Muslim converts in the Solomon Islands revitalise Islam’s similarities with local *kastom*, such as emphasis on justice, external codes of behaviour, gender separation and polygamy (McDougall, 2009). This correlates with Flowers’ (2012) observations in Papua New Guinea, who identified five aspects of local *kastom* that align with Islamic principles: the integral role of religion in governance, a Melanesian culture of payback similar to Islamic justice, tribal/clan-based social organisation, polygamy, and traditional gender roles. Similarly, ni-Vanuatuan Muslims on the island of Tanna perceive Islam’s moral, cultural and political compatibility with Christianity and the island’s *kastom* and even suggesting, that the foundations of Islam lie in Vanuatu (Tabani, 2020, 2021).

cultural reverence for the land that other Fijian groups need to comply with as long as the iTaukei hold the majority political power in the country (Ravuvu, 1987; Tomlinson, 2009).<sup>135</sup>

By openly emphasising the iTaukei’s cultural alignment with Islam, Fijian Ahmadis also aim to encourage their conversion, portraying it as a natural extension of existing values. Many Fijian Ahmadis have openly acknowledged that iTaukei were a primary focus of their proselytisation efforts. Sajjad shared with me that the Khalifa advised Fijian Ahmadis to concentrate on converting iTaukei, *“The Khalifa said, don’t lose your time with Hindus and other Muslims, they don’t like us anyways. But focus on native Fijians”*. The strategy to convert iTaukei, whom many Fijian Ahmadis suggested the Khalifa viewed as pure-hearted, appears to target more than just their perceived moral character, suggesting broader cultural, social, or strategic motivations. Potential iTaukei conversions, supported by their political influence and access to land, could significantly reinforce Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s standing in Fiji, similar to how local converts have driven the expansion of Islam in other Melanesian nations (McDougall, 2009; Flower, 2012). Nevertheless, according to my fieldwork findings, conversions to Ahmadiyya faith in Fiji have been generally rare in the past few decades, with no recent occurrences.<sup>136</sup>

Despite iTaukei’s reluctance to rent land to Fijian Ahmadis and convert to Ahmadiyya Islam, many Fijian Ahmadis that I have met continue to talk about iTaukei overwhelmingly favourably, commending their alleged sincerity and perceived compatibility with Islamic values. Fijian Ahmadis’ persistent admiration for the iTaukei reflects both a strategic effort to foster acceptance and a deeper aspiration to align their community’s future with that of Fiji’s dominant indigenous group.

### **Truth Beyond Discussion**

Beyond Fijian Ahmadis’ belief that not everyone possesses the spiritual capacity to see the “truth” and accept Ahmadiyya Islam, their attempts at proselytising among the

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<sup>135</sup> Fijian anthropologist Asesela Ravuvu (1987, p. 76) explained that for the iTaukei, the land is the foundation of their life, reflected in the holistic concept of *Vanua*, which embodies the interconnectedness of land, people, culture, and spirituality, “A land without people is likened to a person without a soul. The people are the souls of the physical environment... Land is thus an extension of the self. Likewise, the people are an extension of the land. Land becomes lifeless and useless without the people, and likewise the people are helpless and insecure without land to thrive on”. Additionally, sociocultural anthropologist Matt Tomlinson (2009) noted how, in sermons and public discourse within the Fijian Methodist Church context (the most popular Christian denomination in Fiji), *Vanua* and Christianity were often linked to discussions of national identity and the divine foundation of Fiji.

<sup>136</sup> Fijian Ahmadis disclosed to me that several years ago, one iTaukei convert joined Ahmadiyya Islam and even became a missionary after earning a degree from Ahmadiyya *Jaami’ah* (university) in Ghana. However, he left the Jama’at a few months after returning to Fiji, allegedly due to his family’s influence.

iTaukei also arise from specific challenges encountered in this context. Several Ahmadis shared with me that their efforts in spiritual teachings are complicated by what they perceive as the iTaukei’s generally casual adherence to Christianity, as well as their reported apathy to engage in religious conversations.

This was particularly upsetting to some Fijian Ahmadis, who commonly view rational debates as a central component in promoting Ahmadiyya faith. Many Fijian Ahmadis complained to me along the lines of that iTaukei, at their very best, *“listen to us, they agree, but after that, they don’t care”*. Imam Tariq described the difficulty of proselytising among iTaukei during his 25-year experience in Fiji, *“Getting new native Fijian, it really is not easy. iTaukei, they listen to me, I give them references from the Bible. But they never think! On the day of judgment, God will ask them - why, when those people (Ahmadis) were giving you a message of God, why didn’t you think about it?! You saw the truth! Why didn’t you follow?!”*. While Imam Tariq relies on theological engagement grounded in scriptural teachings, including the Bible, to make his message more accessible to iTaukei, he nonetheless encounters strong resistance due to iTaukei’s firm adherence to existing beliefs and reluctance to embrace religious change. Similarly, Babar disclosed his frustration with the apparent uninterest of iTaukei in religious dialogue, *“The only problem I face with iTaukei is that when I bring up the topic of religion, they do not want to entertain that”*. Babar also lamented the short-lived success of local interfaith gatherings, attributing it particularly to local Christians, who allegedly refused to debate sensitive topics. Hence, the iTaukei’s choice to abstain from religious discussions with Fijian Ahmadis seems to effectively halt multifaith communal arguments.

Although Fijian Ahmadis claimed to seek interfaith dialogue, their approach may be as uncompromising in debate as that of the iTaukei. Rather than exchanging ideas, Fijian Ahmadis seemed motivated by asserting their religious perspective, seeking to emerge victorious in the discussion. For instance, Rahat mentioned that the only people interested in discussing religion in Fiji were Jehovah’s Witnesses. Therefore, when they passed by his house, Rahat shared how he enjoyed inviting them in and “outmatching” them with his allegedly better knowledge of the Bible. As some Fijian Ahmadis seemed to approach interfaith dialogue as a contest, it could explain why others might avoid religious debates with them.

When I interviewed Imam Naeem at the Aqsa Mosque in Nadi, he brought his copy of the Bible, which was abundantly filled with colourful stickers, handwritten notes with question marks, exclamation points, highlighted phrases, and entire paragraphs. He recounted his interaction with an iTaukei man at Taveuni island who supposedly claimed that only Christians would go to Heaven, but no Muslims. In response, Imam Naeem said he cited a Bible verse to him, which stated that a faith as small as a mustard seed could move a mountain. He then pointed to an actual mountain before them and challenged the Christian to move it with his faith. From Imam Naeem’s perspective, he had clearly prevailed in the argument through the literal reasoning. The literalist interpretations often upheld by the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at, according to Khan (2015), originate in Ghulam Ahmad’s theological claims and were later reinforced by khalifs to maintain the Jama’at’s religious authority by seeking certainty through strict adherence to Islamic texts.<sup>137</sup> However, as I observed among Fijian Ahmadis, their literalist commitment was at times selectively adjusted when strict literal readings proved unsustainable.

Fijian Ahmadis’ eagerness to defend their spiritual perspectives as the perceived truth seemed to somewhat parallel contentious discussions on Fiji’s religious and secular dynamics. In his doctoral thesis, Thomas White (2020) addressed the general socio-political split between iTaukei Christians and the multi-ethnic Indo-Fijian group. While Fiji’s 2013 constitution declares the country a secular state, White (2020) argues that the social understanding and political implementation of secularism are deeply contested. He suggests that in the broader public discourse, the dynamics between iTaukei and Indo-Fijians resemble a “double monologue” (White, 2020, p. 4), where each group talks past the other, both using the term secularism with entirely different aims and understandings. Whereas iTaukei Christians view the secular state as an attack on the Christian values they perceive as foundational to Fijian society, to Indo-Fijians, secularism is necessary to ensure their religious rights and cultural survival within a predominantly Christian society (White, 2020). In this

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<sup>137</sup> According to Professor of Arabic Studies, Robert Gleave (2012), the literal interpretation in Islam stem from a methodological commitment to prioritising the literal meaning of texts over metaphorical or interpretative approaches. Gleave (2012, p. 175) argues that literalism is valued for its “comforting certainty”, as it provides a stable and definitive understanding of religious texts, in contrast to interpretations based on metaphor, allusion, or subjective intent. While strict literalists uphold the supremacy of literal meaning, Gleave (2012) acknowledged that even the most rigid literalist interpreters occasionally recognise the need for non-literal readings when a literal interpretation becomes untenable.

This aligns with my observations among Fijian Ahmadis and also Ahmadiyya imams’ presentations at community’s YouTube channels, who commonly upheld the literalist interpretations of religious texts. Similar to what Gleave suggests, Ahmadis’ approach to literalism appeared context-dependent, occasionally embracing metaphorical interpretations to preserve coherence within the doctrinal framework of Ahmadiyya faith.

"double monologue", Fijian Ahmadis not only align with the viewpoint of Indo-Fijians but also expand it.

Religious minorities, such as the Fijian Ahmadis, may view the absence of a dominant religious tradition in Fiji as an opportunity for greater inclusivity and equitable representation; therefore, secularism would be the most effective means to safeguard their religious rights and cultural survival within the Christian majority. Meanwhile, the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's goal, often brought up by Fijian Ahmadis, is a spiritual consolidation of humanity under Ahmadiyya Islam. As expressed by one of the Fijian Jama'at members, *"I am waiting to see that the whole world, that every mankind tends to Ahmadiyyat. It is something I am praying for, and Inshallah, that thing will come"*. Hence, the Fijian Ahmadis' praise of Fiji for its secularist, pluralistic democracy reflects both their recognition of its support for their community and its role in facilitating the expansion and spiritual dominance of Ahmadiyya Islam.

The tendency of some Fijian Ahmadis to engage in religious dialogue without fully considering differing perspectives is reflected in Imran's belief that some people are *"built not to change"*. He shared with me how he attempted to convey the spiritual teachings of the Ahmadiyya faith to his iTaukei, Sunni, and Hindu friends, who, nonetheless, *"failed to perceive it"*. He explained to me, *"Only those people to whom God gives power, can understand. You have to be really open-minded, not to think what has been taught to you and then stay with it, thinking that it is right"*. As Imran suggested others' reduced aptitude for critical thinking, he overlooked the fact that Ahmadis themselves are assumed to strictly adhere to the Khalifa's directives without questioning. Due to their firm belief in what they consider the absolute truth, some Fijian Ahmadis may struggle to engage in meaningful religious dialogues with faith groups that hold different views and accept the validity of their spiritual perspectives and practices. This, in turn, influences how they perceive and engage with the iTaukei, shaping their broader relationship with Fijian society and position within the public sphere.

