

THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF JAMA'AT: HOW THE MUSLIM CONGREGATION SERVES AS A PERFORMANCE ENHANCER IN THE LIVES OF MUSLIMS

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ABSTRACT

This research paper studies the Muslim congregational prayer as a performance performed by Muslims all around the world with a primary focus on how the acts leading to the prayer and the prayer itself serves as a performance enhancer in their daily lives. Performance enhancers [PE] are usually associated with drug use in sports, where athletes illegally use drugs to enhance their performance. However, this paper uses this term to claim that the congregational prayer and/or the acts leading to it serve as PE for Muslims and explains how this impacts the worshippers and the onlookers simultaneously in a spiritual and scientific way. Moreover, it attempts to investigate how the acts leading to the Jamaat such as ablution and clean clothes serve as the PE for the main prayer and how the main prayer fulfils the purpose of being a PE for enhancing the quality of life for the worshippers. Through various theories given by Emile Durkheim, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Andrew Newberg, Jonathan Edwards, Pierre Bourdieu, Richard Schechner, Erika Fischer-Lichte and others on prayer serving as a performance enhancer and a performance itself, this paper attempts to highlight the socio-economic psychological impact of the Islamic congregational prayer on Muslim lives.

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The Muslim congregational prayer, also known as Jama'at in Arabic, is a communal act of worship where Muslims gather around at a Masjid [mosque] five times a day. It is correctly understood that the basic idea of this communal worship is to bring the community together and forge the sense of unity in people living at a particular place. While the purpose of this congregational prayer is the religious obligation on Muslims as given to them by Allah in the Qur'an, in Surah 2, Ayah 43,

وَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتُوا الزَّكَاةَ وَارْكَعُوا مَعَ الرَّاكِعِينَ ٤٣

“And establish prayer and give Zakah and bow with those who bow [in worship and obedience]”

There is more to it, considering how this communal act of worship is something that occurs five times every day. People leave their businesses and homes and prepare for the prayer by cleaning themselves through the systematic act of ablution and wear clean clothes and perfume, and either walk to the mosque or drive to it, depending on the distance it is situated in. It is therefore safe to say that the congregational prayer is a religious performance performed by Muslims, where the mosque is used as the stage and the worshippers as the performers who attempt to connect with Allah together, through this performance oriented communicative practice. The congregational prayer also fulfills the conditions of being a performance with the presence of costume [modest attire, head caps], characters [the people, the leader {Imam}, the onlookers], the stage [the mosque], dialogue [excerpts from the Holy Qur'an] and “a marked beginning” with the Adhan (the call to prayer) and “a marked ending” with salutations (Schechner 2013, 240).

It is important to understand that this religious performance has 4 main characters without whom Jam'aa cannot be performed; the lead character is the Imam, who leads the prayer, the second lead is the Mu'addhin, the caller to the prayer, the announcer, the third are the public who actively participate in the performance, and the fourth are the audience, those who watch the congregational prayer happening, but do not take part in it. The sociology behind congregational prayers is the purpose of adding more to the experiences of people; the ritual of Jama'at is more than just an act of worship, it is also a medium through which a society blends together. It is a public stage, through which even though "in a liminal state, people are freed from the demands of daily life. They feel at one with their comrades; personal and social differences are set aside. People are uplifted, swept away, taken over", thus building characters, setting boundaries, embedding social skills and also resolving issues that people need support for (Schechner 2013, 70). The Imam, the one who leads the prayers is not only judged in the way he recites the Qur'an, but also by his charisma and power of oratory, when it comes to the weekly sermons that take place on Fridays. The interaction between the Imam, the Mu'addhin, the worshippers and the onlookers create a performative spectacle that impacts the surroundings, either by stopping business for a spiritual break or by affecting the hearts of the people who are involved in this communal performance through meaningful dialogues in the form of the recitation of the Qur'an in a melodious voice or through the emotional appeals made to God at the end of each congregation for the people who attended it and the world outside as well. Moreover, the act of coming together at a public space, regardless of status, profession, ethnicity, or educational standing for the purpose of uniting and worshipping one God is in itself an empowering phenomenon that helps people build self-confidence and empathy for their community.

