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WAYFARING: A MUSLIM JOURNEY OF BECOMING

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What are different ways of doing knowledge production and practice? This paper presents an approach to research that combines ethnographic analysis and poetic analysis. By using the structure as well as the content of the writing, this research seeks to explore the process of unfolding, during the *dhikr*, or practices of remembering, which occur for Sufi Muslim students as they seek spiritual knowledge within the conceptual and lived framework of wayfaring.

The presentation space is set up in the format of a Sufi dhikr *(meditation) space, with prayer mats laid out, rose and sandalwood incense lit (to open the mind and heart to receiving and channelling knowledge), and rose water sprayed around to cleanse the spiritual space. The attendees and I sit in a circle on the prayer mats, with our shoes removed, and on the same level. No enhanced audio was used; I chose to project my voice across the circle to allow for a more intimate setting and avoid the feedback that often accompanies microphones. It was important to have a stilled and peaceful environment, and to focus our attention, wholly, on the space we were creating. I decided to hold the presentation in this manner to challenge what we consider to be a space of learning and pedagogy. Sufis believe that the process of knowledge transmission is one that must engage and discipline all the senses to receive knowledge.*

As-salamu alaykum (peace be upon you), reader. Thank you for entering this space with me. I would like to blur the lines in terms of what we consider to be spaces of knowledge exchange. The focus of my MA degree, based in social and cultural anthropology at the University of the Witwatersrand, was on Sufi *dhikr* (meditation) practices and pedagogy. Specifically, my study explored how spiritual knowledge and the transcendental are not merely embodied processes but ensouled ones. It is in the spirit of ensoulment—rather than only embodiment—that I offer a Sufi inspired presentation of knowledge transmission.

Incense is burning, smoke trailing into the air, as we are all seated…

The focus of my MA sought to understand the ways in which *dhikr* (meditation) practices and pedagogy in a Sufi community in Johannesburg leads to spiritual development and transformation. Within the Sufi community, the conceptual and lived framework of wayfaring is prominent. I engaged this framework through the *dhikr* (meditative) practices of a Sufi youth group based in the Northern Suburbs of Johannesburg (the majority of the academic literature on Islam in Johannesburg has dealt with the migrant experience of Muslims in Fordsburg, and, while this is important, there is a significant gap in the research regarding other forms of Islam and everyday Islamic practices). The activities of the group revolve around *dhikr*: practices of "remembering," which are acts of past, present, and future-making, involved in spiritual transformation. Drawing on experiences from the year I spent (2018) attending the *dhikr*s, I focused on wayfaring as a constant state of *dhikr*, and a means through which Sufi Muslims are reshaping and negotiating notions of personhood and belonging.

My research is concerned with questions around different ways of *doing* knowledge production and practice. The thesis was written as a combination of ethnographic and poetic analysis, which considered—through structure as well as content—the process of unfolding that occurs for a Sufi student as they seek spiritual knowledge within the conceptual and lived framework of wayfaring. I would like to mirror that amalgamation of the poetic and ethnographic analysis in this written paper, as I did in the presentation format. I invite you to join in a brief guided meditation where I share a few of the poetic sections from my MA thesis regarding the nature and process of awakening to spiritual knowledge. Thereafter, I outline the central theme of my paper—that of ensouled knowledge.

Sufi poetry is an inherently social practice and is shared between community members as a tool to express and engage the transcendental. By adopting a meshwork methodology of autoethnographic approaches, participant participation,[1] and poetic analysis, I found that I was better able to engage the transcendental in a manner that acknowledges not only belief systems, but complex knowledge systems and cosmologies in a deeply embodied, and ensouled, mode of research. Hence, pulling through the

artistic impetus from the conception of the research project right through to the final product, produced as a meditation and dialogue between the ethnographic and poetic analysis, allowed a more nuanced understanding of Sufi *dhikr* practices and pedagogy. With this in mind, I invite you to partake in a guided meditation, as I recount a part of the process that I have undergone in learning how to treat, and be treated by: the spiritual knowledge I learnt attending the *dhikr*s during my year of fieldwork.

Close your eyes…
breathe in Al—meaning 'The'…
breathe out Lah—meaning 'One'…
Al… Lah… 'The'… 'One'…

Dear Earnest Scholar,
There are many things that you will not come to know in this life. More so, most things you cannot know in this life.

Do you know this? Do you know that, no matter how much you come to know, there is so much more you will not? Do you know that your body, your mind, cannot hold the knowledge of most things? Do you know this?

… And, knowing this, what does this knowledge mean for you? What does knowing there is knowledge you cannot know—cannot hold—mean for your scholarship? What does learning first what you cannot know, mean to you?

Before you learn to know anything, you must learn to un-know; to empty yourself of all you think you know. You must scrape away all the arrogance in your being that makes you think you know anything. Mine yourself for knowledge. Learn where knowledge sits in you. Learn how knowledge moves in you, animates you, emanates within you.

