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Transnationality, Community and the Digital: Cultural Regrouping and the COVID-19 Pandemic—A Comparative Ethnographic Case Study of a Muslim and a Hindu Community in Germany

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Abstract: In this article, we discuss the results of two ethnographic case studies on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on a Sunni Muslim DITIB mosque community and an Indian Hindu temple community in Hesse, Germany, conducted in the context of the ReCoVirA research project. The two cases were selected to represent established and less established religious communities. We connect our research to the RSST-Approach to understand the proactive aspect of religious communities and the concept of the refiguration of religion to describe the impacts of the shift to the digital during the pandemic on religious communities. Cultural regrouping emerges as a framework for understanding the changes to the observed socio-religious milieu and diaspora communities during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Muslim; Hindu; minority; Germany; COVID-19; ethnography; RSST; refiguration; cultural regrouping; digitalization

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted religious life, most visibly during the lockdowns. Yet, when we began our research in the summer of 2023 in two religious communities, one a DITIB[1] mosque based in a rural small-town and the other being Indian Hindu temple in a large German city, visible evidence of the pandemic had almost disappeared. Only some markers on the floor and signs advising the need to wear a mask were left, which everybody seemed to ignore. But did the challenging societal experience leave marks in the everyday life of religious communities? Were there persistent changes in religious communities that were triggered during the pandemic beyond these visible remnants?

In the European research project 'Religious Communities in the Virtual Age' (ReCoVirA), we try to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious communities, and the associated growing use of the digital. Based on the cooperation of universities in the United Kingdom, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Slovenia, Poland and Germany, we aspire to develop a comparative European perspective on the challenges and changes in religious communities. In each country, three religious communities were selected for ethnographic research, representing a range of relative positions within the national context: one majority community, one well-established minority community and one less-established minority community. The ethnographic approach is accompanied by three joint research strands: a social media analysis of discourses on religious communities

and COVID-19 restrictions in the early stages of the pandemic on Twitter/'X', a secondary analysis of existing survey data on religion and the pandemic, and an aesthetic analysis of digital ritual during and after the pandemic using methods from performance studies. In the ethnographic strands, our aim is to develop a shared understanding of the pandemic's impact on religious communities within European societies.

This article gives insights into the outcomes of ethnographic research on the minority religious communities from the German sample. The decision to include a mosque community as a well-established minority and a Hindu temple as a less established community was made in order to create a diverse but comparable sample at the level of the international project and to build on existing research and extend it to other religious communities. Other religious communities could have been chosen for both categories, for example, the well-established Jewish community in Germany. However, the Muslim community was chosen because it has been in the focus of public debate during the pandemic (Emmerich 2021). We chose the German Hindu community as a less established religious minority community to extend the research on the impact of COVID-19 on religious communities to a religious community that has not been extensively researched in the response to COVID-19 in the German context. Early in the ethnographic process, it became evident that they encountered distinct experiences compared to the majority community in our sample. The specific nature of these groups allows for targeted analysis during the assessment procedure.

In the first section, we outline the methodological strategy we developed in order to address the challenge of reconstructing changes caused by the pandemic in an ex post facto design (D. T. Campbell and Stanley 1963). This conceptualization was necessary, because at the start of the field research it became apparent that the field was transitioning into a post-pandemic state marked by pandemic restrictions to religious practices. Therefore, the pandemic had to be considered as an environmental factor that would have predominantly preceded the study. In the introduction of the two case studies, we describe the structure of the communities and tendencies attributed to pre-pandemic times. Based on these descriptions, the following three sections delineate the interrelationship between these pre-pandemic tendencies and the pandemic based on the narrations and context given by the community members.

Although the two case studies are largely distinct in these sections, the discussion chapter draws on comparative dimensions indicated in the analysis and discusses theoretical perspectives on the social forms of milieu and diaspora, as well as the concept of cultural regrouping. From there, a discussion derives about the meaningfulness of the fundamental categories of established and less established religious communities.

2. Theoretical Background and Framework

The majority of research on religious communities and COVID-19 in Germany has been focused on the Protestant Church and to a lesser extent on the Roman Catholic Church (Hörsch 2020, 2021; Reimann and Sievert 2021; Rebenstorf and Schlag 2023; Schlag and Nord 2021; Schlag et al. 2023; Linder 2023; Wunder et al. 2023), whereas research on minority religious communities centers on the Muslim community. For example, Simone Pfeifer explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gendered spaces in mosques in an ethnographic approach. She argues that the dynamics of gendered spaces have to be understood "as exemplary of ongoing debates over gendered Muslim spaces and publicness in Germany" (Pfeifer 2021, p. 1). Arndt Emmerich's exploration of the strategies of Islamic associations in Germany for navigating the COVID-19 pandemic came to the conclusion that associations deployed a rigid and paternalistic strategy, while independent mosques used a more flexible approach (Emmerich 2021). A netnography of the public presence of mosques conducted by Samira Tabti provides an overview of the use of digital

technologies in German mosques. Her findings show that the pandemic increased the use of digital technology in mosques and opened them up for engagement with digital publics (Tabti 2020, 2022).

Drawing from existing scholarship in the fields of (digital) religion and COVID-19, the research project ReCoVirA identified four theoretically founded areas of interest: conceptions of religious place (Edelman et al. 2021; Schlag et al. 2023), community (Hammer and Swartz 2021), authority (Cheong 2012; H. A. Campbell 2020; Golan and Martini 2022), and public life (Addo 2021; Yares and Avni 2021).