### **Conditional Tolerance and the Dominance of Logic**

Fijian Ahmadis often emphasised the Khalifa's guidance on tolerance towards other faiths and cultures while simultaneously adhering to his directive, which explicitly rejects

polytheistic worship or attributing divine agency to beings other than God (i.e., *shirk*).<sup>138</sup> In Fiji, this leads to inevitable tensions regarding some iTaukei’s spiritual beliefs and traditional practices, which Fijian Ahmadis perceive as religiously impermissible. The contradiction became evident during a hospital visit when Fijian Ahmadis observed an iTaukei Adventist healing ritual, which, from the perspective of Ahmadiyya faith, was considered sinful. Nasreen, caught in the paradox of upholding tolerance towards Adventists while confronting their spiritual practices that conflict with the Khalifa’s orthodoxy, shared her guilt over her non-intervention to remain compliant with the Ahmadiyya faith.

To alleviate this tension while still leaving room for much-needed cooperation with iTaukei, Fijian Ahmadis make efforts to distinguish between iTaukei’s Christianity and their indigenous culture, which they often cast as incompatible with monotheism. Hina shared that in her department at the hospital, when one of the iTaukei nursing in-charge sisters died, iTaukei were collecting money to buy traditional woven mats and a live pig to contribute to the funeral ceremony. While Hina claimed that she also financially contributed, she supposedly questioned her iTaukei colleagues about their practice, *“They even agreed with me that those were more pagan beliefs, rather than Christian beliefs... However, they cannot let go of the traditions that had preceded the Christian era... I always find that contradicting their faith. But I respect their beliefs as long as they do not force me to do anything”*. Fijian Ahmadis’ acceptance of iTaukei’s Christian beliefs contrasted with their disapproval of some native Fijian cultural practices. While Hina did contribute financially as part of her team, her actions seemed driven more by her professional integrity and the need to maintain workplace etiquette, which could lead to ostracism if not followed, rather than by cultural pluralism that identically honours others’ (pagan) traditions, as she admits finding them inconsistent with the monotheistic faith. Thus, despite many Fijian Ahmadis voicing broad tolerance towards others, such claims may represent more of a social courtesy than a genuine respect for the validity of alternative spiritual viewpoints.

The challenge of attracting iTaukei to Ahmadiyya interpretations of Islam and the iTaukei’s disinterest in it may be partly attributed to the preferred rationalised orientation of

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<sup>138</sup> In one of his Friday sermons, the Khalifa stated that “falsehood is as big a sin as shirk is!” (Al Islam, 2016, “Truth and Falsehood”). In his other speech at the Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s Peace Symposium, Freedom of Speech and Tolerance in Islam, the Khalifa promoted the open-mindedness of Islam, citing the Qur’an that endorses broad, tolerant, harmonious coexistence, particularly with Jews and Christians (Al Islam, 2006, “Freedom of Speech”). By many Muslims worldwide, the monotheistic faiths are regarded more favourably compared to polytheistic or idolatrous religions, which are generally not as accepted because they do not adhere to the principle of Oneness of God and lack a recognised scripture from God (Zia-Ul-Haq, 2010; Waardenburg, 1999).

the religious teachings among Fijian Ahmadis. As Fijian Ahmadis claim to articulate their faith with factual clarity and intellectual rigour, this might not appeal to iTaukei inclined towards spirituality that includes more focus on experience. Anthropologist and psychologist Richard Katz (1999, p. 21) described the concept of *Vanua* that is *experienced*, as well as another key Fijian tradition - the *Vu* (reflecting the daily presence of cosmological gods and the spirits of the dead ancestors), which is “sensed..., occasioning a feeling of terror, a profoundly intuitive, uncanny feeling called *rere*”. Hence, the aspects of iTaukei’s more intentionally emotional or sensory spirituality, practised through a sense of spiritual awareness, contrast with a more deliberate cognitive or rationalised approach to religiosity often pursued by Fijian Ahmadis.

To Fijian Ahmadis, their own alleged rationality, which many equate with accurate knowledge of Ahmadiyya Islam’s teachings and structured adherence to them, helps distinguish them from other religious groups. Nasreen, while sharing with me her critique of certain spiritual practices of the iTaukei, asserted, “*If it’s not logic, it’s not right*”. Her statement broadly encapsulates the perception of many Fijian Ahmadis, whose strict prioritisation of rationalism leads them to mistrust and sometimes devalue approaches, insights and beliefs that rely on intuitive and deeply felt personal experiences. Although Fijian Ahmadis hold a deep emotional attachment to their Khalifa, this connection does not seem to enhance their acceptance of the subjective and instinctual dimensions of other spiritual traditions. This may be because, despite its profound emotional significance, the attachment of Fijian Ahmadis to the Khalifa remains embedded within the highly regulated and systematic framework of religiosity. Consequently, Fijian Ahmadis’ controlled, structured approach to spirituality contrasts with the more spontaneous and less regulated nature of some other spiritual expressions, which may render Ahmadiyya faith less appealing to those drawn to such forms of religious practice.

Additionally, the scepticism of Fijian Ahmadis towards “irrational” beliefs encompasses not only Fijian cultural traditions but also some popular non-orthodox Islamic views and practices. Nasreen, who dismissed observed local cultural practices like burning chillies to protect new-born children from the “evil eye”, asserted that such “*foolishness*” had no place in Ahmadiyya Islam. As she explained to me, “*This is also done by the Muslim people. So that puts me off... What’s the logic behind it?! Ahmadis are prohibited from doing those things... How can this save anyone from evil?! It’s only God who saves us*”. The belief among Fijian Ahmadis that their allegedly logical interpretations are universally correct and that what

seems illogical to them represents ignorance likely exacerbates the divide between them and other Fijians, including some Fijian Muslims, who may adopt a more imaginative or less structured approach to their spirituality.

The Fijian Ahmadis' concept of tolerance embodies conditional respect, acknowledging the iTaukei's right to their beliefs while simultaneously maintaining the perceived superiority of their own perspective. Nasreen's statement exemplifies this selective stance, *"There are some big superstitions in the iTaukei culture, like talking to ghosts, talking to the dead bodies... the dead person comes talking to them... It's their culture, we respect it. But when we have a chance, in our own good way, we try to explain things to them logically"*. This approach suggests a preference for convincing iTaukei of own perceived superior view rather than seeing their beliefs and practices as just as credible as the Ahmadiyya faith. A comparable limit to tolerance was also expressed by Babar, a doctor, who conveyed his disapproval of his iTaukei patients' reliance on traditional practices and talismans when dealing with incurable illnesses, *"It makes me wonder if they saw the light when they have become Christians... When it comes to difficult times, even the educated ones resort to witchcraft... Why are they still holding onto this?! This thinking is really backwards"*. Babar rejects religious syncretism in favour of strict adherence to monotheistic orthodoxy, excluding local traditional rituals, which he regards as outdated. Nonetheless, despite their rejection of local traditional healing practices, many Fijian Ahmadis, including those in medical professions, whom I have met, commonly made use of homoeopathy, which falls outside mainstream scientific paradigms.

The opinions expressed by Nasreen and Babar align with anthropologist Jonathan Benthall's (2016, p. 141) assertion, which contends that the idea of toleration is inherently problematic due to its basis in "double negation" - that is, permitting something to persist despite disagreement with it. This involves disapproval of beliefs or behaviours deemed wrong, yet, despite such disapproval, the decision is made not to intervene. Consequently, Benthall (2016) argues that toleration entails a power imbalance, where the dominant group extends tolerance to others at its discretion, rather than as an equal recognition of rights. Even though Ahmadis in Fiji are not in a dominant position politically or ethnically, many members shared the belief of moral authority as derived from their perceived preeminence of Ahmadiyya theological accuracy and monotheism. However, beyond alleged spiritual superiority - through which they may gracefully tolerate otherwise unacceptable practices, as

suggested by Benthall - Fijian Ahmadis’ cultural tolerance is also constrained by their strict adherence to the Khalifa’s prohibition of polytheism. Consequently, if Fijian Ahmadis were to attribute the same level of spiritual legitimacy to iTaukei beliefs as they do to Ahmadiyya faith, they might risk being accused of spiritual misconduct. This stems from Fijian Ahmadis’ perception that iTaukei religious practices, particularly those blending Christian and indigenous spiritual elements, may compromise pure monotheism and therefore conflict with the core theological principles of Ahmadiyya Islam.

Additionally, to some Fijian Ahmadis, an elevated view of their faith correlated with their conviction regarding the supremacy of Islam overall.<sup>139</sup> Sajjad deemed both the traditional Fijian spirituality and a Christian doctrine inconsistent with the principles of Ahmadiyya faith, *“Fijians’ beliefs that shark is a God or something or Fijian people walking on hot stones... these things are not good for humanity. Even believing that Jesus Christ is God. He is the Prophet of God, there is no doubt about it; we believe in that. But Jesus Christ is not God. There is only one God, and that is Allah”*. While delineating clear boundaries between what he considers correct and incorrect spiritual beliefs and practices, Sajjad’s perspective manifested his conviction in the higher status of a monotheistic understanding of God.<sup>140</sup>

Through their strict adherence to Ahmadiyya interpretations of Islam, Fijian Ahmadis engage in a form of conditional tolerance, maintaining a sense of superiority over polytheism (and largely also over Christianity) while remaining collaborative in professional settings, tactfully bearing with what they consider regressive practices of Fijian culture. This stance leads to self-marginalisation and may impact their ability to participate in broader Fijian community activities that involve a variety of spiritual perspectives. Consequently, Fijian Ahmadis who seek strict adherence to Ahmadiyya teachings appear to find it challenging to more deeply engage with other religious sects.

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<sup>139</sup> According to Friedmann (2009), in Islamic jurisprudence and theology, Islam, as God’s final revelation, supersedes all prior religions. Friedmann suggests that this principle commonly reinforces Muslim identity but also defines boundaries for their interreligious discussions and relations.

<sup>140</sup> Professor of Religious Studies Douglas Pratt (2021), who explored recent initiatives of interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians in Germany and the UK, argues that the most profound disagreement between those two faith groups centres on the theological concept of God. While the Christian doctrine of the Trinity conceptualises God as one essence manifested in three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), the Islamic concept of *Tawhid* emphasises the absolute Oneness of God and regards the Trinity as fundamentally incompatible with Islam’s pure monotheism (Pratt, 2021).

