

Performances of the Sufi Ascent in Ibn ‘Arabī’s Metaphysics, Tunisian
Ḥaḍra and Dhikr Rituals, and Three Sufi Plays: Journeys in God’s Vast
Earth

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Part Submission for the Degree of PhD (1)

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I Dia Barghouti hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:

Date:17/11/2020

Acknowledgements

Over the last five years I have met countless people in Tunis, London, Istanbul, Ramallah, and Beirut who have helped me complete this thesis. The names of those who helped me during my research on the Shādhiliya and ʿĪssāwiya communities are endless. Nonetheless, I shall try to thank those whom I can. To Maria Shevtsova, who, like the great Andalusian saint Muḥyiddīn Ibn ʿArabī, has been an example of what it means to be truly human. I am eternally grateful for her patience, guidance, and kindness. To Stefan Sperl for his valuable feedback and encouragement. To my parents, Rita Giacaman and Mustafa Barghouti, for their unconditional love and support. To Selima Bin-Chedli, who taught me more about life than Sufi rituals. To Mondher Mʿribah, Eskander Derouiche, Sufian al-Shahid, Shaykh Munir, Salah Wargli, Mohammad Farouk Chlagou, Youssef Salma, Maryam al-Akhwa, the shaykhs and caretakers of the Shādhiliya and ʿĪssāwiya shrines, the spirits of Sīdī Miḥriz, Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan, Sīdī Bin-ʿĪssa, and Sīdī Boū-Saʿīd, and to those who preferred to remain anonymous, I am eternally grateful that they have allowed me to be part of their community.

To Faris Giacaman, Zaid Amr, Zeina Amro, Rand Jarallah, Shyrina Rantisi, Serdar Coskun, Shaden Powell, Amer Abu Matar, Akif Yerlioglu, Belgin Tekce, Huda Zurayk, Weeam Hammoudeh, George Giacaman, Lisa Taraki, and Alexandra Corrigan who have been incredibly supportive throughout this journey. To Wafi Bilal, Dina Amr, Hedaia Ghannam, and Emma Playfair for making London feel like home. To Sadok Aidani, Erik Ehn, Marcus Gardley, and Lara Khaldi for encouraging me to continue writing plays. To my grandmother Emily Giacaman, who always encouraged us to pursue knowledge.

Abstract

The story of the Night Journey describes the Prophet Muhammad's miraculous ascent to the heavens. In several Sufi communities, the ascent has become part of the Sufi path, symbolizing the different spiritual stations adepts encounter in their journey to God. Tunisia is home to many Sufi orders, including the Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya, who perform the ascent in *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals. Drawing on the philosophical-theological writings of Muḥyiddīn Ibn-ʿArabī (1165-1240), this thesis explores the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals through the framework of Islamic metaphysics in an attempt to examine what constitutes performance from an Islamic Sufi perspective.

The purpose of this practice-as-research thesis is to examine the metaphysical concepts and cultural contexts that have given rise to these rituals and provide both theoretical and concrete principles by means of which theatre practitioners can experiment with Sufi modes of performance. My practice-based component – in the form of three plays – demonstrates how Sufi understandings of language and embodiment can create new avenues for theatrical experimentation. Methods of writing, corporeal techniques, and a religious culturally specific understanding of performance are embedded within the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra*. They have not been explored specifically in terms of the theatre – a lacuna that my plays, written within the frames of reference of the religious, spiritual, philosophical and other relevant research of the theoretical part of my PhD submission, which is integral to my thesis as a composite whole, begin modestly to fill.

My plays focus on the tension between the transcendent and immanent attributes of God, one of the most fundamental principles of Ibn ‘Arabi’s ontology, embodied in *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals. Three characters travel through various landscapes in search of God until they realize that the divine is both within and beyond the forms they witness in the Sufi journey that has no end.