In this article, we explore the impact of the pandemic on two religious communities with different societal statuses, following up on previous research that suggests that the experience differs between religious communities and their members (Hillenbrand et al. 2023, pp. 23–28; Duncan and Höglund 2021).

So far, minority religious communities in Germany have been compared to majority religious communities, e.g., in Emmerich's analysis of the strategy of Islamic associations (Emmerich 2021). In this article, we compare two minority religious communities, their experiences, and responses to the pandemic directly, adding to the study of minority religious communities and religious pluralization in Germany (Klinkhammer and Neumaier 2020) and the COVID-19 pandemic with the following question: how did the status of the establishment of a minority religious community mediate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The underlying assumption of the project is that the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, following Erin F. Johnston et al. (2022), can be understood with the concept of unsettled cultural times (Swidler 1986). Ann Swidler understands unsettled cultural times in contrast to settled cultural times as "situations in which new strategies of action are being developed and tried out" (Swidler 2001, p. 89). These new strategies are set in the media environment of the Virtual Age, characterized by increased connectivity to the point of the permanent possibility of connection across space (Hepp and Hasebrink 2018, p. 19). Several studies conducted during the pandemic have indicated that the use of digital technology by religious communities has increased (Schlag et al. 2023; Tabti 2022). This perspective organically connects to the religious social shaping of technology approach proposed by Heidi Campbell (2010). The RSST approach, as an extension of the social shaping of technology (SST), tries to describe and understand the religious aspects (values, priorities, and narrated traditions of media use) of how communities shape technologies by theological and value-based negotiations of their use, limitations, and adaptations (H. A. Campbell 2010). In his revision of the RSST approach, Stefan Gelfgren demonstrates that the religious social shaping exists in the context of a "secular and mediatized society" (Gelfgren 2015, p. 121). Religious communities act as what Hall and colleagues conceptualize as *media settlers*. They negotiate the use of digital media, which were created by *digital pioneers* for other purposes, and strive to adopt them for their agenda (Hall et al. 2023, p. 30).

Conversely, it is possible to infer that the study of media use, and negotiations in a broad sense, can reveal something about community structure, as well as the maintenance and transformation of said community in its socio-technological context. While the RSST approach tends to show continuities, the notion of the 'refiguration of religion', introduced by Hubert Knoblauch, theorizes that shifts caused by postmodernity and digitization will impact religious figurations on a micro-, meso- and macro-level (Knoblauch 2020). The focus of the article will be the religious community as the meso-level in the multi-level crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic (Yendell et al. 2021). The meso-level allows us to understand the religious communities as corporate actors that strategically use different media to sustain and expand their community while maintaining authority structures (Hall et al. 2023, p. 30).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework utilized to integrate these two theoretical perspectives is the concept of 'cultural regrouping'. Cultural regrouping is described by Juli L. Gittinger as grasping the dynamics of community building in a migrant or diasporic context (Gittinger 2021, p. 68). Gittinger conceptualizes cultural regrouping via the dynamics associated with how "when a cultural group is no longer confined to the singular geographical place of the motherland, digital space represents itself as an ideal site for the recovery of and connection with other members of the diasporic community with whom they imagine a cultural kinship" (Gittinger 2021, p. 68).

In the description of the two case studies, we will elaborate on the pre-pandemic social form as a stabilized form of 'cultural regrouping' of these religious communities. From the coding of the material, the notions of 'milieu' and 'diaspora' emerged as categories to understand the social form of the communities. The term 'milieu' refers to a group set apart from other groups by shared values, lifestyles, mentalities, and relationships. Religious milieus are defined by having religion as an observable factor of group cohesion (Breuer 2020). The understanding of diaspora follows the work of Laura Candidatu and Sandra Ponzanesi, who embrace the definition of William Safran (1991) as a theoretical background for their concept of 'digital diaspora', which includes "different types of migratory groups—expatriates, refugees, minorities, etc". (Candidatu and Ponzanesi 2022, p. 263). The concept allows us to understand the adaption of digital media by diasporic communities in "progressive efforts to maintain and reproduce shared cultural norms outside the homeland, in a simultaneous attempt to build new hybrid spaces of belonging" (Candidatu and Ponzanesi 2022, p. 264). Candidatu's and Ponzanesi's concept of digital diaspora is developed as framework with which to study the role of digital media in mediating these agendas of diasporic communities (Candidatu and Ponzanesi 2022, p. 265); subsequently, it emerges as a theoretical framework with which to understand the cultural regrouping in the Hindu temple case study.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

Our ethnographic case studies (Breidenstein et al. 2015) consist of participant observations, interviews, and a netnography (Kozinets 2010) of digital media used by the respective communities. The interviews were semi-structured with an open question from each area of interest (place, community, authority, and public life), as well as room for open questions that took into account observations from participant observations and netnography. The three types of materials were triangulated so that they informed each other. In a theoretical sampling process, we strived to complement results from these material types with each other. The areas of interest functioned as 'local' concepts, that could be found to be unimportant, and were reflected through theoretical sensitivity (Glaser and Strauss 2017, pp. 45–46). Therefore, we remain open to the significance of the empirical material.

The field structure and its relevancies thus guided the sampling process and produced two distinct samples of ethnographic data. The mosque case study consists of 15 interviews conducted in German, 6 documented participant observations, and a netnography of the mosque's Facebook profile, which predates and documents the times of the pandemic. The interviewees included current and former mosque leaders, one of the mosque's imams, and members, and were selected by the current president of the mosque. They ranged in age from 20 to 70+. The length of the interviews varied from short 10 min interviews to 30 min, depending on the interviewee's knowledge of German and their role in the mosque community, with interviews with religious and leadership figures lasting longer. The material from the temple case study has a stronger focus on participant observations.