The socio-economic psychological impact of such a regular performance is immense especially when a community ensures its occurrence at prescribed times. It is important to understand that Muslims all over the world know when a particular prayer is being prayed at the mosque as the first

performative act that occurs is the call to prayer [Adhan], which is done by the Mu'addhin [the person appointed for this job] on loudspeakers in various countries such as Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom, and others with Muslim majority populations. The Adhan is usually given in a melodious voice with variations in tune, pitch, intonation and dialect depending on the people living in different areas of the world. The tuneful way the Adhan is given serves as a performance enhancer as it not only attracts the attention of the worshippers while they are busy in their activities but also urges them to reach the mosque for the Jama'at, inducing a physical movement where people suddenly sit up and listen and then pack up whatever they were doing to begin their preparation for the prayer. To understand this concept of a melodious adhan, we could observe it as a parallel to music, which in its own capacity serves as a motivating tool for people at the gym, at the field, while working random tasks, by affecting the brain; according to "some studies, [...] music can trigger various parts of the brain, including the cingulate, amygdala, and hippocampus", which helps our brains "improve connectivity between supplementary motor areas and widespread brain regions such as the posterior temporal cortex, sensorimotor cortex, and occipital cortex" (Kuan 2023, 19). It is crucial to understand that the Adhan is not being equated with music but with musicality, the quality of it being melodious. These rhythmic tools help our brains release good hormones or what is known as dopamine which motivates us towards a particular action such as exercising, completing agendas on our to-do list, cooking a new recipe and, in this case, going to the congregational prayer being held at the mosque. The reason for a melodious adhan is hence for this purpose, whereby a person or a group of persons are called to the prayer by triggering this communal motivation and perception, that enables them to consciously leave their work at hand and move towards the central stage of the mosque.

Every performance has some or complete requirement of costumes and props. These are external elements that improve the performance, help people understand the context behind a plot and allows the characters to fully immerse into their roles as performers. Costumes are thus quite

significant when it comes to performances as it establishes an identity, a sacred commitment to the script and idea that the performers wish to impart. Moreover, these elements also “remain as traces of the performance after its conclusion” helping the audience and the performers reflect on what they just experienced, establishing the importance of the performance (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 75). When it comes to Jama’at, the costumes are never really specific; some people wear trouser and shirt, some wear shalwar kameez (a long shirt, with a loose pant, commonly worn in South Asian countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), some wear Thau’b (a long white garment, mostly worn in the Middle East), some wear an unstitched cloth wrapped around their waists and a shirt (mostly worn in countries like Indonesia and Malaysia), depending on the area they belong from and the cultural ethics of modest wear therein. The beauty of the Muslim congregational prayer is that it is diverse all over the world; people wear what is considered modest and comfortable to pray in. However, there are few regulations for men; one that their ankles should be visible, and if they can, they should have a head cap as well. Now, with the head cap/cover also comes a large variety; some countries have simple head caps, while others have colourful ones, some have scarves, while others have green net caps made of plastic. Each Jama’at is a different performance in every mosque, city, country and yet, the performers are usually in such signifying attires that tell their surroundings that they have just come from the mosque or are going to one. It is interesting to note that “[because] these garments are deeply embedded within the regional cultures of various Muslim-majority countries, they have also become symbols associated with Islamic identity – each piece often carrying unique political, societal or identity-oriented connotations”, which shows how performative the congregational prayer is throughout the globe (*The different types of Muslim men's headwear: Yalla World* 2024). This Muslim identity is established through the similarities in modest clothing that is a prerequisite for Jama’at; every performer dresses themselves as a worshipper, with indicators like the head cap, or the ankle above pants and so on,

and thus establishes a sense of identity as a Muslim. The dress code and the varieties of it serve as a performance enhancer as it enables them to adopt a certain characteristic through an indicator such as these garments and thus perform better in what they are about to participate in as they immerse themselves into the character of a worshipping Muslim.