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Introduction

Tunisia is home to a wide range of indigenous performance traditions, including the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals of the Shādhiliya and ʿĪssāwiya Sufi orders. Indigenous Arab performance practices like the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* are generally understudied and have only recently begun to receive attention from pioneering theatre studies scholars such as Marvin Carlson, Khalid Amine, and Deborah Kapchan who have stressed the importance and value of these traditions as theatrical forms.¹ While ethnomusicologists and religious studies scholars have done some of the most important research on Sufi communities in North Africa, their work does not provide a comprehensive study of Shādhiliya and ʿĪssāwiya rituals in Tunisia, nor does it examine these religious practices as a performance form.²

The aim of my practice-as-research thesis is to explore the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals as performance events within an Islamic intellectual framework so as to explore what constitutes performance from an Islamic Sufi perspective, and how this culturally specific understanding of performance can help to alter theatrical practice with a focus on playwriting. My three plays, which form the practical component of this thesis, provide an example of how theatre-makers can experiment with the metaphysical ideas and performance principles examined in the theoretical part of this thesis. There are several reasons why I chose the writings of the twelfth-century Andalusian saint Muḥyiddīn Ibn ʿArabī as the primary theoretical framework through which to examine the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals. First, Ibn ʿArabī's writings provide a comprehensive Islamic framework

that summarizes some of the most important metaphysical and theological issues of vital importance to the Sufi orders such as the notion of sainthood.³ Second, members of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya hold Ibn ‘Arabī in high regard and the more advanced adepts are familiar with his books. Although the majority of adepts do not read his works, they explore some of the most important aspects of his ontology through embodied performances. Such performances include the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* that contribute to the integration of Islamic metaphysics into Tunisian Sufi culture, which manifests itself in the practices of everyday life.

Third, there is a historical connection between Ibn ‘Arabī and the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya orders through the figure of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī, a thirteenth-century Andalusian saint. Al-Shushtarī made Ibn ‘Arabī’s philosophy much more accessible to the public by incorporating his ideas into popular songs composed in Andalusian vernacular.⁴ Members of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya attribute several of the songs and poems performed in their rituals to al-Shushtarī, who is one of the many saints affiliated with these orders. The Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals are oral traditions which constantly change as they are passed down from one generation to the next. It is therefore impossible to determine the exact sources from which these traditions have emerged, including the poems attributed to al-Shushtarī that cannot be traced back to the historical figure. However, a comparison of al-Shushtarī’s poems with ‘Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya songs and litanies reveals that they explore many of the same metaphysical themes discussed in detail in Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings, suggesting that al-Shushtarī played an important role in the dissemination of these ideas.

Fourth, for both Ibn ‘Arabī and members of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya, the story of the Prophet Muhammad’s ascent (*mi‘rāj*) has become part of the Sufi path, representing the different spiritual stations, encounters with prophets, and esoteric knowledge acquired in the journey towards God.⁵ Both also stress that there is no end to the journey of ascent that gradually and endlessly brings adepts closer to the Absolute (God) which cannot be known except through its revelation in finite forms that constantly change, reflecting one of the infinite divine attributes.⁶ The ascent is performed in *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals where dedicated Sufi shaykhs guide adepts to an encounter with the divine which allows them to experience God in the body – through dancing, singing, and writing – all of which are considered forms of ‘spiritual intoxication.’ Even though each of Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya orders have developed their own unique methods for helping the seeker ascend, these communities share particular musical and performance techniques that have emerged out of a shared history and context.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Ibn ‘Arabī and members of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya have a shared understanding of epistemology centered on the notion that knowledge is acquired through practice.⁷ Adepts know God by engaging in acts of worship that allow them to embody the divine attributes (the ninety-nine names of God mentioned in the Qur’ān). In both Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology and Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya rituals, language mediates the adept’s experience of the sacred and is the ontological intermediary (*barzakh*) through which the divine attributes are made manifest during the adept’s ascent. Language does not only encompass the songs and litanies performed in the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra*. Much like in Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology, language (the Divine Names)

corresponds to embodied states in which adepts perform one of the divine attributes allowing them to know God through direct embodied experience. I argue that this shared understanding of embodiment that is intimately tied to language, metaphysics, and experiences of the sacred, constitutes a culturally specific Islamic notion of performance that has the potential to alter and enrich theatrical practice.