### Self-Appointed Reformers

Whereas Fijian Ahmadis commonly depicted the iTaukei as staunch Christians who lack religious knowledge and are susceptible to “detrimental” traditional practices of their native culture, they also stated that they did not seek to eradicate Fijian culture. Their objective was to promote the iTaukei’s modification towards a form of Christianity purified of traditional practices that align more with the principles of monotheism and, hence, with the Ahmadiyya faith. Much like the early Methodist missionaries in Fiji in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who positioned themselves as a force opposing indigenous religious traditions, portraying pre-Christian Fijian beliefs as from the “dark old days” that needed to be eradicated (Tomlinson, 2009, p. 159), many Fijian Ahmadis expressed their aim to educate iTaukei towards “modernising” their traditional cultural beliefs, by what Fijian Ahmadis deemed to be in iTaukei’s best interest. Among some Fijian Ahmadis, the tendency to frame iTaukei’s syncretic religiosity as “backward” served a strategic function. It allowed them to critique indigenous Fijian cultural practices while positioning themselves as compassionate and progressive spiritual leaders, rather than overtly judgmental outsiders.

Predominantly, Fijian Ahmadis frowned upon iTaukei’s lifestyle, which they view as immoral and in contrast with their pursuit of *purdah*. Imran, who used to manage the department at one of the hotel resorts in Nadi with mainly iTaukei staff, commented on many young women taking maternity leave without getting married, “*We’re seeing the Westernised lifestyle that iTaukei adapted... They have a drinking party and end up having sex with somebody, and they don’t even know who the father is... It’s not okay, but that is the way they live*”. Although some Fijian Ahmadis disclosed to me they had no problem with iTaukei drinking the traditional drink *kava*, many disapproved of iTaukei’s alcohol consumption, citing Islam’s prohibition of intoxicants for “*clouding one’s judgment*” and emphasising its negative impact on social behaviour. Fijian Ahmadis shared with me behaviours they claimed to observe within broader Fijian society, such as interpersonal violence and the mistreatment of women, including physical abuse. Sajjad stated, “*Islam doesn’t allow this. I never hit my wife!*”. As many Fijian Ahmadis highlighted their positive views of broad Islam’s ethics, which they believed provided a moral framework to prevent domestic violence, they implicitly criticised the iTaukei’s culture for lacking moral restraint.

In her ethnographic study of Ahmadi women in Switzerland, Sarah Beyeler (2012) found that they often framed the dominant society as morally lacking, presenting the ethical

framework of the Ahmadiyya Jama’at as superior to the broader “Western” culture, which they see as lacking strong family values and bonds. Similarly, the Fijian Ahmadis’ judgements of the iTaukei’s perceived promiscuity and antisocial behaviour, despite perpetuating some stereotypes and partly attributing it to “Western” influences, simultaneously reinforced their own sense of moral righteousness. Promoting Ahmadiyya Islam as an ideal source of ethical and spiritual guidance appeared to boost Fijian Ahmadis’ stated belief in their role and status as enlightened moral reformers within wider Fijian society.

Consequently, I suggest that for Fijian Ahmadis, living among iTaukei - whom they frequently regard as less developed in broader societal terms - provides a distinct sense of fulfilment and purpose. This context also seems to parallel the rhetoric of the Khalifa (as discussed in Chapter 1), whose narratives of Muslim disunity worldwide, even when unsubstantiated, provide him with a framework for sustaining moral and spiritual authority while maintaining a level of emotional and ideological separation from everyday realities.

The attitudes of Fijian Ahmadis toward iTaukei revealed a tension between genuine empathy for their social and economic challenges and a sense of moral and spiritual dominance that positions iTaukei as needing guidance. Paradoxically, despite their criticism of iTaukei for behaviours such as domestic violence or alcoholism, many Fijian Ahmadis simultaneously depicted iTaukei as innocent, docile, and naive, implicitly suggesting a lack of full accountability for their own actions. Such portrayals facilitate the Fijian Ahmadis’ self-perception of their own spiritual and moral authority, from which they believe they possess the capacity to “correct” others. Imam Tariq shared his concern towards what he perceived as the iTaukei’s excessive submissiveness. He pointed out that despite 76 years of ferry service between Rabi Island and Vanua Levu, there was still no shelter at the nearby bus stop, exposing those waiting to frequent rain. Imam Tariq lamented the iTaukei’s inability to demand improvements from the government or the bus provider, *“If someone tells iTaukei to wait, they will wait for hours, and they don’t even know why they are waiting... Fiji is very backwards. I tell them, please have some self-respect, raise your voice sometime”*. Whereas the value of obedience to governments and authorities generally is highly praised among Fijian Ahmadis and the global Jama’at (as discussed in Chapter 3), here, the apparent iTaukei’s compliance with the status quo was viewed negatively as a sign of low self-worth.

Another illustration of this underlying paradox can be observed in many Fijian Ahmadis who disclosed their unease over traditional Fijian funeral practices, which they view

as particularly detrimental to iTaukei. According to many Fijian Ahmadis with whom I interacted, these customs, which typically involved extended mourning periods, hosting guests, and substantial expenditures on food and *kava*, reportedly often led iTaukei to incur debts and take out loans. Musawat conveyed earnest empathy for the financial burden he observed on the iTaukei, related to their traditional rituals, *"They have to cater for those traditions. However, it is not justified. It is too expensive for them. Financially, most of them are unstable, but they have to give in and spend all their money on traditional ceremonies"*. In such ways, Fijian Ahmadis frequently presented iTaukei as passive hostages of their own culture, which they were bound to and unable to break free from.

My observations of the paternalistic attitudes expressed by Fijian Ahmadis toward iTaukei somewhat correlate with Katz's (1999) findings that Indo-Fijians often viewed iTaukei as lacking business acumen and interpreting their generally quiet demeanour and humility as indicators of timidity and passivity. However, Katz (1999, p. 14) also revealed common iTaukei's perceptions of Indo-Fijians as follows: *"Where we share, they hoard; where we are quiet, they are loud; where we are respectful, they are aggressive; and where we are humble, they are arrogant"*. Many Fijian Ahmadis with whom I interacted shared their genuine aim to improve the iTaukei's lifestyle and enhance their financial and social empowerment. While these encouragements often reflected the sincere care of Fijian Ahmadis for the well-being of fellow humans, they sometimes carried undertones of cultural insensitivity. Sanam, after critiquing iTaukei for lacking education, paused and reconsidered her statement, noting that she actually did regularly see many iTaukei at her university. And subsequently, she admitted, *"I have no grounds to speak on their behalf"*. Although this demonstrated her capacity for self-awareness, it also indicated a tendency among Fijian Ahmadis to rely on specific narratives surrounding the iTaukei as generally deficient.

During my interactions with iTaukei sellers at the fruit market, or when I observed iTaukei Adventists performing healing rituals in the hospital, they did not strike me as lacking confidence or being easily pushed around. Nonetheless, for some Fijian Ahmadis that I interacted with, depicting iTaukei as naive victims seemed to allow them to critique iTaukei's culture from a safe position of being well-intentioned benefactors. Such portrayal of iTaukei validated the Fijian Ahmadis' self-perception of moral and spiritual authority while maintaining a degree of detachment.

### Superiority as a Source of Self-Esteem

For some Fijian Ahmadis, the idea that the iTaukei communities were underdeveloped supported their own sense of identity and belonging by providing them with a distinct mission in Fiji. Azhar shared how in his company, which employs iTaukei and Indo-Fijians, he fostered close relationships with his workers, encouraging them to share their problems, *“It is our responsibility to understand them and remove their difficulties. Even if we have to take the difficult path... We are trained such by our religion that we eradicate the hardship... It is all about humanity”*. While Azhar revealed a self-appointed obligation for the welfare of other Fijians, which to him correlated with a humanistic ideal, he also indicated that Ahmadis were in Fiji on a purposeful mission by divine design. Azhar explained, *“We could have been in Afghanistan, but God chose us to be here in Fiji. So, I always blame myself for not doing enough for the people here... Where they are, I see them in confusion. As Ahmadis, it is our duty to give them the true understanding”*. Invoking the divine plan among Fijian Ahmadis’ explanation of their presence in Fiji also provided a strategic narrative for managing their precarious status within the country. As discussed in Chapter 2, while not imminent, the potential for renewal of past violence against Indo-Fijians heightened Fijian Ahmadis’ efforts to portray themselves as benefactors to iTaukei, whose goodwill is essential for their safety in Fiji. Considering the Fijian Ahmadis’ ancestral roots are located in Afghanistan and present-day Pakistan, where they face religious persecution, returning is not an option. Consequently, narratives of the divine plan play a role in reinforcing Fijian Ahmadis’ sense of belonging in Fiji.

Listening to Fijian Ahmadis’ descriptions of iTaukei (and, for that matter, descriptions of Fijian Muslims) as *“confused”*, *“less educated”*, or *“in need of guidance”*, prompted me to reflect not only on how these views may gratify the Fijian Ahmadis’ sense of preeminence but also on whether those narratives indicate an underlying feeling of inferiority among them. Without Ahmadiyya Islam’s alleged greater standing over other faiths and the assumed responsibilities of its members to guide others by their supposed virtuous example and insights, Fijian Ahmadis would become just “ordinary” believers and a religious minority. It appeared to me that for some Jama’at members in Fiji, the focus on their superior understandings shaped their identity to such an extent that it could act as psychological compensation for their own feelings of inferiority. Given the lack of interest among the Fijian public towards the spiritual guidance offered by the Ahmadiyya teachings (and the

widespread consensus among conventional Muslim authorities worldwide to exclude Ahmadis from the Muslim fold), it would not be surprising to me if Fijian Ahmadis (occasionally) questioned the validity of their community’s “truth” and values. Therefore, their claims of superiority may, in part, function also as a defence mechanism against broad dismissals of their distinct spiritual identity.

The sociologist and historian Charles Tilly (2006) argued that the reasons we provide for our actions serve as storylines, framing behaviour within larger motives and justifying actions based on values, beliefs, and goals. Tilly (2006, p. 14) asserted that people do not offer reasons due to a “universal craving for truth or coherence” but to rationalise and align their behaviours with personal and societal values. While Tilly suggested that narratives of self-superiority may rely on far-fetched or simplistic reasoning, they ultimately convey truths that resonate and satisfy. Seen from Tilly’s perspective, the Fijian Ahmadis’ self-perception as enlightened reformers could be, for some of them, deeply gratifying.