Along with costumes, many performances have a preparation before their commencement; performers usually engage in various mental, social and physical activities that are designed to help them reignite their vision, strengthen their focus and immerse into their respective goals. Activities such as make up, touch up and exercising by pacing up and down, and even gargling for musicians to ensure that their throats are functioning properly before they go on to the stage are some of the things that performers to perform optimally. According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow (1990, 156), these practices are to enhance one’s focus and helps one to get with the flow of the work ahead of them. This idea of immersing oneself into a character is also reinforced by Pierre Bourdieu who correctly explains how the performer’s habits and intentional movements prepare them to interact seamlessly within the “game” of the performance, bringing unconscious skills to conscious control as according to him, the “practices produced by the habitus, as the strategy-generating principle” helps people in general by giving them the boost they need to tackle a particular situation or complete a specific task (1977, 72-73). These repetitive habits before a performance thus become a part of the performance itself, even if it is not performed on the main stage. This said, the act of ablution before every prayer, be it congregational or privately performed, comes under the category of Bourdieu’s *habitus*¹, as it is a ritual that is associated directly with prayer; it is not only obligatory on the Muslims to wash themselves through certain instructed steps that include washing their faces, hands and arms, feet, and passing their wet hands on their head, ears and the nape of their necks, it is also a repetitive act that people do throughout the day as they prepare for

¹ Habitus: How individual and social practices are formed by ingrained patterns of thought, behaviour, and perception shaped by one’s environment and experiences.

the five obligatory prayers. Just like cleaning the stage and theatre before a performance is a performance enhancer which allows actors, producers and directors and other technical staff to focus properly on their main agenda, the ablution before the main congregation is also a performance enhancer, that helps one fully immerse into their roles as worshippers by becoming clean and thus void of any distractions such as dirt or bad odour (Schechner 2013, 244). The routine steps of the ablution help them fulfil not just one of the requirements of the main prayer, but also helps them follow a set of synchronised steps which enhances their discipline and sense of cleanliness as well. A study, titled, “Ablution (Wudu) health benefits (HBs) through comparison nasal–cavity (NC) bacterial–content (BC) with gold–standard (GS) at high–altitude (HA) area, Taif, KSA” proves this through practical experimentation that performing ablution five times a day helps reduce bacterial content in the body, especially the nasal area, thus preventing bacterial infections and other harmful diseases (M Sabra 2018, 332-334).

In a performance, unity and coordination with each performer is very important to ensure a synchronised performance. This synergy between performers helps the entire performance to create the best impact, and to impart what it meant to impart in the best manner. Performing together in any kind of performance, be it a musical choir or a religious congregation brings people of all ethnicities, professions and lifestyles to come together and unite towards one particular goal. This reinforces how public activities help people make sense of the world they are living in and the cultures they share with one another as these communal performances serve as learning environments for not just the participants but also the onlookers (Durrant 2003, 45-46). After ablution, the worshippers gather around in the stage finally; the lead character, the Imam stands in front, and the rest of the worshippers line up behind him in straight rows, shoulder to shoulder, leaving no gaps in between. The rows are meant to be facing the direction of the Kabah², and are necessary to be filled in as mentioned in a hadith:

عَنِ ابْنِ عُمَرَ عَنِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ أَقِيمُوا الصُّفُوفَ وَخَازُوا بَيْنَ الْمَتَاكِبِ وَسُدُّوا الْخَلَلَ وَلْيُنُوا بِأَيْدِي إِخْوَانِكُمْ وَلَا تَذَرُوا فُرُجَاتٍ لِلشَّيْطَانِ وَمَنْ وَصَلَ صَفًّا وَصَلَهُ اللَّهُ وَمَنْ قَطَعَ صَفًّا قَطَعَهُ اللَّهُ

‘Abdullah ibn ‘Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) narrated that the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “Straighten the rows, stand shoulder to shoulder and fill the gaps; be gentle with their hands of your brothers, and do not leave gaps for the Shaytaan. Whoever connects a row, Allah will connect him (with His mercy), and whoever breaks a row, Allah will cut him off (from His mercy)” (Dawood and Al Khattab 2008, 666).

This method of uniting the public in equal rows is exemplary; the reason why performances, especially those performed on a communal basis have such widespread impact on people, whether they are passively or actively involved in them or not. It is important to understand that “Prayer occurs in social networks linking performers communally across time and space. Though localized in individual bodies, prayer is not only personal but also social,” which not only serves as binding phenomenon for a particular community, but also behaves as a performance enhancer, by strengthening public relations and embedding trust and confidence in each individual (FitzGerald 2021, 5).