In total, 17 field notes were compiled that also documented several short interviews and conversations. Additionally, three formal interviews were conducted, one in English, one in German, and one where a member of the temple community acted as a translator from Hindi to German. The formal interviews in the temple were organized with the help of a long-time member and volunteer at the temple. The formal interviews were conducted with middle-aged interviewees, a long-time member, a volunteer, a member of the committee, and the temple priest. These interviews ranged in length from 30 min to an hour. Informal, often short conversations supplemented formal interviews by broadening the sample to include former leadership, first time and repeat visitors, and volunteers, ranging in age from 20 to 60+. The netnographic aspect of the temple community includes its outlets on Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp.

The analysis and coding of the interviews and participant observations accompanied the data collection process. After the conclusion of the field phase, the clearing up of the field notes, and the transcription of the interviews, theorizations were built from the data following the Grounded Theory Coding style, which develops concepts and theory inductively by iteratively coding the data (Corbin and Strauss 2008, pp. 50–53). From the coding emerged the key concepts of maintaining and expanding the milieu structure for the mosque case study and adapting to the changing necessities of the diasporic community for the temple case study. The two case studies were then contrasted and we theorized on the relevance of the status of religious communities in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.2. Field Access

Field access to the DITIB Sunni Muslim mosque was achieved through request at the regional office of DITIB for Hesse, which established contact with a mosque open to participation in the research project. The ethnographic study at the mosque community commenced in mid-September 2023 and concluded in December the same year. The contact with the Indian Hindu temple community was facilitated by a local cooperation partner of the research project, the 'Rat der Religionen Frankfurt' (Council of Religions). Due to difficulties in scheduling the interviews, the research period for the temple community, which began in mid-June 2023, was extended until early February 2024. These difficulties were linked to a changes in the temple committee during the research process.

4. Religious Minority Communities in Motion—Two Case Descriptions

4.1. DITIB Mosque Community

The DITIB mosque is situated in a medium-sized Hessian city, with rural surroundings. The mosque traces its roots back to the workers who migrated to Germany due to the 'Anwerbevertrag' (recruitment agreement) in 1961 (Lemmen 2017, p. 313). This background is still formative for the community, as some of this first generation, now at the end of their work life or in early retirement, are still members of the mosque. The mosque changed its location several times, using multifunctional spaces, before plans were made in the 2000s to build a new, permanent mosque. After conflict-laden negotiations with the municipal administration and council,[2] which the research literature discusses under the term 'Moscheekonflikte' (Schmitt 2003), the mosque was given its current location in a commercial area. The formation of the mosque community in the context of work migration in Germany's industrial society at the time is evident in another respect: many members of the mosque still work at a local factory, which ties the mosque to the factory and its working hours. This is evident in the practice of postponing the Friday prayer by a few minutes, thus allowing members who are employed at the factory to join the prayer during their lunch break. As the president of the mosque notes in an informal conversation about the digital Islamic prayer time clock hanging in the mosque, the adaptation of Friday

prayers may soon become obsolete due to the declining percentage of members employed at the factory. At the same time, shifting economic conditions and the integration of new generations into the German education system—resulting in greater fluency in German than in Turkish and aspirations in higher education (Behr and Kulacatan 2022, p. 74)—reflect broader changes within the community. The mosque took the initiative of appointing a new, young committee even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2021, the members of this board have all been under 30 years of age and they lead the mosque community, which is organized as a registered association ('e.V.') under German law. Furthermore, they have integrated language-learning apps and movies into the Qur'anic school curriculum offered by the mosque, utilizing touchscreen technology to address evolving pedagogical requirements.

An additional artifact, situated in the prayer room of the mosque, attests to another process of change in the community—a screen displaying the German translation of the *hutbe*, the sermon held during the Friday prayer by the imam. The screen was installed in 2012, as a response to an increase in members without Turkish language skills. An unintended use of the screened translation is that Turkish members of the second and third generation also admit to sometimes following the *hutbe* by reading the translation. The mosque also manages a Facebook account that posts in Turkish and German, providing information about the mosque activities to members and engaging with the public image of the mosque and Islam in Germany.

The decisions concerning the screen reflect the social structure of the mosque. Despite the integration of Muslims of other ethnicities, the mosque belonging to a German–Turkish mosque association has kept the Turkish community at the center, a tendency observed and documented in other research (Halm et al. 2012, p. 59; Tezcan 2016, p. 176; Breuer 2020, p. 98). The committee still consists of members of the Turkish community, the primary language remains Turkish, and the mosque, both as a building and outside of Friday prayers, is used by the Turkish community. The formative established cultural regrouping of the mosque community exhibits the social form of a religious milieu; religion's role as a central element of cohesion is observable (Breuer 2020), and Muslims of other ethnicities are integrated. The cultural regrouping is molded by the conditions experienced and shaped by the migrant community. The work migration context and the employment at a local factory develop local ties and a shared socio-economic status. Language, ethnicity, and religion form a shared identity and transnational relationships, which Breuer identifies as central factors of milieu cohesion (Breuer 2020, p. 91). The conflict surrounding the construction of the mosque, experiences of anti-Muslim sentiment and attacks/hate crimes, as well as the legal status as a registered association is testament to the current process of establishment as a religious milieu (Breuer 2020).