Accordingly, the self-ascribed superiority expressed by Fijian Ahmadis may function as a means of negotiating their social position. For example, Azhar articulated his and Ahmadiyya Islam’s role in Fijian society in eliminating practices deemed unacceptable by his faith, *“One of the biggest tragedies in the iTaukei community is that they have mixed their religion with their culture and they are not able to differentiate and choose one path... I find myself convicted here that I fail to remove that misconception in them... Witchcraft, it is not in the Bible, but they blindly follow it. That’s a tragedy, that has to be addressed, you know... quite professionally”*. Azhar’s assertion that Ahmadis were entrusted to address these issues “professionally” suggests his self-proclaimed elevated social status and self-portrayal as a natural leader within Fijian communities. While some Fijian Ahmadis I have met seemed to draw inner strength from their personal devotion, independent of outside recognition, other members, like Azhar, appeared to rely more heavily on a socially displayed self-ascribed sense of spiritual superiority, which functions as both a source of self-worth and a socially affirming identity within their minority position.

Ahmadiyya Islam offers a theological and communal framework that supports both socially engaged expressions of faith and inward, contemplative spiritual practices. This allows Fijian Ahmadis to relate to their spiritual identity through either a socially expressed display of morally elevated spiritual leadership or more humble personal piety, aligning with their commitments to spiritual discipline, proselytisation, and ethical transformation

according to their own understanding of superiority and humility. As the broader Fijian public appeared uninterested in Ahmadiyya Islam’s guidance, Fijian Ahmadis’ self-portrayal of spiritual dominance may help them to reinforce their sense of distinctiveness, possibly more for their own reassurance than for others. Such positioning may reflect a coping strategy among minority religious groups that claim absolute spiritual truth, enabling them to navigate societal marginalisation or self-imposed isolation while safeguarding their collective identity and self-perception. Rather than acknowledging the validity of iTaukei’s spiritual beliefs and social practices, many Fijian Ahmadis maintain that, unlike them, iTaukei lack the mental capacities and education to perceive the “truth”. This view also provides Fijian Ahmadis with some rationale for the iTaukei’s indifference to undergoing moral, spiritual and social reforms advocated by the Ahmadiyya faith.

Due to the iTaukei’s continued political dominance in Fiji, Fijian Ahmadis are compelled to tread cautiously as they remain under their substantial influence. Depicting iTaukei as lacking understanding or intentionally ignoring spiritual truths presented to them, rather than as holders of legitimate alternative spiritual beliefs, enables Fijian Ahmadis to manage intergroup relations with a kind of tact and diplomacy. By purposefully speaking sympathetically about iTaukei, who, as the indigenous majority, wield extensive political and cultural power in Fiji, local Ahmadis navigate their own vulnerable status as a religious and ethnic minority. Subsequently, Fijian Ahmadis position themselves as supporters of iTaukei’s well-being, a strategy that concurrently seeks to protect their own well-being and uphold their social standing within Fijian society. Meanwhile, this approach also offers an ideal framework through which Fijian Ahmadis work to enact the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s vision of its followers as “leaders of humanity”, responsible for guiding others morally and spiritually through their own perceived virtuous behaviour. In this context, I suggest that framing iTaukei as requiring guidance serves not only to best preserve, from the perspective of Fijian Ahmadis, their own security in Fiji but also as a way to affirm their religious purpose, reinforce their identification with Ahmadiyya Islam’s global mission, and derive personal spiritual fulfilment. Given both groups’ firm commitment to their non-negotiable spiritual beliefs, this dynamic underscore the complex interplay of power and cultural narratives that shape the interactions between Ahmadis and iTaukei in Fiji.

### III. GLOBAL BELONGING - LOCAL DETACHMENT

In my observations, while the Fijian Ahmadis consistently complied with the country's laws and economic practices, their deeper cultural integration into Fijian society did not appear to be a priority for them. Instead, I noted that the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at placed greater emphasis on maintaining its distinct spiritual identity, valuing religious affiliation over national integration and prioritising faith-based cohesion over deeper assimilation into broader Fijian society. In seeking to maintain Jama'at cohesion while integrating into broader society, Fijian Ahmadis engage in particular public practices intended to reflect their community's image as exemplary citizens. Meanwhile, they balance this public-facing approach with maintaining the Jama'at's boundaries through in-community marriages. I argue that while both approaches help to assert the Jama'at's consistency and distinctiveness, simultaneously, they present a potential for its internal destabilisation and limit its wider acceptance within a broader Fijian society.

For comparison, I examine how some other minority religious movements with a global presence pursue maintaining a distinct spiritual identity and varying levels of public engagement. Mormons (LDS Church), Jehovah's Witnesses, and Bahá'ís in Fiji share certain moral principles and organisational structures with the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at; however, their approaches to interaction with broader Fijian society reflect diverse strategies for balancing religious distinctiveness with societal integration. In this context, Fijian Ahmadis, despite professing loyalty to national governments, paradoxically exhibit behaviours that somehow resemble those of Jehovah's Witnesses, who explicitly distance themselves from state authority.

#### **Public Charity and Cultivated Self-Presentation**

Fijian Ahmadis navigate the relationship between their spiritual and national identities through benevolent engagements with broader Fijian society. While those communal charitable actions are not isolated from national contexts, they appear to be primarily driven by Fijian Ahmadis' religious motivations - both to fulfil faith-based obligations as righteous Muslims and to project a positive image of Ahmadiyya Islam as a humanistic faith.

Fijian Ahmadis regularly initiate various public endeavours that benefit Fijian society. Between the late 1960s and 1980s, the Jama'at built four schools and one kindergarten in

Suva, Lautoka, and Valoca, primarily, although not exclusively, meant to serve the children of the then-thriving Ahmadiyya community in Fiji (*Ahmadiyyat in Fiji*, 2000).<sup>141</sup> Additionally, the Fijian Jama’at pursues both local and international humanitarian engagements and charitable contributions from within its own organisational framework and through external initiatives and agencies.<sup>142</sup> Fijian Ahmadis shared with me that they organise quarterly blood drives, and during natural disasters, which are frequent due to the region’s susceptibility to cyclones and floods, they raise special funds to purchase and distribute groceries. Beyond that, Fijian Ahmadis also expressed that they frequently visit the poor, offering financial support through *sadqa* donations as a means of spiritual self-purification and an integral part of their religious practice (as discussed in Chapter 3).

Scholar of Human Geography Tahir Zaman (2016), who researched faith-based humanitarianism in Iraq and Syria, argued that religious charity, apart from solidarity and support, can sometimes reinforce social boundaries by differentiating between the “worthy” inside the community and the “unworthy” outside. Although the potential for the Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s charity to marginalise certain groups in Fiji requires further research, the individual Fijian Ahmadis that I have met challenged the exclusivity of their benevolent activities. Javed from Lautoka shared with me that he regularly paid *chanda* to the Jama’at but did not become *Musi*, as that would require him to contribute higher fees. Instead, he dedicates a portion of his finances to a trust, which provides daily assistance to about 40 people, predominantly iTaukei. He explained that he wanted to support other Fijians directly, “*I do my part in the Jama’at, and I also do my part for other Fijian communities*”. Similarly, Samina, *Sadar Lajna* from Maro, disclosed that she and her husband were involved with a local NGO, Helping Hand Fiji, supporting various initiatives, including clothing and food donations and fundraising to send Fijian patients for specialised medical treatments in India. Samina shared her belief in inclusive charity that does not allocate resources based on ethnicity or religiosity, “*I know I belong to Ahmadi. That is my religion, and that is my culture. But helping people, no matter what religion... for me, every religion is as one*”. Many Fijian Ahmadis claimed to regularly

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<sup>141</sup> As per the community publication, at the time of their establishment, these schools distinguished themselves from others by offering instruction in three languages - Hindi, Urdu, and Fijian - and took pride in having a library, a canteen, a photocopier, a typewriter and proper toilet facilities, features that were not automatic in Fiji at the time (*Ahmadiyyat in Fiji*, 2000). Imam Asad, who showed me the Ahmadiyya school and nursery in Lautoka, opposite the Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s Rizwan Mosque, stated that nowadays, the school serves around 400 Fijian children of any faith, aged 6 to 13. Although the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama’at owns property and a school building in Lautoka, it does not influence the curriculum, which is centrally provided by the Fijian government.

<sup>142</sup> The global Ahmadiyya Jama’at also runs a humanitarian and development relief organisation, Humanity First, which claims to be non-religious, apolitical, and impartial (Humanity First, 2024).

extend aid to other Fijians irrespective of faith, demonstrating that their humanitarianism transcended cultural and religious boundaries.

Although these charitable efforts often promote inclusive civic benevolence and contribute to a shared sense of belonging, they nonetheless remain closely aligned with Fijian Ahmadi's spiritual identity, running alongside rather than fully merging with national affiliation. The Fijian Ahmadi's altruistic public welfare actions, as discussed in these conversations, were more often principally motivated by their religious commitments, seeking to fulfil spiritual obligations while also promoting greater awareness of Ahmadiyya Islam's philanthropic image within Fijian society. As such, while Fijian Ahmadi's humanitarian efforts contribute to broader social integration and a sense of national belonging, these actions are primarily rooted in religious motivations, with their spiritual identity taking precedence over national affiliation.

In line with the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at, Fijian Ahmadi's seek to project a positive public image as exemplary citizens and Muslims. However, beyond maintaining the community's official outward virtuous reputation (Evans, 2017; Valentine, 2008; Balzani, 2020), I find that Fijian Ahmadi's place perhaps even greater emphasis on rigorously disciplined and morally upright self-presentation among their own members. An internal focus on exemplary self-fashioning strengthens the Jama'at's cohesion and members' sense of belonging to the perceived distinguished global community. While the desire to present a better version of oneself in public social interactions is widespread or even universal, some Fijian Ahmadi's may place an especially enhanced focus on decent conduct and appearance, which is motivated by the importance of righteousness as central to their spiritual practice and identity.

The importance of specific community standards for its public persona also likely played a role in the positioning of my research. Initially, I planned to conduct my fieldwork in Suva at the Ahmadiyya Jama'at's headquarters in Fiji. However, local Jama'at leaders recommended that I base myself in Nadi instead, noting that Ahmadi's in Suva were more fragmented and spread out. In contrast, I was told that Nadi members were more cohesive, and I also would have the opportunity to reside with the family of the national president of *Lajna Ima'illah*. Thus, this arrangement was more suitable according to the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at. However, my subsequent visits and interactions with Fijian Ahmadi's in Lautoka, Maro, and Suva indicated some differences in their participation in the Jama'at. The notable

vigour with which members in Nadi engaged in their religious practice, community administration and adherence to its norms distinguished them from other active Ahmadis that I encountered elsewhere in Fiji. Consequently, I sensed that my placement in Nadi might have been coordinated purposefully. The Jama’at, highly aware of its public image, created an environment conducive to my research that allowed me to engage with its most dedicated members, ensuring that I witnessed the representation the Ahmadiyya Jama’at aimed to project.