The beliefs shared among members of a social group, including religious beliefs, form a fundamental part of culture, which influences how people perceive and act in social situations.⁸ This is particularly true for religious practices like the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra*, through which Islamic metaphysics has become part of the day-to-day lives of the Tunisians who participate in these rituals. Both Ibn ‘Arabī and Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya adepts maintain a delicate balance between experiencing God as immanent and realizing His transcendence. This tension forms a fundamental part of the ascent experience, allowing adepts to come into contact with the divine that is both within and beyond the individual self. Such an encounter can manifest itself in various ways, including near-involuntary performances of divinely inspired writing. I experimented with the Sufi idea that writing is a performance event, which incorporates embodied practice, by being an active participant in *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals. Thus, I used the creative material I generated in these performances to develop the characters and content of my plays titled *The Sacred Triangle of Silence*, *Paths to the Infinite Forest*, and *The Eternal Seed*.

My plays are not the first to incorporate Sufi themes and motifs. Both European and Arab theatre-makers have experimented with Sufism, particularly after the 1960s when Arab

playwrights and directors began to give more attention to indigenous sources and forms. Notable examples include ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Madanī and Ṣalāḥ ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr’s plays, all inspired by the tenth-century mystic al-Ḥallāj and Peter Brook’s production of *Conference of the Birds* based on a twelfth-century poem of the same title by Farīd al-Dīn ‘Aṭṭār.⁹ My plays differ from the works of Arab and European theatre-makers interested in Sufism in their detailed exploration of Islamic metaphysics and its relation to the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals of the Shādhiliya and ‘Issāwiya Tunisian Sufi orders. This culturally specific religious Sufi notion of performance, based on a dialogue between the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals and Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics, had a significant influence on both the content of my plays and my writing process, which incorporated an embodied practice that included participation in the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* and performing states of intoxication.

Since the 1960s, Sufi rituals have been staged in non-ritual contexts in performances that appropriate the litanies, songs, and gestures performed in the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* without taking into account their religious and culturally specific meanings.¹⁰ Mimicking the ritual actions performed in the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* does not give the audience insight into the metaphysical ideas that are the foundations of these ritual performances and a fundamental part of the adept’s ascent experience. My thesis aims to pose an alternative to these staged performances by providing a theoretical framework that makes accessible this culturally specific Sufi understanding of performance to theatre practitioners, so as to create new avenues for theatrical experimentation. My three plays provide an example of how theatre-makers can experiment with these Sufi methods of creative expression in which performance constitutes an embodied encounter with the divine, which may

manifest itself in the form of divinely inspired writing. As noted earlier, this Sufi understanding of performance had a profound influence on both the content and writing of my three plays.

The theoretical component of this thesis is composed of five chapters that are integral to my three plays in that they explore the performance principles, metaphysical ideas, and Sufi approaches to language and writing on which my plays are based. Chapter One provides a literature review and an explanation of my research methodology, which incorporates participant observation as well as a creative practice (playwriting) that distinguish practice-as-research from other forms of academic research. Chapter Two introduces the aspects of Ibn ‘Arabī’s philosophy most relevant to the practices of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya, and the sociocultural performance context in which the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* developed. Chapter Three contains an ethnographic account of the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals, and explains how they relate to Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics. It must be noted that the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* are gendered spaces since some of the rituals are exclusive to women and the performance of certain forms of intoxication is limited to men. Since the metaphysical dimension of these rituals is the primary concern of this thesis, I do not explore gender dynamics within these communities, which are far beyond the scope of this study. Chapter Four explores al-Shushtarī’s influence on North African Sufism and examines the metaphysical ideas associated with the act of writing in Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology, the poems of al-Shushtarī, and Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya songs and litanies. Chapter Five gives examples of theatrical works which have incorporated Islamic and Sufi themes and explores the differences between the Arab avant-garde, who had a

renewed interest in indigenous traditions after the 1960s, and the European avant-garde who experimented with a wide range of ritual traditions, leading to the development of an intercultural theatre. This last chapter also outlines the main metaphysical ideas explored in my plays with reference to particular scenes that clearly illustrate the influence of Ibn ‘Arabī and the rituals of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya orders. My writing process is discussed in greater detail in the preface to my three plays, which can be found in part two of this thesis.