Every performance has a beginning, a middle and an end. These periods could be managed within a minute or less, or within hours till the main objective of the performance is achieved. In a repertory performance, one observes that both the performers and the spectators are familiar with it, even with some of the dialogues in it. In such cases, it is understood that such performances have a repetitive streak in a particular community. It is through such performances that the concept of “feedback loops” come into being, where “[a]s a self-organizing system, as opposed to an autonomously created work of art, it [the performance] continually receives and integrates

² The Kaaba, sometimes referred to as al-Ka'ba al-Musharrafa, is a stone building at the center of Islam's most important mosque and holiest site, the Masjid al-Haram in Makkah, Saudi Arabia. It is the direction towards which Muslims all over the world face when they pray.

into that system newly emerging, unplanned, and unpredictable elements from both sides of the loop [performers on one side and spectators on the other]” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 8). This enlightens why every human interaction serves as a performance, as every time the performance is repeated, there is something new to be learnt, something better to be voiced, something more to be observed. In a Jama’at, once the Imam begins the prayer with “Allahu Akbar!” in a loud voice and raising his hands to his ears and then placing them on his navel, right hand on top of left hand, the performers behind follow him, by raising their hands and placing their hands on their navels, right on top of left, saying the same phrase but quietly. There are some particular sentences or incantations (also called Dua in Arabic) that are read quietly both by the Imam and the worshippers before the Imam begins reciting the Holy Qur’an in a melodious manner, beginning with Surah Al-Fatihah (the first surah in the book, titled, “The Opening”) and then recites from any part of the Qur’an. Apart from this particular piece of the performance, which can vary according to the Imam’s choices, every other dialogue in the whole performance is the same, till the prayer ends with salutations. There is Ruku, which is bowing, which as soon as the Imam bows, the performers behind him also bow and there are two Sajdahs, which is prostration, which when the imam prostrates, the performers behind him also do the same, following each of his moves in synchrony. These movements are repeated according to the amount of Rakahs or parts that the particular prayer has; some prayers have 2 Rakahs where they repeat the whole cycle 2 times, some have 3, some have 4. The minimum amount of Rakahs is 2 and the maximum is 4. It is interesting to note that during the month of Ramadan, many of the performers who have memorized the Qur’an know the piece that the Imam chooses to recite, once he begins reciting it. Or if they have been following the prayer since Ramadan began, they know beforehand what he will recite that day, as it is customary for Muslims to finish the whole Qur’an in 30 days, in the month of Ramadan. They do so by dividing the Qur’an into 30 parts, and recite one part every day. Since this is a known phenomenon, almost all the worshippers and the spectators become aware of

that part of the performance as well during this month. Apart from the repertory performance of the Jama’at during the month of Ramadan, on every other month, “the performance remains unpredictable and spontaneous to a certain degree”, as the Imam chooses from any part of the Qur’an to recite from (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 38).

Moreover, the constant evolution and integration of better vocals, tunes, increasing the quantity of Qur’an recited or decreasing it in case there are ill people who cannot stand or sit for too long amidst the audience, the improvement of the quality of the recitation and so on adds to the concept of a feedback loop present in the performance of the Jama’at, which categorizes as a repertory performance as it is continually performed at various places in the world. Another thing that is different and spontaneous in this performance is what happens after the Imam ends the prayers with salutations. After reading a few phrases in praise of Allah, he turns and begins praying for the worshippers and the whole world in general. It is during this performance that the performers become the audience as the Imam takes the central stage, where he displays his oratory skills in an articulate manner. This is also the part of the performance where the audience now becomes active, as they respond “Ameen” to his prayers, and also put in requests to him to pray for anything specific that they need, be it a prayer for someone’s parent who is admitted in the hospital, or someone’s child who is being difficult and so on and so forth. It is important to remember that the whole performance of the Jama’at included body movements such as bowing and prostrating, where the frontal lobe of the head is involved; many researches “[implicate] the frontal lobes in the modulation of emotion such that the frontal lobes might be particularly important in the development of empathy and compassion”, thus perhaps helping the worshippers form such emotional values in them (Newberg 2010, 172). When seen in a scientific manner, this performance hence also shows the unity in the community; the Imam knows about the difficulties that some of the members in that society are facing and he informs the community about it with prior permission, and gathers help and support for those members who are unable to find solutions on their own. In some