According to Evans (2017), the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at strategically uses its centralised bureaucracy and its own media to present Ahmadis as honourable Muslims. This carefully curated image is not just symbolic, but Evans suggests that it aligns with the community’s broader political and social efforts, including countering anti-Ahmadis sentiments. Similarly, Fijian Ahmadis underscore the importance of proper social conduct, which is closely tied to their observance of *purdah* (as discussed in Chapter 2), reflecting their moral and religious values but also serving to limit interactions with broader society. As such, the conscious self-presentation of Fijian Ahmadis in public reflects both, local dynamics, such as underlying anti-Indo-Fijian sentiment (discussed in Chapter 2), and broader commitment to the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s emphasis on maintaining a distinct, virtuous identity. Many Ahmadis in Fiji that I observed strived to act courteously in their exchanges with other Fijians. I particularly admired Fijian Ahmadis’ capacity for serenity as they drove slowly in a dusty column of cars behind sugar cane trucks, refraining from swearing or hastily overtaking. Once, late at night in Nadi, we waited in a car for over 20 minutes in an empty McDonald’s drive-thru for three cups of milk tea, and it was only after I voiced complaints that Bilal finally stepped out of the car and reminded the staff about our order.

By maintaining a dependable and disciplined public self-presentation, the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at is particularly well-understood by those who align with the same values. I have found great ease in interacting with some Jama’at members from Fiji, Auckland, Hamilton, and Sydney, many of whom upheld decorum in their social exchanges with me. Among many, Imam Naeem from the Aqsa Mosque in Nadi always promptly responded to my written questions via well-structured emails, providing detailed answers in impeccable English and concluding his letters with almost poetic expressions like, “May Allah Tallah help you and guide you in your research and May Allah give me the strength to assist you in the best way possible”. In his case, it wasn’t just a glossy empty promise, as Imam Naeem

consistently helped me before and throughout my fieldwork. Balzani (2008) noted that the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at has been exceptionally well received by Western commentators, largely due to its self-presentation grounded in universal ethics and peaceful coexistence, but also because of its internal structure, which presents itself as a rational and humanistic face of Islam.<sup>143</sup> As the Jama’at utilises its public image and connections to enhance the recognition of Ahmadiyya Islam in those societies and pursue its goals (Balzani, 2008), its emphasis on interfaith dialogue and humanitarianism may increase the acceptance of Ahmadi’s interpretation of Islam among some Western audiences. Alongside this, I suggest that given the prevalent anti-Muslim sentiments in Western countries (Shaver et al., 2016; Caldwell, 2009; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2009; Kalkan et al., 2009; Panagopoulos, 2006; Ho, 2007), certain Western sympathies toward the Ahmadiyya Jama’at might also partly echo subtle critiques of Muslim mainstream communities, wherein support is more readily extended to groups marginalised by the global Muslim ummah. Additionally, such solidarity may entail the projection of Western liberal imaginaries onto the Ahmadiyya Jama’at, positioning it as an embodiment of a “moderate” Islam - one that supposedly aligns with secular-liberal expectations of rationality, gender equality and moderate religiosity.

Nevertheless, among Fijian Ahmadi’s, I have observed potentially more substantial attention on members’ self-presentation within their Jama’at than towards the Fijian public. To celebrate 100 years of *Lajna Ima’illah* in September 2003, the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama’at rented the Civic Centre in Suva. Besides approximately 80 *lajnas* from different parts of Fiji, the only guests from outside of the community were two speakers (one Indo-Fijian and one iTaukei living in Australia), I and two iTaukei maids employed by Nadi Jama’at members. Despite the absence of international guests, the event showcased a bookstall with copies of the Qur’an in numerous languages, not just English and Fijian, but also Albanian, Luganda, Tuvalu, Kikamba, Persian, Kikuyu, German, Hausa, Russian, Danish, Spanish, Tamil, Hindi, Igbo, Bulgarian, and Czech. I interpreted this as serving as a reminder to the attending *lajnas* of the Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s international presence and mission, aiming to reinforce their sense of excellence and pride in belonging to a global, cultured community, thereby

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<sup>143</sup> While Canadian Professor of Religion Antonio Gualtieri applauded the fourth Khalifa’s hardworking demeanour in managing an extensive workload on just a few hours of sleep (Gualtieri, 1989), UK scholar Valentine (2008) praised Jama’at’s hierarchical bureaucracy for rigorous internal discipline that safeguards community’s religious and ethical norms and practices (Valentine, 2008). Australian anthropologist Debra McDougall recounted how she was warmly received by an Ahmadiyya missionary in Solomon Islands, at the community’s branch in Honiara’s elite, ocean-view expat community. This contrasted with her visit of local Sunni Muslims in a more rundown neighbourhood, who initially refused to communicate with her because she was a woman, only relenting when she returned accompanied by a male researcher (McDougall, 2009).

enhancing the community’s attractiveness, identity, and cohesion. Meanwhile, to my surprise, none of the Fijian Ahmadis I met, including those who grew up in remote areas among iTaukei communities, admitted more than elementary knowledge of the iTaukei language. The Fijian Ahmadis’ predominant reliance on Fijian Hindi (occasionally Urdu among those Jama’at members born in Pakistan) and English when communicating with iTaukei is just one aspect of their reduced commitment to local cultural and linguistic participation.

Many Ahmadi imams, office-bearers, and regular members that I have interacted with in Fiji, New Zealand and from Australia have presented an image of an admirable community of polite individuals with soft-spoken accents and warm manners. Whereas the Jama’at’s emphasis on ethical standards strives to positively influence its members’ behaviour and outward presentation, an excessive focus on upholding these ideals can also foster a culture of judgment and monitoring among individuals. A few Fijian Ahmadis confided in me that there is a member, moreover, a Musi, who secretly photographs *lajnas* on the streets in Nadi who do not wear a veil, intending to confront them for not properly following their obligations. As such, the Jama’at’s ideal of virtuous self-portrayal can also be exploited to exert control over others, instilling a sense of distrust among its members.

In Fiji, Ahmadis’ emphasis on public charity and disciplined self-presentation reflects a dual commitment; outwardly, to project the community’s virtuous public image in alignment with global Ahmadiyya Jama’at ideals, and inwardly, to reinforce communal identity, cohesion, and a shared sense of distinction. Although Fijian Ahmadis’ public engagements contribute to broader social acceptance, they primarily serve to strengthen their spiritual identity and consolidate their internal community bonds.

### **Committed to Marrying an Ahmadi**

One of the main strategies Fijian Ahmadis employ to maintain the distinctiveness of their Jama’at is through endogamy. I argue that the practice of in-group marriage among Fijian Ahmadis reinforces communal boundaries, sustains notions of perceived purity, and ultimately contributes to their self-marginalisation within broader Fijian society. In fact, the determination of Fijian Ahmadis to marry within their community often leads to their emigration, highlighting their preference for spiritual identity over national identity and over their desire to stay in Fiji, where many were born.

Following the community's norm of arranged marriages as the predominant way of gaining a spouse, mothers and female relatives commonly search for suitable partners within the Jama'at, both locally and worldwide. They can utilise the global Jama'at's official matchmaking institution, *Rishta Nata*, which facilitates international marital connections among members, attesting to the community's objective of self-preservation as a global minority. Nasreen disclosed to me that the Khalifa explicitly encouraged Ahmadis to consider international marriages. Likewise, one Fijian Ahmadi family shared with me that they sought the Khalifa's help in finding a suitable partner for their son, and he arranged a match in Sweden, where their son relocated and now resides. Whereas there is also an option for non-Ahmadi partners to convert, this process requires a minimum six-month probation period and religious education and many Fijian Ahmadis with whom I interacted viewed this option unfavourably, noting past cases where converted spouses allegedly remained relatively inactive within the Jama'at. In her research on transnational marriage among British Ahmadis, Balzani (2006) argued that the Ahmadiyya Jama'at often facilitated marriages for converts to integrate them into the community, reflecting a deliberate strategy to socially embed new converts within the Jama'at through marriage. Among Fijian Ahmadis, however, I noted a prevailing scepticism toward convert marriages, which, although present within the local Jama'at, were neither actively promoted nor widely regarded as favourable. Given the absence of conversions to Ahmadiyya Jama'at among indigenous iTaukei, I observed no coordinated community-level initiatives aimed at facilitating marriages involving converts.

The topic of marrying outside the Jama'at was met with considerable anxiety and emotional distress among community members. When I asked Fijian Ahmadis parents about the imaginary scenario in which their child would marry a non-Ahmadi, statements such as, *"It would be shocking"*; *"That would be the biggest trial of my life... I really hope it doesn't come to that"*, and *"It might sound a little harsh, but it is clear that we cannot accept our girls getting married outside Jama'at"*, highlighted Fijian Ahmadis firm stance on preserving their community's religious homogeneity through marriage.

When I inquired of 18-year-old Zahra if she would ever consider marrying a non-Ahmadi man, her response was unhesitant and straightforward, *"No!"*. She also explained her reasons for rejecting the idea of converting a potential partner to Ahmadiyya faith, *"It would be really hard to teach him all the methods and all the things we Ahmadis follow"*. Her non-negotiable resolve to marry an Ahmadi revealed a strong social boundary that defines in-

group and out-group dynamics among Fijian Ahmadis. Furthermore, it shows that some Fijian Ahmadis prefer their partners to be deeply engaged with the Jama'at's teachings and values, emphasising exactness in their practices, and a degree of complexity that they believe might be difficult for converts (motivated to convert by marriage).

Zahra also expressed her disapproval of what she saw as a serious consequence of mixed-faith marriage, *"If we both were not from the same religion, then how our future generation would be?! If one has a Christian mother and a dad who is Hindu, that's why kids must get confused... Because they just don't have any religion and enjoy their life. So, I don't practically blame them. They just lack teachers"*. Zahra's statements reflected her belief that a singular religious instruction was crucial for maintaining a clear religious identity, which she considered necessary in avoiding the spiritual disorientation that she associated with mixed marriages.<sup>144</sup>

For most Ahmadis I have met in Fiji and New Zealand, marrying an Ahmadi seemed the only good and acceptable option regarding relationships and sex. Farah, a single university student, emphasised the importance of in-group marriage in preserving community ties and ensuring her children's religious identity, *"We have to marry an Ahmadi. That is the better choice. Being connected to the Jama'at and the Khalifa is very important. So, I wouldn't deprive my kids of that by sending them off with a non-Ahmadi"*. Similarly, many Fijian Ahmadis emphasised in-group marriage, viewing shared religious beliefs as essential for a strong family, thriving relationships, and a fulfilling life. Meanwhile, as Balzani (2006) noted in the UK contexts, Ahmadis' in-group arranged marriages contribute to the development of new transnational networks while maintaining existing ones. This aligns with the Ahmadiyya's broader mission of global religious expansion and the ideal of endogamy based on faith rather than ethnicity or nationality.