Chapter One

Methodologies

Literature Review

This practice-as-research (PaR) thesis is composed of two parts: a theoretical component that explores the metaphysical dimensions of the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya communities, and a practical component composed of three plays that show how the metaphysical ideas performed in these Tunisian Sufi rituals can be explored through Sufi-inspired plays. Ibn ‘Arabī’s philosophy is in focus here because it provides an Islamic framework that elucidates how metaphysics is embodied in Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya rituals. Furthermore, his theories on the relationship between embodiment and language are essential for understanding how certain metaphysical ideas have been integrated into the ritual practices of these communities and provide, as well, opportunities for theatrical experimentation, particularly for those interested in Sufi modes of writing. This is because writing, for both Ibn ‘Arabī and members of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya, is a performance of the loss of self that makes it possible for the divine to speak through them.

The three plays integral to the thesis as a whole are *The Sacred Triangle of Silence*, *Paths to the Infinite Forest*, and *The Eternal Seed*. They were the means for experimenting with the performance techniques and metaphysical principles derived from the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals, which I had learned as part of my research. In addition to highlighting how these performance traditions can be of relevance to the theatre, the

practice of playwriting helped me better understand Sufi modes of writing, giving me insight into the semi-unconscious states in which my informants composed poetry during Sufi rituals. The multi-disciplinary nature of my research necessitated consultation of studies from different fields – essentially theatre and performance studies, religious studies, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy, and, together, they had a significant influence on the development of my approach to the study of Sufi ritual.

Literature in the Area of Practice-as-Research

PaR is a relatively young area that has been developing at higher education institutions in the United Kingdom since the 1990s.¹ Since then, such scholars as Robin Nelson and Baz Kershaw, have promoted the idea that artistic practice, which couples reflexivity and theoretical reflection, should be considered a valid form of academic research. According to them, this method of research can provide new insights, unavailable through other methods that do not involve a practice-based approach. They argue that artistic practice forms a fundamental part of the research process, stressing that it constitutes a new form of knowledge production.²

Both Kershaw and Nelson have emphasized the importance of embodied experience for practice-based methodologies, which include active participation in the cultural performances studied: ‘In contrast to the ethnography of performance, which discursively investigates cultural performances, performance ethnography employs enactment and embodiment to perform research about cultural values.’³ Nelson focuses on explaining the importance of subjective experience in the process of knowledge production, whereas

Kershaw provides practical advice with regards to how one can engage in this kind of embodied research, giving several examples of what PaR studies might look like.⁴

Nelson's critique of empiricism stresses the need to examine embodied forms of knowledge that can only be acquired through experience, that is, through practice.⁵ He argues that subjectivity is always part of the process of knowledge production and that 'situated epistemologies' such as practice-based research make this knowledge accessible through extensive self-reflection.⁶ Kershaw agrees, asserting that the PaR has the ability to overcome the pre-established binaries of theory versus practice through reflexivity, which gives value to embodied practice.⁷ In other words, it makes explicit the interrelation of theory and practice, also moving beyond other binaries such as mind versus body so as to articulate how embodied knowledge is inscribed in performance.⁸

Because PaR continues to be a developing approach, there have not yet been many opportunities to examine its relation to non-western contexts and epistemologies.⁹ The *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals of the Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya communities of Tunisia create an opportunity for this dialogue. Embedded within these religious traditions is a practice-based Islamic epistemology that is of relevance to PaR as a methodology because it takes the body as the starting point of philosophical inquiry. The importance of Ibn 'Arabī's writing lies in its provision of a theoretical framework and vocabulary grounded in the same religious tradition that makes it possible to articulate how Sufi adepts acquire philosophical knowledge through ritual performances, which are a matter of embodiment. The *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* of the Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya are just a few examples from a wide

range of North African performance traditions that have not been adequately explored, as explained in the following section.