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mosques, the Imams also collect money as donations for various causes; some collect it for a poor, sick member of the community, some do it for the expansion or improvement of the mosque and religious school facilities, some do it for national disaster victims who are in need of aid and so on. Due to the constant exercise of the frontal lobe and the rhythmic synchrony of the prayer in a communal set up, these performative activities after the Jama'at serve as PE as it boosts the performance of the worshippers as active members of their community, where they all join together to better each other's lives and build their moral compasses unanimously.

In addition to the Jama'at as the congregational prayer for Muslims in a mosque, just like the Christian church, the mosque also serves as a community centre; where events such as Nikah ceremony (wedding oaths), Janazah (Funerals) and other such activities take place though voluntarily as people might choose to do these activities outside a mosque as well. Emile Durkheim (1995, 42) rightly defines the church in this way, "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things... which unite into one single moral community called a Church". This definition can also be applied to the mosque, the central stage in the entire performance of congregational prayers and other activities as it highlights its function in establishing the sense of social cohesion and collective consciousness in people. Nikah ceremonies remind the people about the importance of marriage and their responsibilities regarding this new beginning of their lives while funerals remind the people of how short life is and that death will come to all thus awakening their conscience and sense of being. Moreover, these very two events nurture humanitarian sentiments in people, as they are included in social activities and are made a part of the community in itself. These often motivate people to improve their lifestyle, boosting their performances in their daily dealings as they realize that there are more important things in life while they are still living and that death is a new beginning for any Muslim³. Such activities thus act as PEs in their lives, helping them enhance their performance as community members and as

Muslims in general, establishing a stronger sense of identity and belonging.

The purpose of PEs is to ensure that one's performance in any particular task is optimal; to see the congregational prayer and the acts leading to it as PEs in Muslim lives is not far-fetched. In a survey conducted among 26 grown men on the impact of attending their prayers in Jama'at, they were asked the following questions:

1. Do you pray 5 times in the masjid?
2. Why do you go to pray in Jama'at?
3. How does praying with the Jamaat affect your mental health?
4. How does praying in Jamaat affect your social life?
5. How does praying in Jamaat affect your economic situation?
6. How does praying in Jamaat affect your physical health?
7. How has praying in Jamaat affected you as a community member?
8. Participating in Jamaat helps you participate in events like Nikah, Funerals, Khatm e Quran etc. How does participating in such events help you?
9. Imagine you are a man who prays 5 times in the Masjid and also spends time in the Masjid after each prayer for a certain period. How does this quiet moment in the solitude help you as a Muslim? (Hafiz 2024)

The responses to these questions highlight how significant praying in congregation is; it acting as a performance enhancer in people's lives by helping them find strength in unity, solutions to their problems, having a sense of security, increase in productivity, improvement of overall mental and physical health and so on is the crux of this research paper. Most of the respondents to this survey are regular in their participation in Jama'at while others only go to the mosque when it is Friday or when there are social events such as funeral prayers.

Those who go to the mosque daily have had seen significant improvements in their mental health; from battling the feeling of loneliness to feeling as though they belonged somewhere to finding peace in the solitude in the mosque, after prayers. Most

³ Muslims believe that death is a new beginning, as they believe in the hereafter, heaven and hell.

responses are in favour of the fact that praying with the congregation gives them peace and helps them recuperate from their tedious worldly affairs by giving them time to reflect amongst many others who are possibly going through similar things. Some have also commented that it helps them build a sense of discipline as they meticulously follow the Imam's instructions while praying and uphold a sense of commitment to their religious ideals. This also shows how praying in Jama'at does not only act as a PE in itself but also outside the Jama'at, where people's lives are enhanced to some degree or the other. When it comes to their physical health, most responded in a positive way; some walk to their local mosque which gives them some time to engage in this exercise, while many equate the praying act itself as yoga of some kind, an exercise of bowing, prostrating, and sitting a certain way helps them stretch their muscles and thus improves their blood circulation. Apart from this, praying is also seen "as a type of stretching and isometric contractions exercise. These movements have an effect directly and indirectly on the whole organism," which improves posture, increases the intake of oxygen and enhances the functioning of the respiratory, blood flow, endocrine and excretory system. Moreover, it also helps to strengthen muscles, and also has positive impact on joints, eyes and other body parts. Most importantly, due to the use of the frontal lobe, the accumulated electrical charges in the body are released as well as the head prostrates on the earth (İmamoğlu 2016). These respondents have merged all of these benefits by saying how much going to the mosque and praying in Jama'at have improved their physical health by ensuring physical movement and their mental health by giving them the feeling of security and oneness in each other.