4.2. Indian Hindu Temple Community

The temple is situated within a commercial area of a large German city. Upon approaching the temple, there are few indications of its function; instead, a flag is hoisted on the roof of the building, displaying the symbol and the name of the temple association on it. The temple is structured as a registered organization ('e.V.'). Its origins can be traced back to the second half of the 1980s. This time frame aligns with Martin Baumann's estimation, which places the establishment of Hindu temples in Germany during the late 1980s. Prior to this, only worship places in private houses existed, and had been in use since the beginning of the 1950s (Baumann 2008, p. 234). At first, the temple was organized by a Hindu organization, but later it became an independent association. In the self-understanding of the temple committee, the temple functions not only as a religious organization, but also as a cultural institution, offering language and dance classes.

The initial demographic profile of the temple's membership, according to interviewees, was shaped by migration from the northern part of India. Until January 2022, the temple was managed by a team of volunteers who oversaw the organization, educational, and ritual tasks of the temple. Older members of the temple community assumed the role of religious authorities, providing guidance for rituals and spiritual counselling on matters pertaining to health and relationships. In January 2022, the temple employed a priest from India, who had previously worked in a different Hindu temple in Germany. This resulted in a shift in the division of responsibilities within the temple. The priest is now the religious authority and expert, bearing responsibility for conducting the rituals within the temple, and providing *puja* (ceremonial worship rituals) at homes and businesses. Concurrently, the temple committee serves as the organizational entity responsible for the maintenance and development of the temple property, in addition to determining the manner in which the temple is utilized by renting it out to other parties for the performance of Hindu rituals and marriages. Furthermore, the committee determines which holy days are celebrated and to what extent. The temple priest is the only person employed by the temple, while the members of the committee are volunteers elected to their respective positions. The organization and performance of rituals is carried out by non-elected volunteers, who are now advised by the temple priest, who also advises the temple committee.

During the initial visit, interlocutors in the temple community in an impromptu group discussion used the metaphor of 'one leg in Germany, one leg in India' to describe the diasporic structure of the community prior to the pandemic. The diasporic experience was marked by having a community in India and in Germany; while life in Germany was linked to work, family and religious life were associated with India. Associations with the latter was maintained through frequent travel and visits.

5. Experiences of the Pandemic

In response to the pandemic, both communities were obliged to temporarily suspend their activities in accordance with the regulations governing the assembly of large groups (Lämmlin and Beck 2023).

Both communities report that their respective religious traditions were readily adaptable to rituals conducted at home. The members of the temple community conducted *puja* at home altars, while members of the mosque performed all prayers at home, including the Friday prayer.

In the interviews, respondents from the membership and leadership narrated their experience of the pandemic to explain how their communities responded to the pandemic and how they related to the response. While the majority of interviewees and interlocutors in the temple community provided only cursory descriptions of the pandemic, the experience of the pandemic was a major topic in the interviews with the mosque community.

5.1. 'It Was a Completly Unfamiliar Situation'—Accounts of the Experience of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Mosque

The quote from the current mosque president provides a succinct summary of a pervasive motif of the pandemic experience in the mosque community, namely that of feeling strange and unfamiliar. This sense of unfamiliarity is linked to the disruption of religious life. A significant number of interviewees have stated that, despite being able to fulfill their prayer obligations at home, they experienced a sense of loss due to the absence of the communal aspect, the physical presence, and the atmosphere of the mosque. Moreover, the implementation of contact restrictions resulted in the disruption of communal life. Some members explained in their interviews that COVID-19 had shattered their expectation that Germany would never be impacted by a pandemic. The subsequent

overburdening of the German healthcare and crisis management system seems to have led to a decline in trust of German institutions, reflecting a general trend of declining trust during the COVID-19 pandemic (COSMO 2022). In this case, it is also connected to a transnational experience of the pandemic, as interviewees compared the response to the pandemic in Germany to how the pandemic was handled in Turkey. The Turkish response was experienced as delayed but more resolute and offering more support to its citizens.

The pandemic as a whole is described by members of the mosque as beginning with some initial latency, in which the pandemic was present, but the gravity of the situation had not become apparent, followed by a sudden peak, during which the mosque was forced to close its doors entirely in accordance with the restrictions imposed by the government. Following this, the measures were gradually eased. It is noteworthy that a considerable number of the interviewees make reference to the *hadith*, the sayings and traditions ascribed to the Prophet Mohammed, when addressing the topic of the pandemic: "The Prophet said, 'If you hear of an outbreak of plague in a land, do not enter it; but if the plague breaks out in a place while you are in it, do not leave that place'". (Sahih al-Bukhari, Vol. 7, Book 71, Hadith 624). One of the interviewed older members of the mosque traced the prevalence of the hadith back to its use in the *hutbe*.

Some of the measures like the separation of friend groups and families during prayer and limits on visitors were met with a lack of understanding and some conflict according to the former mosque president. The interviewed members did not formulate any critique of the mosque committee and overall indicated that they satisfied with the way the mosque committee handled the pandemic. While the experience of unfamiliarity and disruption is visible in all interviews, the comparison to the Turkish response and references to the Hadith appear only in interviews with the mosque leadership and older members. A possible explanation for this is that the production of a shared understanding of the pandemic and its implications is limited to certain parts of the community.

5.2. Moving Away from 'One Leg in Germany, One Leg in India'—Accounts of the Experience of the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Temple

The interviews and observations indicate the existence of two distinct groups of temple visitors/members: The first group consists of members who ceased attending due to changes in employment and place of residence, as well as members of the community who died during the pandemic. The other group includes visitors who reported an increased appreciation for the temple and its community, as well as placing increased importance on spirituality.