Whereas the strict norm to marry an Ahmadi aims to maintain the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's strength and consistency, in Fiji, I argue, striving to meet this ideal paradoxically weakens the local Jama'at. In the diminishing Fijian Ahmadiyya community, the members' practice of endogamy accelerates its further decline, as young Fijian Ahmadis, facing a limited choice of potential local Ahmadi partners, often emigrate to marry Ahmadis abroad. For example, the Fijian Ahmadi parents of two highly intelligent young daughters disclosed that

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<sup>144</sup> One of the Fijian Ahmadi woman shared with me, that she heard about multiple *other* Muslim women in Fiji who married Hindu men and were reportedly beaten by their husbands. This also reinforced the Fijian Ahmadis' opposition to interfaith marriages.

suitable matches in Fiji are unlikely, and they have already decided to look for Ahmadi partners in Australia once their daughters reach marriageable age. Meanwhile, they disclosed that Australia would also offer their daughters a better overall lifestyle and economic opportunities than Fiji.

For some Fijian Ahmadis, the process of finding an Ahmadi marriage partner within the Jama’at is a source of stress. An unmarried *lajna* from Lautoka shared with me her difficult choice. As an only child, she wished to remain in Fiji near her parents, but the lack of suitable Ahmadi matches locally led her to consider relocating to Australia. Her mother sought assistance from Imam Asad of the Rizwan Mosque, who had recently relocated from Pakistan, to find a potential partner from there who was willing to move to Fiji. However, while some Ahmadis immigrate to Fiji for marriage, it is far more common for members to marry abroad, particularly to Western countries.

Families seeking partners for unmarried Fijian Ahmadis abroad almost exclusively targeted Australia, New Zealand, as well as Canada and some Western European states. While Ahmadis primarily sought to marry within the Jama’at, they also used this preference as a means of relocating from Fiji to more developed countries - a migration that might otherwise be challenging. This trend may reflect both the potentially vulnerable position of Ahmadis in Fiji as well as their preference for migration to economically more developed societies, where they seek religious security, integration into larger Ahmadiyya communities, and better economic opportunities. According to Balzani (2024, p. 335), the global Ahmadiyya community interprets the hadith of Prophet Mohammed, “In the latter days, the sun shall rise from the west”, as a metaphor for the spread of Islam in the Western world during modern times. This understanding, Balzani argues, provides Ahmadis worldwide with a religious justification for viewing the West as a spiritually significant space, helping them articulate a sense of home and purpose in Western contexts. Fijian Ahmadis, with whom I spoke, did not mention this hadith or its symbolism. This may relate to their migration patterns, which are frequently oriented toward Australia and New Zealand - located in the geographical South, and which may thus complicate the interpretation of whether the “West” in the mentioned hadith extends also to a contemporary geopolitical construct. Ultimately, the migration of Fijian Ahmadis through marriage appears to be more driven by practical and regional considerations than by the global Jama’at’s theological narratives.

Fijian Ahmadis’ migration through marriage offers a lens to extend theories of citizenship as a strategic, flexible asset rather than merely a marker of national belonging (Maira, 2008; Harpaz, 2013; Ong, 1999). Such scholarship focuses on the topics of transnationalism, dual and cultural citizenship, and the evolving state-citizen relationship in migration and globalisation contexts. For example, sociologist Yossi Harpaz (2013, p. 166) introduced the concept of “passport citizenship”, wherein individuals acquire a second nationality primarily for mobility, security, and economic advantages rather than out of patriotic allegiance. Similarly, anthropologist Aihwa Ong (1999) and Professor of Asian American Studies Sunaina Maira (2008) highlighted the transnational nature of “flexible citizenship”, emphasising how migration decisions are driven by economic and political opportunities rather than a fixed national identity, thus prompting debates around the negotiation of national loyalty and the instrumental use of citizenship for accessing legal rights and material gains.

The migration patterns observed among Fijian Ahmadis appear to expand upon these theories, indicating that their movements are influenced not only by marriage and economic opportunities but also by religious motivations and the pursuit of communal purity. Fijian Ahmadis, who use marriage as a means to migrate from Fiji to the “West”, exemplify a calculated approach, similar to individuals who acquire multiple passports for practical benefits rather than patriotic affiliations. According to Balzani (2024), Ahmadis in the UK interpreted transnationalism as part of a divinely guided plan, where concepts of belonging and home are not defined by geography but by participation in a global spiritual mission. As Ahmadiyya eschatology anticipates the Earth’s complete conversion to the community’s interpretation of Islam (Balzani, 2024) - a view also expressed by many Fijian Ahmadis I spoke with - the ultimate goal of spreading Ahmadiyya teachings positions transnational marriages as instrumental in fulfilling the divine mission. Ultimately, the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s ability to move across national borders through marriage (and through asylum claims) reflects the community’s pragmatic use of citizenship, where nationality is not rooted in national attachment and Jama’at members hold primary allegiance to their community, not a country. Consequently, Fijian Ahmadis’ marriage migration shows how religious groups may actively use marriage as a way to not only preserve the boundaries of their faith community but also to secure mobility and economic stability.

When a Fijian Ahmadi decides against marrying within the Jama'at, it can lead to emotionally painful divisions and negative feelings both within the family and the local Jama'at. Javed from Lautoka told me that when young members look outside the Jama'at for marriage prospects, they are often condemned by the so-called hardliners within the community. Several Fijian Ahmadis in Nadi confessed to me that when some of their relatives chose to marry non-Ahmadis, it often resulted in severing family ties with them. This acute sensitivity underscored the close-knit character of the Fijian Jama'at, where individual actions are perceived as significantly impacting the community's collective unity and identity, with the potential to undermine a sense of religious distinctiveness and authority. In these marital arrangements, Fijian Ahmadis' spiritual identity is prioritised over national affiliation and even close physical kinship ties, as children often leave their families to marry Ahmadi spouses residing in other countries.

Apparently, particularly, parents usually experienced profound distress, feeling betrayed by their children's decision to marry an "outsider". This is because marriage, among Fijian Ahmadis, is regarded as a measure of proper upbringing and a reflection of the parents' success; therefore, choosing an Ahmadi partner demonstrates one's dutiful respect for the authority of parents - a principle heavily emphasised in Islamic teachings as fundamental to good Muslim conduct (Rozario, 2011). According to Tremayne (2022), in Iranian society, Muslim mothers are not only responsible for raising their children but are also held accountable for their failures. Children's successes or shortcomings are seen as a reflection of maternal efforts, often subjecting mothers to blame and severe repercussions when expectations are not met. In the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at, both parents are held accountable if their children deviate from community norms. Nasreen expressed to me her view that parents are responsible for whether their children marry outside the Jama'at or "*go astray*", a term she used for members leaving Ahmadiyya Islam. Similarly, other Fijian Ahmadi parents revealed acute awareness of their responsibility to prevent such a scenario from happening. Hina shared feelings of guilt if her child ever deviated from this community's norm, "*If my child made the decision to marry outside, I would think - Where did I fail?*" and her husband's reaction was similar, "*It would clearly reflect that I failed my responsibilities to educate my child properly*". Importantly, in these conversations, "outside" always meant outside the religion, not outside the country.

These community expectations around marriage shape Fijian Ahmadi’s stronger affiliation with the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at, while they diminish their emotional attachment to Fiji as their homeland. Whereas marrying a non-Ahmadi Fijian is likely to result in ostracisation by other Jama’at members, marrying an Ahmadi abroad and emigrating preserves one’s status as a respected community member who diligently follows the Khalifa’s guidance. This norm further reinforces the importance of Fijian Ahmadi’s cultivating a sense of belonging within the global Jama’at over identifying principally with their national identity tied to Fiji.

To prevent their children from marrying outside of the Jama’at, Fijian Ahmadi mothers shared with me how they take active steps in their children’s education about love and marriage. Safiana disclosed to me, *“You have to educate the person whom they would fall in love with”*, while Nafisa decisively stated, *“Non-Ahmadi is never an option... My daughters understand that”*. These efforts have led most Fijian Ahmadi’s that I interacted with to commit to marrying within their Jama’at without considering other options, as expressed by Musawat, *“I never thought of marrying outside of Jama’at. Since childhood, we were educated to marry within the Jama’at. We were clearly given the pros and cons of it”*. All young, single Ahmadi’s I encountered in Fiji shared with me that they strongly preferred to marry an Ahmadi partner, viewing it as beneficial to their well-being. However, it remains unclear whether any member would acknowledge (either to me or to themselves) a desire to marry a non-Ahmadi Fijian, given the potential social consequences. I therefore argue that the prospect of social and emotional repercussions may also serve as a mechanism for maintaining the Jama’at’s boundaries and cohesion.

The scarcity of local Ahmadi partners, together with Fijian Ahmadi’s strong commitment to in-group marriage and the opportunity for social and economic mobility through marriage in the “West”, encouraged by the Khalifa, drives their migration from Fiji, reflecting their clear prioritisation of spiritual identity and religious purity over Fijian citizenship and emotional attachment to the nation. In choosing allegiance to the global Jama’at above national belonging, Fijian Ahmadi’s reinforce their transnational religious ties, even as this preference accelerates the decline of the local Ahmadiyya community in Fiji.

### Parallels with Global Faith Minorities in Fiji

The comparative insights reveal the varying approaches and degrees to which global religious minorities navigate societal integration while maintaining their spiritual identities in multicultural contexts, such as Fiji. Minority religious movements with a global presence, such as Mormonism<sup>145</sup> (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or LDS Church) and Jehovah’s Witnesses,<sup>146</sup> show some prominent similarities with the Ahmadiyya Jama’at in Fiji. These communities maintain distinct spiritual identities through hierarchical structures and unified practices (Chryssides, 2022; Rajtar, 2009; Davies, 2008). The Ahmadiyya khilafat and governing bodies of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons exhort centralised authority on a global scale, enforcing doctrinal standardisation across their global communities by prescribing religious observance that ensures adherence to a defined way of life and maintaining religious “purity” (Chryssides, 2022; Gordon & William, 2012). However, their societal engagement in Fiji offers differing standpoints, with Mormons participating actively in public life, while Ahmadis and Jehovah’s Witnesses lean towards self-isolation.