On responding to the question on how praying in Jama'at affects their social lives, there are a variety of responses; while some have said that because of their introverted nature, they usually do not talk with people much and just go to the mosque, pray and return, others have said that they get a chance to meet new people and build familiarity with one another. Some of the respondents have commented on how being a part of Jama'at also keeps them informed about the happenings in the community and gives them a chance to extend their services or

aid of any kind to those in need. It helps them become active members in their locality. One of the respondents said that he feels less anxious and more social when he is among people of his age at the mosque and is able to find relaxation as they all gather for the same cause. On a social level, many of these men feel connected to their fellow members and build a relationship of mutual respect and bonding over the daily performative act of the congregational prayers. This same effect is reinforced when they answer the question of how praying in Jama'at has affected them as a community member and how participating in events like Nikah and Janazah affect them. Most of the respondents have commented on how participating in such events not only help them interact with people but also boosts their self-reflection and sense of discipline in life. Because of these communal activities, they tend to make an effort to know more people and also try to immerse themselves in the company of good people, so that they can learn the Qur'an and know about their religion better. This shows how the entire performative act of the Jama'at acts as a PE in many Muslim lives. Apart from these responses, only a few have commented on how they don't really participate actively in these activities due to either their introverted nature or the lack of such activities being held in their local mosques.

When it comes to the economic effects on their lives due to praying in Jama'at, the respondents have shown a sentimental approach; praying in the congregation gives them a sense of support from God and gives them hope that their businesses, jobs and other economic sources will flourish if Allah is pleased with them. Most of them leave their work behind to attend prayers at the mosque and they say that it helps them remember that this life is not to be prioritised over the afterlife. Because of this, their economic situation is not affected in any adverse way, rather it seems as though they have more time and more blessings in what they earn due to praying in Jama'at. Others have commented on how due to the prayer times they have to leave their shops at times when there are customers/peak hour. This does sometimes make them feel as if they are losing valuable income but since they prioritise prayers, they don't think much about it. Rather, they take it as a challenge for

themselves to see if they can fight the urge to ignore the prayers for the worldly gains or whether they can fight against it. Most of them have commented on how due to the discipline that Jama'at integrates in their characters, their economic situation has improved as they try to implement those disciplines in their work ethics as well thus improving productivity and income. Some have reflected on how praying in Jama'at helps them recuperate from worldly affairs such as inflation and other economic downfalls, which gives them time to find solution amidst their peers at the mosque and generate ideas as to how their situation could be improved. Some have realized that due to their regular participation in Jama'at, their economic situation has improved vastly due to their belief that asking from Allah solves everything and that obeying Him has brought blessings in their lives, by helping them mentally, physically and thus economically as they are able to work better and focus better.

In conclusion, it is to be understood that Salah as a performance and a performance enhancer shows us how religious beliefs and basic etiquettes in human beings help us function better in a society by building discipline, embedding morality, bonding communities and strengthening personal and communal relationships. Moreover, Jama'at as a PE has scientific benefits associated with its leading acts such as ablution or walking to the mosque or praying itself, where the body and mind are given stimuli to release good hormones and reduces risks such as developing nasal bacteria or muscle disorders. By not only affecting their mental and physical health, the congregational prayer serves as a central stage in the lives of Muslims where it embodies the duty of ensuring social cohesion and collective consciousness in people who are active participants in this repertory performance. Even for those who do not engage directly by interacting with their fellow members much, Jama'at helps them inculcate a silent form of bonding and community in themselves, giving them peace of mind which is crucial in the enhancement of any performance.

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