The first type is a testament to the mobility of the Indian migrant community in Germany. All interviewees describe this community as being composed of white-collar migrant workers with a biography of international employment, especially in the IT sector. In the second group, the increase in spirituality during the pandemic was attributed to the experience of uncertainty. This group consists of new and previous members. For the, interviewees and interlocutors indicate that the pandemic had a communizing effect, reinforcing 'family-like' bonds between members. As one longtime member of the temple community described,

> "Since I know them since childhood, it wasn't a problem for me to call them. In some sense, they are uncles and aunts for us. [...] They belong to us. This feeling has been further amplified, that we are a large family and not a small one consisting of just two. That has been reinforced for sure during the pandemic, for the other, for some it didn't. Some really became more distant. But I believe 90 percent didn't. What I found interesting also in conversations, that the adults [of

the community] told me, that their children became more distant, but therefore we became closer to friends of our children."

This spirituality is linked to more frequent visits to the temple, an increase in prayers, and a general shift from materialistic values to more traditional values such as family and community. The temple, its distinctive atmosphere, and its *murtis* (statues of deities) were highlighted as significant factors. Many interviewees identified the Hindu religion as a crucial element of cohesion.

The travel restrictions impacted the transnational aspect of the diasporic experience and motivated a shift away from 'one leg in Germany, one leg in India' to spending more time and monetary investment in the temple community and the local community—buying property and bringing their family (Nagel 2018, p. 993). The previous provisional nature of local connection becomes apparent in the reported loss of and shift in members. This is linked to the perspective of a permanent residency in the host country (Nagel 2018, p. 993).

6. Responding to the Pandemic

The response of the communities to the pandemic highlights the structure of the community by showing the priorities of the community and aspects that influence the decision-making when implementing the COVID-19 restrictions. Furthermore, accounts of how community is maintained during the pandemic shed light on the post-pandemic state of the community.

The communities responded to the first lockdown by reaching out to their members; interviewees mention streaming the *hutbe* and offering online lectures in the mosque or attempts to establish online gatherings for chanting and singing.

Both communities saw an increase in the importance of the WhatsApp messenger service during the pandemic: both used it to inform their members about current restrictions, and the opening times of the temple and the mosque. Facilitating in-person rituals and gatherings emerged as the primary concern of the communities and their leadership. However, different community structures and socio-religious needs shaped different responses.

6.1. 'Necessity Fosters Solutions'—Contact Tracing at the Mosque

The mosque's policies were informed by the Koordinationsrat der Muslime (Coordination Council of Muslims, KRM)[3], which adapted the regulations laid by the health ministry for Muslim communities. In an effort to counteract anti-Muslim sentiments, the KRM adapted a strict interpretation of the state regulations (Emmerich 2021).

With the beginning of the first lockdown in Germany, the mosque closed completely and reopened two months later under strict hygiene guidelines, without offering Friday prayers. The guidelines, published on the mosque Facebook page, consisted of general routines concerning disinfection and masks, as well as the introduction of contact tracing, but also included specific rules like the obligation to bring along individual prayer mats and the exclusion of children under 12 years old from the prayers. This shows that the reopening was designed to allow those who are obligated to fulfill their duty to pray, i.e., people over the age of puberty, to participate in prayer. People over 65 years were recommended to pray at home. In an interview, the former president of the mosque explained what informed their response to COVID-19:

"We also adhered to the rules of course from politicians and health authorities. That in the first instance. And secondly, we followed the laws, and guidelines of KRM, the Coordinating Council of Muslims, they were a bit stricter than those of politicians or the health office. They didn't want any reason [for negative public attention] or people [testing positive for COVID-19] in the mosque. That's why our rules, which were drawn up by the Muslim Coordinating Council, were

somewhat stricter than the normal rules. And we also adhered to the rules of KRM to, I estimate, ninety percent."

While the mosque community predominantly followed the recommendations of the KRM, it also followed political debates and publications of the health ministry itself. This research enabled the mosque committee to develop an independent course of action. During Ramadan, 2020, the mosque committee discovered in an online search what the former member of the mosque committee calls a 'legal loophole', which allowed them to host a gathering and deflect attempts of authorities to shut it down. A former member of the mosque committee recalls this as following:

"Once, we found a small legal loophole. It said, that congregations and prayer houses could gather for special events. I read this quickly and we immediately implemented it. This was during Ramadan and I invited everyone. We ought to document everyone and get their signature. Then suddenly, the police showed up. [. . .] They were really pissed off, because there were so many people there. So I went to them immediately, saying: we are allowed, this is allowed. Then he [the police officer] was somewhat surprised and he thought, why are they allowed to do this? Then I named him the paragraph and it clicked. He didn't know the paragraph either. Then he was very surprised, how we knew about this and then I said, it's okay. He turned and left. He just wanted to give us a fine and that didn't work. We just were too well prepared. As I mentioned, I just got this from the internet and we used that immediately. People were really happy, that they got join the evening prayer during Ramadan."

The mosque, which usually functions as a community center that caters to several community needs (Herz and Munsch 2022), was transformed as all its rooms were designated as prayer spaces by marking them off according to social distancing regulations.