Just as Ahmadis are not recognised as Muslims by many within the broader Islamic tradition, Mormons are often regarded as distinct from mainstream Christianity (Jones, 1986). Structurally, both communities adhere to hierarchical leadership, financial discipline, and a strong culture of obedience to religious authority. Mormons, following the teachings of their prophetic founder, Joseph Smith, comply with an organised system of centralised directives and coordinated donations (Gordon & William, 2012) that mirrors the Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s bureaucratic framework. Both Mormons and Ahmadis emphasise religious collectivism, family, and traditional gender roles, with spiritual leadership and missionary work reserved for men, while women primarily focus on family stability (Cornwall et al., 2001; Beaman, 2001;

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<sup>145</sup> Mormonism was founded by Joseph Smith in 1830 in the U.S. after he claimed to have received divine revelations and reportedly discovered the Book of Mormon, which he translated from golden plates given to him by the angel Moroni. Mormons emphasise the continuation of revelation, believing that God still communicates with prophets. The community’s core teachings include the divinity of Jesus Christ, salvation through faith and work, and the restoration of the true church allegedly lost after early Christianity. Mormons’ doctrine include belief in additional scriptures, eternal progression (a belief that humans can become divine), and sacred temple rituals, including baptism for the dead. Mormonism stresses strong family values, missionary work, and a structured priesthood hierarchy (Jones, 1986; Gordon & William, 2012; Beaman, 2001; Davies, 2008).

<sup>146</sup> Jehovah’s Witnesses originated in the late 19th century in Pennsylvania, U.S., with Charles Taze Russell starting a Bible study group that evolved into this religious movement. The group emphasises a literal interpretation of the Bible, active evangelism, and distinctive eschatological beliefs, including the forthcoming establishment of God’s Kingdom on Earth, governed by Jesus Christ and 144, 000 anointed ones. Under Joseph Franklin Rutherford’s leadership, the organisation was officially named Jehovah’s Witnesses in 1931, and its organisational structure and methods of preaching were significantly reshaped. Central to Jehovah’s Witnesses doctrine is ethical living guided by biblical principles, influencing members’ stance on political neutrality, refusal of military service, and other aspects of societal engagement (Chryssides, 2022; Rajtar, 2009).

Jafar, 2018). Both groups claim a positive stance toward science and education and oppose same-sex marriage, albeit with differing approaches. While the Ahmadiyya Jama’at condemns same-sex relationships as shameless (Al Islam, “Chastity”, 2025), the Khalifa, as well as Fijian Ahmadi I interacted with, appeared to keep their stance on LGBTQ+ remarkably quieter than for instance their advocacy of tolerance, likely aimed at aligning the Jama’at’s progressive image with its orthodox beliefs in front of Western audiences. In contrast, Mormons in the U.S. have taken an active role in campaigning against same-sex marriage initiatives (Gordon & William, 2012).

Like the Ahmadiyya Jama’at, Mormonism emphasises loyalty to state authorities. Similar to the Khalifa, who presents the Jama’at as apolitical yet strategically indirectly influences public affairs (as discussed in Chapter 1), the Mormon Church formally maintains neutrality while its members strive to impact societal and moral issues (Gordon & William, 2012; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Political Neutrality”, 2025). This dual approach allows both groups to advance their interests without alienating members or outsiders wary of political ties.

In Fiji, however, Mormons’ participation in secular communal affairs is substantial when compared to local Ahmadi. Mormonism was established in Fiji in the 1950s, and despite initial resistance, it successfully expanded among the iTaukei and integrated into the Fijian society (Jacob & Lesuma, 2005).<sup>147</sup> Today, Mormons in Fiji hold prominent roles in politics, business, civil service, and professional rugby (Jacob & Lesuma, 2005), highlighting their capacity to maintain their religious distinctiveness while actively participating in broader local societal frameworks. In contrast, the inability of Fijian Ahmadi to convert iTaukei to Ahmadiyya faith, combined with a preference for fostering their own community cohesion over deeper cultural integration, contributes to their self-isolation.

In interactions with other Fijians, the social dynamics of Fijian Ahmadi appear to more closely parallel those of local Jehovah’s Witnesses than Mormons. Further reinforcing their separation from broader society, Jehovah’s Witnesses are guided to maintain uniformity in dress and a humble appearance as a visible marker of their religious identity (Rajtar, 2009), which resembles the Fijian Ahmadi’s adherence to some modesty practices through *purdah* (discussed in Chapter 2). Members of both groups are closely monitored by their community

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<sup>147</sup> As of December 31, 2023, LDS Church in Fiji claims to represent about 2.7% of the population (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Facts and Statistics”, 2025).

authorities, influencing most aspects of their lives, including marriage, family dynamics, and, in the case of Jehovah’s Witnesses, even medical decisions (Rajtar, 2009). Just as Fijian Ahmadis claim literal interpretations of the Qur’an (Khan, 2015), Jehovah’s Witnesses strive to follow the Bible to the letter (Chryssides, 2022; Rajtar, 2009), and much like Fijian Ahmadis perceive mainstream Muslims as theologically flawed, Jehovah’s Witnesses (and for that matter also Mormons) view mainstream Christian denominations as corrupt and misleading (Chryssides, 2022; Rajtar, 2009; Davies, 2008).

However, unlike Ahmadis and Mormons, who express loyalty to their respective states, Jehovah’s Witnesses adhere to strict non-involvement in state administrations (except for complying with civil laws and paying taxes) (Marley, 2019).<sup>148</sup> Based on my observations, in practice, Fijian Ahmadis in Nadi generally exhibit a low level of civic engagement, which resembles the disengagement of Jehovah’s Witnesses. However, in contrast to Jehovah’s Witnesses, the limited civic engagement of Fijian Ahmadis is not an explicit expression of their community’s values but rather a result of its strategic positioning. The global Ahmadiyya Jama’at seeks broad public acceptance by presenting itself as staunchly pro-establishment while simultaneously directing members toward its own affairs, reinforcing their detachment from broader societal participation (as discussed in Chapter 3). The Khalifa’s emphasis on members’ unwavering loyalty to local national governments, while remaining apolitical, has in Fiji led Ahmadis to prioritise Jama’at affairs over broader civic involvement.

For a comparative analysis of diverse approaches to public and social engagement among global religious minorities in Fiji, it is also relevant to consider the Bahá’í Faith, which differs in many aspects but shares an apolitical stance with Ahmadis and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Unlike groups mentioned above, Bahá’ís do not engage in proselytising nor assert the exclusive possession of spiritual “truth” (Hassall, 2005).<sup>149</sup> Through spiritual and intellectual initiatives within study circles, Bahá’ís foster a sense of communal devotion and belonging, yet without prescribed rituals and welcoming all who seek participation (Fiji Bahá’í Community, 2024). The Bahá’í Faith’s non-clerical leadership and organisational structure<sup>150</sup>,

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<sup>148</sup> Their refusal to vote and pledge allegiance to state authorities has resulted in them being perceived as disloyal by national governments, and in the U.S., Jehovah’s Witnesses’ refusal to salute the national flag led to Supreme Court cases (Marley, 2019).

<sup>149</sup> Although embracing monotheism, to be admitted to the Baha’i Faith, one must acknowledge the validity of all previous religions (Hutter, 2005). Baha’is’ pursuit of integrative spirituality is reflected in the values of the oneness of humanity, gender equality, and education, whereas the political involvement is discouraged due to its perceived divisive aspects (Sabet, 2023).

<sup>150</sup> The Bahá’í Faith operates under a structured leadership, with the Universal House of Justice in Haifa, Israel and views members’ voluntary financial contributions as a spiritual duty (Sabet, 2023).

which enables a form of regional autonomy (Sabet, 2023), sets this group apart from faiths with religious hierarchies that maintain absolute authority over doctrinal interpretations, such as the Khalifa. Kremer (2016) argues that the Bahá'í Faith also encourages grassroots participation in decision-making, aiming to balance central authority with regional autonomy, fostering local diversity, personal responsibility, and collective unity.

Fijian Ahmadis, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Bahá'ís each exemplify distinct approaches to public social engagement as global religious communities striving to maintain unique spiritual identities and degrees of autonomy from nation-states. In Fiji, Ahmadis, guided by the centralised Jama'at leadership, prioritise internal community development over direct local political engagement, which distinguishes them from other religious groups such as Mormons, who engage in national politics, and Bahá'ís, who remain politically neutral but actively contribute to societal initiatives. Although Ahmadis publicly affirm allegiance to the state, in practice, their approach resembles Jehovah's Witnesses in their restrained involvement in state affairs, though Jehovah's Witnesses openly declare their abstention.

Notably, among those groups, Fijian Ahmadis maintain a strong transnational allegiance that transcends national borders, prioritising their own religious community over territorial affiliation to Fiji (similar to Jehovah's Witnesses). The contrast between the civic engagement of Fijian Ahmadis and local Mormons, who have successfully embedded themselves in Fijian public life while maintaining their distinct religious identity, highlights how Fijian Ahmadis' self-imposed public detachment is not simply a result of being a religious minority but a deliberate outcome of their Jama'at's global leadership's strategy. This reinforces the argument that Fijian Ahmadis' limited participation in broader civic affairs is less about their state loyalty and more about preserving religious autonomy within a transnational framework.

### **Reflection**

Cultural theorist Peter Sloterdijk argued that in multicultural interactions, “More communication means at first above all more conflict” (Žižek, 2008, p. 59). In Fiji, limiting exchanges in spiritual matters between local Ahmadis, Muslims, and iTaukei may facilitate coexistence between those groups, though it does not necessarily promote broader societal cohesion. As one Fijian Ahmadi woman living in Sydney told me, she and her Sunni Muslim

friend over there have agreed never to discuss their faith. Otherwise, she said, “*it would be a battle*”, ending their friendship.

While the global Ahmadiyya Jama’at publicly advocates for building bridges through interfaith harmony, its directions prevent Fijian Ahmadis who diligently adhere to them from accepting others’ Fijian spirituality holding the same value. Despite that, Fijian Ahmadis perceive themselves as tolerant and humanistic, highlighting the ambiguity of the Jama’at’s idealised public self-image. Meaningfully engaging in multicultural exchanges might be uncomfortable to some Ahmadis, as doing so requires some level of acceptance of the validity of others’ views despite disagreeing with them (and perhaps even be open to reassess one’s own convictions) - neither of which, some Fijian Ahmadis in Nadi I have met appeared to be willing to do. If Fijian Ahmadis were to sincerely connect with other Fijians to meet them halfway on the interfaith bridge, many would need to re-evaluate their spiritually superior stance and, for instance, accept that Christian or Muslim Fijian believers who adopt seemingly inconsistent, irrational, syncretic or polytheistic approach to their faith, might be just as virtuous and righteous as them - or not.