Qalb—*meaning heart. Your heart is a channel for knowledge, a tightrope between your material body and your soul… learn to dance along this line. Do not focus on the rope, nor the destination, too much. Rather, focus on refining your movements along this rope, on its textures and length, on other ropes around you with their own dancers. Spin webs from these ropes, immerse yourself in the fibres.*

Extend. Extend your awareness beyond your own rope, beyond the awareness of other ropes around you, beyond the awareness of others tripping or clinging or hanging about their ropes, frantically reaching for others to help them create a sturdiness that cannot be… Extend… Create not illusory bridges but webs… Extend… find other seekers, know them by their dancing upon their ropes, by their skilled web-spinning…

Be gentle with yourself, move lightly through your learning. Knowledge emerges from the alchemy of these webs, it hovers ever-present in the spaces all around; it is your medium and your materiality… it Is.

Dear Weary Traveller,
You pass so many on this journey… so many versions of yourself. This path is made of mirror. To find it, you must wipe away the dirt and grime. But before you can even start to follow it, you are immediately faced with your own reflection staring back at you.

I can see your feet are calloused from treading upon the glass,

I can see your eyes are searching for others beyond their own reflections,

I can see your body is calling upon all its reserves to push further,

I can see you, Weary Traveller, I can see you even if you cannot yet see me.

Keep walking. At your pace, in your time. Keep walking. Keep polishing that glass to find the Path. Keep confronting your reflection in its infinite varieties. Keep following the Way.

I know that you are wearied, but this is not your home. Resting places lie upon the path, yes, but these are not your Home.

Keep taking those steps, Dear One, your Beloved awaits your return at day's end…

Dear Teacher,
Learn. Learn to bring bodies and spaces into the music you are dancing to. Weave them together in ways, such that the spinning captures the Light in all and shines forth for all to see.

Let your students be your guide—each one contains within them the pattern in which they wish to be spun. Seek the pattern and bring it forth.

Continuously read the textures, gestures, vibrations, and movements. Write yourself into the moment so that those around you can learn to be scribes themselves.

Above all, dear teacher, be taught.

When you are ready, please open your eyes.

During my year of fieldwork, the Sufi youth group was in the process of establishing itself. Since Sufism refrains from becoming institutionalised, it is common to see groups moving through periods of expansion and contraction in terms of membership. The format of the group over this time changed to accommodate the students' progress. Initially, as the students were new to *dhikr*, the meditations of the group were focused on transcendence meditations: going beyond the body and the material world. The main purpose of these meditations was for students to be initiated into the practices of *dhikr*, and to learn the differences between their body and their soul (between the experience of ultimate Duality and Unity). The interpretation of texts, during this initial phase, was used to frame the experience of the body.

As the students became adept at experiencing nuanced *dhikr* sessions, the meditations of the group became more theory-based. These were known as the grounding meditations and were intended for students to become fluent in practices of *dhikr* and to focus on crafting their bodily presence. During this secondary phase, the experience of the body was used to frame the interpretation of texts.

Abd al-Qadir Al-Jīlānī explains that, in Sufism, souls are created from the Divine Light of Allah and have descended from this realm into the material world. He goes further to explain that a "time came when these souls started binding themselves to the flesh and forgot their source."[2] Within this understanding, *dhikr* is the act of

remembering one's source of creation, and living in this life with the practical understanding that all of existence comes from the same source.

During the *dhikr*s, by framing the body as a vessel through which the interpretation of texts is filtered and as a mechanism of filtering the interpretation of texts, Sufis engage in a process of knowledge production that is more resonant of knowledge *transmission*. By acutely disciplining the body and learning how to filter and make sense of experiences of the body, the body becomes a tool in knowledge transmission to be used at the will of the individual.

These movements of interpretation, from being text-based to be more body-based seems to refer to an embodied sense of knowledge. However, considering the expanded sense of the body, and acknowledging rather, the bodily presence, students explore a process of knowledge transmission that is *ensouled*. Talal Asad describes ensoulment as "the idea that the living human body is an integrated totality having developable capacities for activity and experience unique to it, the capacities for sensing, imagining, and doing that are culturally mediated."[3]

Tim Ingold speaks about the body's capacity to remember when he says that "*only the body remembers* ... The hand can bring itself into use, and in its practised movements can tell the story of its own life."[4] Thinking about this through the lens of *dhikr*, ensoulment is more than just an enactment of remembrance or remembering—it is, as al-Jīlānī outlines, the intimate remembrance of Allah, despite the forgetfulness of the flesh-body. *Dhikr* is more than embodied learning because knowledge is not produced or consumed by the body. Knowledge is *awakened* to by the spirit within the forgetfulness of the flesh. By this we can understand that knowledge is not considered as located within the body, but rather within the spirit that is enrobed by the body.

Dear Seeker,
Reach.

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Notes

1 Kersenboom, 'The Faculty of the Voice'.

2 al-Jīlānī and Bayrak, *The Secret of Secrets*.

3 Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 89.

4 Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, 57; emphasis in original.

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