The re-designation of spaces is an indication that the mosque's priority was to facilitate access to communal prayer for as many members as possible. A specific challenge was the peak of visitors during the Friday prayer, which, in the KRM opening strategy, was reestablished in a late and final step. The mosque committee responded with the introduction of a digital system for mandatory contact tracing, which replaced complicated paperwork. Working at the factory, the former president observed the implementation of a barcode system there. This inspired him to adopt this contact tracing at the mosque. He asked a colleague, a German electrician responsible for the implementation of the barcode system, if he could develop a registration barcode system for the mosque. He programmed a system that would read the barcode and transfer the data to a computer in the mosque's office. Concerns of data protection were addressed by using a numerical system to register and identify visitors. The cards with barcodes were then provided to mosque members; the barcode scanner was staffed with the youth of the mosque. Information about registration was provided via WhatsApp; registrations were also processed via the Messenger app. The mosque committee provided a practical guide on how to connect to the broadcast channel to older members.

Although the system includes the possibility of welcoming new visitors by filling out forms, it shows a focus on mosque members. The system's success led to plans to introduce it in other DITIB mosques, but restrictions ended before these plans were implemented.

The setup of the registration system emphasizes that it responded to the socio-religious need of mosque communities at the time. It also attests to the social structure of the mosque community, whose historical and personal links to the local factory enabled and shaped the barcode system as a response to the pandemic-related restrictions. Additionally, it highlights the organizational structure of DITIB mosques in Germany, which are organized

as registered associations and thus run by unpaid volunteers, which requires processes that can be handled simply and quickly. In the end, this also has to be understood as a socio-technological response to the public stigmatization of Muslims during COVID-19 (Pfeifer 2021; Emmerich 2021). The former president of the mosque describes these experiences of stigmatization, voiced by other interviewees, as follows:

> "There were a lot of people, no, not a lot of people. A lot of people, some people came and complained: 'The Turks gather in front of the mosque'. Our disadvantage is, that we are right next to a bridge. When somebody walks by and he sees a couple of people together. [They think:] 'Oh, that's a lot of people'. Although that's not the case. [. . .] But then the police came. But we always had security camera recordings of how the prayer took place. We have cameras everywhere. [. . .] I always said, just show them the videos and show them the photos. After the police saw them, [they knew, that] everything correct, nothing wrong is happening here, you're keeping the regulations, everything's fine. Then he left. Still, it's sad, that we need this proof."

The former mosque president describes that as a response he invited the local authorities to review the barcode registration system:

> "Following my invitation, meaning I told them to come: 'Have a look at this. maybe we are doing something wrong. What could we improve?' People from the code enforcement office were here, they took a look at it and they found it to be very good."

Therefore, the strict interpretations of regulations, the disciplining of mosque members, the tracing of public debate and regulations, and the rigorous documentation allowed the mosque committee to assert agency in the crisis.

6.2. The Response of the Temple Community

The temple community respondents mention that the temple was closed for about a year. During this time, there were some attempts by volunteers to establish online gatherings for singing and chanting. The reopening of the temple was organized locally by volunteers and the temple committee. Volunteers from the temple community took shifts opening up the temple and taking care of registrations via Google forms for contact tracing. During this time, lectures and *puja* hosted at the temple were also livestreamed via Facebook. A volunteer also established a calling service with weekly check-ins on the older community members.

7. Post-Pandemic Developments

In 2023, the last pandemic measures were gradually discontinued. In April 2023, the last measures were compulsory protective masks in hospitals and pharmacies. Religious communities had different paces when it came to lifting restrictions. At the beginning of Ramadan 2022, the KRM did not publish any recommendations of its own, instead referring mosques to local and federal regulations as well as each mosque's own responsibility to prevent infections (Koordinationsrat der Muslime (KRM) 2022).

In both communities, interlocutors and interviewees described challenges that emerged in the post-pandemic setting. In the mosque community, there was a challenge to engage the youth of the mosque and in the temple community, and a shift in membership led to challenges in terms of community management and outreach.

7.1. The Pandemic as a Catalyst for Generational Processes—Post-Pandemic Youth Work in the Mosque Community

Interviewees from the mosque's youth organization reported that when restrictions on religious gatherings were lifted, it became apparent that the restrictions had a specific disintegrating effect on younger members. A former president of the mosque's youth organization describes this experience:

> "Let me put it this way, we are praying five times a day. We personally, the young [members of the mosque], try to pray once or twice a day at the mosque, because we also have community here. So that it's sustained. During the times of COVID-19, we weren't allowed to do this, hence the cohesion of the young members fell apart. That means, we meet here, drank coffee, drank tea. We spent time together. But because of COVID, we couldn't, our religious meeting did not take place. There was no working together. That's also religion for us, because on Saturday, we have a meeting with the imam. That didn't take place, we couldn't. Then we were just at home, then just outside and that's when the cohesion broke off. But religiously, I mean, we can do it at home. That's not a problem, but the atmosphere. How can I explain? The inner peace, that you have here in the mosque, that's completely different. We missed that."

The restrictions of the pandemic made the usual meetings of the younger members impossible. Alternative strategies to initiate online meetings and meetings in compliance with restrictions were not successful. While young members of the mosque continued to conduct their prayers at home, when they came back to the mosque after the end of restrictions, they indicated that the absence of other members their age was discouraging for them. The disruption of religious education during the pandemic also became evident with younger and new members struggling to follow along during communal prayer and to integrate into the mosque community.

These experiences of disintegration motivated the initiative of a young member of the mosque who, in coordination with the imam and the president of the mosque, became the president of the youth organization. Additionally, in an effort to reintegrate the youth of the mosque, they remodeled the youth room. The remodeling involved young members of the mosque in creating a space they would like to 'hang out' in. The new youth room also featured a PlayStation. Similar to the integration of touch screens in the Qur'anic school, this can be seen as a concession to prevalent entertainment technology in order to adapt to changing needs of younger generations. The formulated goal of the remodeling is to create a space where young members are likely to 'hang out' in earshot of the prayer room and the call to the prayer.