As I have observed, the belief in theological “truth” appears to be central to Fijian Ahmadis, serving as a profound source of fulfilment. Consequently, for many Fijian Ahmadis, engaging in such a form of interfaith dialogue where all spiritual beliefs are regarded as valid expressions of faith might be as uninteresting as it seems for iTaukei to follow Fijian Ahmadis’ spiritual advice or for Fijian Muslims to accept Ahmadis within Islam. Meanwhile, the Fijian Ahmadis’ stance of rejecting pluralistic views remains in tension with the broader ideals of inclusive tolerance and universal compassion that community members and the Khalifa actively promote in public engagements.

After Imam Tariq lamented the iTaukei’s apathy to his self-appointed mentorship on “proper” adherence to the Bible, he laughed and remarked, “*Fijians are very relaxed about religion because God helped them so much*”. For Imam Tariq, as for many Fijian Ahmadis, attributing the broader Fijian disinterest in Ahmadiyya Islam to others being “blind to the truth” appears to be a convenient explanation, externally, but also to themselves. Remaining on the social and religious margins among Fijians whom they perceive as “unlucky” and “less privileged” than themselves seems to provide some Ahmadis in Fiji with a sense of emotional comfort and space to nurture their belief in their own sacred distinction and chosen status.

Fijian Ahmadis may not fully recognise that their strict religious adherence, critique of local cultural traditions, and primary allegiance to global religious identity may be unappealing to many Fijians, for whom Fiji is their only homeland and social framework. While Fijian Ahmadis often describe other Fijians as "naïve", this assumption reflects their own expectation that, despite distancing themselves from Fijian political, national and cultural identity, and rejecting marriages with partners from local Fijian communities, they would still be widely acknowledged as spiritual and moral authorities.

As such, this discussion broadens understanding of religious minorities in the Pacific by illustrating how firm commitments to global religious identity can complicate local integration efforts. Additionally, it also invites reconsideration of multicultural ideals by showing that public narratives of tolerance may coexist with underlying theological boundaries that subtly reinforce separation rather than foster genuine interfaith engagement.

## CONCLUSION

This research project is shaped by the viewpoints of the Fijian Ahmadis with whom I interacted, and thus reflects not a comprehensive account of the community but an interpretation grounded in particular relationships, experiences, and narratives. In sustaining their distinct religious identity, the Fijian Ahmadis I encountered tend to prioritise religious over national belonging and remain primarily affectively oriented toward the Jama'at headquartered in London in ways and with an intensity that constrain deeper forms of local social integration. This strong orientation often entails moral and spiritual claims of superiority toward both iTaukei Christians and Fijian Muslims - a position that stands in tension with the community's self-perception and public rhetoric of tolerance and universal inclusion.

During my engagement with Fijian Ahmadis, I was often reminded of Carl Gustav Jung's (1969) concept of the shadow, which refers to unconscious elements of the self that encompass traits and impulses deemed inconsistent and often undesirable with one's conscious and social identity. Jungian analyst Robert Johnson (1991) suggested that when a society collectively denies its darker dimensions, the consequences may manifest in the form of intolerance, conflicts and even wars. As he expressed, "to refuse the dark side of one's nature is to store up or accumulate the darkness" (Johnson, 1991, p. 26). Within the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at, this figurative darkness, comprising aspects of communal life that are inconvenient and repressed, such as unacknowledged theological and moral intolerance or degree of societal disengagement, seemed to be concealed beneath aspirational self-descriptions and community slogans such as "Champions of Peace", "Human Rights Advocates" and "Defenders of Islam". Although a number of Fijian Ahmadis sought to follow these principles sincerely in everyday practice, some members appeared to interpret these slogans as immutable features of the community's identity rather than as ideals to strive for.

As such, the virtuous ideals of the Ahmadiyya Jama'at, as professionally articulated by its London-based elite, exist with shadow aspects that become more readily visible in contexts such as Fiji. The shadow of the Fijian Ahmadis' self-image as progressive spiritual leaders manifests in the reproduction of unequal relations of knowledge, spiritual authority, and moral worth, whereby claims to compassion coexist with discourses that marginalise other Fijians. While some Fijian Ahmadis who critically reflect on these assumptions

demonstrate that this shadow is neither uniform nor uncontested, its persistence within the community nevertheless reveals how ideals of moral and rationalist advancement can slip into paternalism and forms of symbolic domination.

Here, I reflect not on the promotion of (idealistic) humanism per se, but on the extent of both collective and members' awareness regarding the tensions that may arise in the absence of sustained critical introspection or meaningful social engagement with broader society. Without such internal processes and social practices, values that the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at publicly encourages risk functioning as hollow signifiers - articulating aspirations that, though rhetorically powerful, may become too far detached from the complexities of lived experience.

The shadow of the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's self-presentation as a unifying force became evident in my research encounters. My observations and analyses of Fijian Ahmadi were strongly shaped by their own emphasis on consistently distancing themselves from "other" Muslims, to the extent that I gradually came to perceive Ahmadi as adhering to a separate faith. Meanwhile, as an outsider researcher, I was repeatedly confronted with an implicit expectation to adopt a pro-Ahmadi position regarding the community's belonging within Islam - a stance that, once made, is likely to be perceived as invalidating beliefs of some Muslims and is therefore inherently contentious. This "impossible choice" exposes the shadow of the Jama'at's unifying self-perception: while presenting itself as inclusive and cohesive, the movement simultaneously produces fundamentally divisive boundaries of spiritual belonging.

Another shadow aspect of the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at can be found in the presence of so-called "lazy members", who do not actively strive to align with communal ideals and who appear to occupy a symbolic space at the periphery of the community's moral imagination. During my fieldwork, I encountered a small number of Fijian Ahmadi who did not seem to wholly conform to the elevated moral expectations and rigorous practices commanded by the community's global headquarters; refraining from attending regular mosque and community events, and/or allegedly not complying on time with compulsory financial contributions. Exploring the lives and spiritual expressions of these so-called "lazy" Fijian Ahmadi may offer meaningful insight into their religious subjectivities and how imperfection is negotiated within this community. Nonetheless, engaging with such members

may prove difficult, particularly for “non-native” researchers, given the community’s emphasis on self-representation through its most visibly committed members.

However, Jung’s concept of the shadow encompasses not only perceived less-desirable traits but also unrealised positive potentials. Among Fijian Ahmadis, I have discerned this “positive shadow” in the community’s insistence on men’s *purdah*. Beneath the hierarchical arrangements - through which the Jama’at maintains traditional gender norms that locate women primarily within the domestic sphere and exclude them from spiritual leadership, including participation in the selection of the Khalifa - the community simultaneously advances a comparatively egalitarian approach in the regulation of modesty. Within the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama’at, norms of modesty, sexual restraint, and self-discipline are imposed upon men as explicit moral obligations rather than left as implicit expectations. In doing so, the Jama’at repositions men as equally accountable for the self-regulation of desire and modest public behaviour, thereby configuring *purdah* as a redistribution of moral obligation across genders. It is therefore not the Ahmadiyya Jama’at’s emphasis on (strict) modesty standards per se, but rather the community’s intentional effort to pursue ethical obligations for modest conduct across genders equally, that constitutes a distinctive normative approach within contemporary global society, including Western contexts. This egalitarian framing nonetheless coexists with everyday discourse among some Fijian Ahmadi women that partially reassigns this burden to women by foregrounding female responsibility for regulating speech, humour, and interaction with men.

Although the Fijian Ahmadis are a potentially vulnerable minority, their external socio-political prospects in Fiji appear somewhat stable. Political scientist Jon Fraenkel (2013) cautiously predicted a decrease in ethnic divisions in Fiji due to significant ongoing demographic changes related to the persistent emigration of Indo-Fijian groups. Fraenkel (2013) suggested that as the demographic majority shifts towards iTaukei, this might depolarise racial tensions, as the general decrease in Indo-Fijian population could raise this

ethnicity's acceptance. Even though this argument is compelling in certain respects, other socio-economic issues are likely to surface.<sup>151152</sup>

Despite the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at's pursuit and preference for preserving the status quo, it is inevitably shaped by the forces of a globalised world, where remaining unchanged - a quality many Fijian Ahmadis proudly attribute to their community - is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. As the Fijian Ahmadiyya Jama'at continues to shrink, driven by emigration and the almost total absence of local conversions, the growing demographic dominance of the iTaukei in Fiji may offer a degree of stability to those Ahmadis who remain. However, this development is also likely to constrain the community's aspirations for expanding the Ahmadiyya message in Fiji, a hope and a purposeful mission expressed by many Fijian Ahmadis.

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<sup>151</sup> Fiji may face multiple social and economic challenges related to the ongoing emigration of economically active Indo-Fijians, the country's rich history of confrontational politics, corruption, but also its increasing involvement in narcotics trade that led some characterise Fiji as "the heart of the trafficking across the Pacific" (Boister, 2021, p. 95; Sousa-Santos, 2022). Geopolitical rivalry between China and the U.S., as both compete for influence in the Pacific, may also hold significance.

<sup>152</sup> Another external development worth noting is the emergence and rise of a new sect, the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (AROPL), which might potentially influence the standing of the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at. While many of AROPL's beliefs - such as its promotion of LGBTQ+ rights - diverge from those of the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at, the two groups, apart from a name, share some striking similarities. AROPL, which presents itself as the embodiment of true Islam and a universal religion, is led by a charismatic figure, Abdullah Hashem, who claims to be divinely appointed to restore justice in the end of times (Introigne & Kotkowska, 2024). Furthermore, like the global Ahmadiyya Jama'at, the ARPOL, headquartered in the UK, has a growing international presence and effectively uses digital and social media platforms to further expand its reach. The similarity in names between those two movements has already confused some international human rights organisations, particularly in cases involving AROPL's members who face marginalisation in certain countries, including Sweden and Thailand, thus increasingly attracting global attention (Introigne & Kotkowska, 2024; McClenaghan & David, 2025). Although I am not aware of any current presence of AROPL's members in Fiji, their possible future emergence could impact the local Ahmadiyya Jama'at's efforts to maintain its identity and public image.

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