The COVID-19 pandemic worked as a catalyst to pre-existing disintegrative tendencies in the youth when it disrupted coping strategies that dealt with local, cultural, and communal experiences of the young members of the mosque stemming from different educational aspirations and language skills.

7.2. 'We Have to Start from the Beginning'—Post-Pandemic Community Management and Outreach in the Temple Community

A member of the temple committee, responsible for social media outreach, describes the post-pandemic situation of the temple as follows:

> "During the pandemic, we were not gathering [...] So many people, let's say move from one city to other city [...] after the pandemic the people stopped coming or moved somewhere. So again, we have to start from the beginning [...] Indian peoples are religious, they are religious, they love the religion, they believe in the god. So this temple is easy to connect to the most of the people,

> whenever we organize some event according to Indian culture. [. . .] The people who came regularly before, only few of them are coming back on regular basis after that. And there are some new people coming, so when the new people are coming, they check the vibes: like they feel good or they do not feel good. New people are coming from India every year, so many people are coming [. . .]. So every time new people come, [. . .] it's little bit of change. previously [. . .] people were coming regularly, celebrating much, but [now] we are still reaching out to reach and to obtain that level [from] before pandemic. We are not on that level right now; we are [still] more exploring now."

After the pandemic, the temple experienced a drop in regular visitors; at the same time, visits to events hosted and promoted by the temple increased, which forced the temple committee to rethink its communication strategy. These new visitors show an individualized approach, testing if the temple fits their preferences and some only visiting during parts of events and rituals. Another factor was that these new visitors migrated from other parts of India. Therefore, the challenges reported to the temple organization involved tendencies of individualization and pluralization.

The temple committee responded by expanding its use of WhatsApp as a tool for outreach. Its importance had already increased during the pandemic, when the temple's WhatsApp group was used to inform people about opening hours and restrictions. When WhatsApp introduced the community feature as an extension of the group feature in May 2023, it was embraced by the post-pandemic temple community. Since then, the temple has used the feature's broadcasting channel to inform people about and promote events and key figures in the temple and provide services. The option to create themed subgroups that community members can join or be assigned to is used to organize volunteers, e.g., to coordinate the preparations for festivities. The temple's WhatsApp community can be accessed through QR codes displayed at the temple and is promoted by links shared to other Hindu WhatsApp groups.

The new organizational form is accompanied by a modified understanding of the temple committee as a provider of a facility for Hindu ritual and events, as well as for *puja* at devotees' homes performed by the priest. They are also actively working on connecting to migrant communities from other parts of India and neighboring countries by using WhatsApp Community, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook to reach out to potential new members.

The committee has added a new member with the role of a social media manager, who uses informal, self-taught skills to design the promotional content for the temple accounts on Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. Having only recently joined the temple community, he is representative of the group associated with the recent surge in the new members, visitors, and devotees, of which the majority are highly educated professionals from the engineering and IT sector who have recently migrated to Germany.[4]

The change in the community brings new necessities, since the pandemic has triggered new dynamics in cultural regrouping (Gittinger 2021). While the pre-pandemic community is described as being shaped by region/ethnicity, now the shared Hindu religion and a common understanding of the rituals are at the forefront of the temple's identity New members also bring with them their own regional traditions, thus leading to a pluralization of the community. New devotees visiting the temple exhibit an individualized engagement style, which the temple also caters to by designing events for prolonged and short visits. The new migration shaped by the need for IT professionals caused socio-economic change in the Virtual Age, bringing new volunteers to the temple who are willing to support and expand the temple's digital outreach. The organizational and the promotional use

of WhatsApp and social media platforms can therefore be considered adaptations to the evolving needs of a digital (religious) diaspora (Candidatu and Ponzanesi 2022).

8. Discussion

When comparing the two case studies, it becomes apparent that the impact of the pandemic was different for each community. The changes visible in the temple community were more pronounced and far-reaching than in the mosque community. An explanation for this might be that, in the temple community, several factors coincided: discontinuities in the community structure, new migration patterns, processes of institutionalization, and changes in the use of communication technology and communication technology itself.

The factors of discontinuities in the community structure and changes in communication technology are also present in the mosque community, although the first has a strong generational aspect. The mosque community was not influenced by new migration patterns during the pandemic; rather, adapting to the influx of new members of different ethnic backgrounds was something the mosque had already done in the past. The mosque community also experienced the shift to 'local investment' and the perspective of permanent residency (Nagel 2018, p. 993).

The socio-economic changes associated with the Virtual Age (Reckwitz 2019, pp. 139–42) impact the two religious communities differently. While new migration patterns pluralize the previously regionalized community structure and experience of the temple community, the diversified career paths of the young members challenge the localized cultural regrouping formative of the mosque.

The cultural regrouping of the temple community is not shaped by majority employment at the same local factory; instead, they work at different businesses and locations in the wider Rhine Main Area. In this dispersed and individualized group interested in engaging with the community, the temple, with its efforts towards institutionalization via the employment of a priest and intensified outreach and with the expanded capacities of digital communication technology, can become a player in cultural regrouping as well as in shaping the public and digital presence (Lazar 2021, p. 231) of the Indian Hindu diaspora in the region. This explains why the temple community has embraced the WhatsApp community feature, while the mosque community continues to use the WhatsApp broadcast feature. The cultural regrouping of the two communities has taken on different forms; the mosque community has established strategies to engage with challenges to community cohesion, including the integration of digital technologies based on local proximity and the mosque building.

The minority perspective is inherent to the described processes and the status of the establishment has also proven influential as the indicator of local investment and integration. The role of the different status of establishment can be observed in two interacting aspects: institutionalization and visibility in public discourse.

In the temple case study, there is no mention of any overarching organization or cooperation with other temples. Instead, the response to the pandemic was negotiated on a local level and consisted of a long closure of the temple. The KRM is an important institution for the response of the mosque community and, with the coordination of a common response to public anti-Muslim sentiments and adaptations of the official regulations for mosque communities, relieves the volunteer-run mosques. This seems to have enabled the assertion of agency by the mosque committee in the case study.

The KRM is an organization that emerged from the public and political discourse on German Islam as an attempt to form an entity that is representative of Muslims in Germany and able to negotiate with the government (Emmerich 2021; Lemmen 2017). The Muslim community was at the center of suspicions of breaking restrictions (Emmerich 2021; Pfeifer

2021), while the Hindu community, when analyzing data from Twitter/X, remained largely invisible to the public discourse. Subsequently, the umbrella organization, KRM, in its response to the pandemic, primarily addressed the public image of Muslims in Germany (Emmerich 2021).

9. Conclusions

The difference in experience is linked to the divergent cultural regrouping processes: Both communities share the key concept of maintaining the community structure and identity, which is intertwined with adapting to new necessities. The mosque community, with its religious milieu structure, showed pre-pandemic adaptations to community change, which was connected to the use of digital media and the maintenance of the ethno-religious character of the community. The pandemic, as an unsettled cultural time (Johnston et al. 2022), disrupted these stabilized strategies and the socio-religious structure, which led to the experience being an 'unfamiliar' period. At the same time, the organizational structure of the mosque was able to handle the pandemic by employing similar strategies. The post-pandemic community settled back into pre-pandemic modes but faced the challenge of the generational disintegration of the youth. This was addressed by again resorting to established modes of problem solving. Still, several tendencies including the loss of trust in institutions, generational shifts linked to socio-economic changes, and community diversity put strains on the cohesion in the community.

The impact of the pandemic on the temple community was more pronounced than that on the mosque community. This was linked to several factors such as coinciding community change and changes in digital communication, which led to the development of a digital diaspora formulating a broad Hindu identity to cater to and integrate devotees from diverse backgrounds. The less established temple community proved to be both more responsive to transformative factors and adaptable to new modalities. This seems to be linked to lower pre-pandemic levels of local investment among the community members.

In comparison, the mosque case study demonstrated that another influential characteristic of established communities is greater visibility in public discourse. They are therefore also shaped by organizations that deal with the consequences of this visibility.

Both case studies reveal how shaping and refiguration interact in the framework of cultural regrouping. The two communities in their socio-religious figurations display different levels of responsiveness to changes. In the temple community, from the pandemic there emerged the need for and perspectives on the adaptation of media use to sustain and expand the community, creating new hybrid spaces of belonging that accommodated new modes of transnational relationships. The mosque community did not experience any shifts in its established and institutionalized organization.

This study is limited by the sample and its overall scope. While this article has developed that different levels of institutionalization influence the response to and the impact of COVID-19, there is need for further elaboration and comparison with other well-established and less established communities. The ethnographic approach produces a very local perspective that can be discussed. In our case studies, this was further limited to members of the community and visitors. Therefore, it does not show other socio-religious effects of the pandemic, such as a decrease in spirituality (Leonhardt et al. 2023) and in the importance of the role of organized religion in times of crisis (Hillenbrand et al. 2023). The two case studies show how religious communities are structured locally, and which socio-religious aspects of the community are actualized in the context of crisis. This perspective contributes to the development of the RSST approach (H. A. Campbell 2010) by allowing us to differentiate between the factors that have led to the refiguration of religious

communities and how they interact with digital media and when established figurations of religious communities and their media use persist.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany does not have an overall interdisciplinary ethics committee. The faculties are responsible for research ethics. The Department of Catholic Theology (07) has not established an own ethics committee to this day. In early 2023, the research design for the ReCoVirA (Religious Communities in the Virtual Age) project was developed, research ethics considerations and protection plans were made extensively, and the project was reviewed by the university's data protection office. At that time, according to the research guidelines of the Goethe University, there was and is no formalised and binding research ethics approval process for data-generating research projects with human participants at the Department of Catholic Theology. The German sub-project in the research group was therefore unable to apply for a formal approval from an ethics committee.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author due to privacy and ethical concerns of ethnographical data.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes

1 DITIB, short for Diyanet İşleri Türk-İslam Birliği which translates to Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs and is 'Germany's largest mosque association' (Emmerich 2021). It organizes the Turkish-Islamic mosques in Germany under the supervision of the attaché of the Diyanet, the Turkish Directorate of the Religious Affairs.

2 This conflict is documented in publications. Due to reasons of anonymization, these are not included in this article.

3 The Coordination Council of Muslims is a cooperation of several Muslim umbrella organizations in Germany. It was founded in spring 2007, following the German Islam conference in 2006 with the goal of building a unified representing body for Muslims in the Federal Republic of Germany (Lemmen 2017, pp. 319–20; Emmerich 2021).

4 This influx can be attributed to a new bilateral agreement between Germany and India, which was signed in December 2022 and aims to facilitate the migration of students, trainees and skilled workers (Bundesministerium des Inneren und für Heimat 2022).

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