Performance Traditions of North Africa

Since the 1980s, there has been a growing interest in indigenous North African performance traditions previously neglected in scholarship in English for two main reasons: the assumption that Islam prohibits representation of the human form; the assumption that these indigenous performances were not theatrical forms because they did not fit limited Eurocentric conceptions of theatre, particularly since the majority were not based on written texts.¹⁰ Consequently, many such performances were overlooked or described as ‘pre-theatrical’ forms that had not yet evolved into European-style theatre.¹¹ Such views were not only widespread among western academics, but also Arab scholars such as Mohammad al-Khozai, who refers to these indigenous traditions as ‘embryonic forms of drama’ that had not yet reached the more ‘complex’ European forms of theatre.¹²

Scholars Shmuel Moreh, Peter Chelkowski, and ‘Umar Muhammad al-Ṭālib have argued against the claim that theatre did not exist in the Arab and Islamic world prior to the introduction of European-style theatre in 1847.¹³ Furthermore, they stressed the significance of indigenous performance traditions, like the shadow theatre, for instance, which is part of the cultural heritage of the Arab and Islamic world.¹⁴ Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson have also critiqued Eurocentric approaches, arguing that indigenous

performance traditions existed in North Africa before the introduction of western-style performances in the nineteenth century.¹⁵

Drawing on a wide range of traditions including the dramatic storyteller (*Gouwāl*), Karagöz (puppet theatre), and the *meddah* (songs in praise of the Prophet Muhammad and the saints), Carlson and Amine argue that performance practices have been prevalent in North African societies for centuries.¹⁶ Their work has been a major contribution to the field of performance studies not only because it highlights the importance of these traditions, but also because of its scope, which covers a wide range of performance practices spanning from religious rituals such as the *dhikr* to modern day theatrical performances.¹⁷

Kamal Salhi has taken a similar approach arguing that how these performance practices relate to the social and cultural context of North Africa needs to be re-examined, while stressing the significance of non-western forms such as the *ḥalqa* (performing in a circle). These practices had an important influence on modern North African theatre, including on Moroccan writer and director Ṭayyib Ṣaddīqī and the Algerian playwright Kāteb Yācīne. Thus, examining these traditions is important for understanding the broader cultural context in which North African theatre has developed.¹⁸

Salhi refers briefly to the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals, arguing that scholars need to examine these performance traditions to understand how modern theatrical performances have been shaped by their cultural context.¹⁹ Salhi calls, then, for research that differs from the

anthropological study of Sufi communities, which is concerned with the social structure of these religious groups, whereas the focus of a performance studies scholar is on the performance event itself. This not only includes the cultural and symbolic meanings of the gestures performed, but also how they are incorporated into other performance contexts, including the theatre.²⁰ Such an approach not only highlights the influence of indigenous traditions on the modern theatre, but also creates opportunities for theatre practitioners to experiment with them.

The contribution of the authors cited is significant in that it stresses the importance and value of ingenious Arab and Islamic performance traditions. However, although Amine, Carlson, and Salhi mention the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals, their works provide a general overview of North African performance traditions rather than a comprehensive study of Sufi rituals in their own right. In this regard, the work of Deborah Kapchan on Gnawa rituals is a significant breakthrough, since it is a detailed ethnographic study of the Gnawa community of Morocco: it examines the staging of Gnawa music in non-ritual contexts, leading to their integration into the world music market.²¹

Kapchan has also examined indigenous traditions such as the *ḥalqa*, stressing that they are a means of understanding how culture is embodied in performance.²² She argues that *ḥalqa* performances are sites of ‘reflexivity’ through which Moroccans renegotiate gender relations in the community, since until relatively recently women did not participate in these performances.²³ In other words, indigenous traditions such as the *ḥalqa* generate cultural meanings that reflect the beliefs and worldview of the

communities in which they are performed. Although Kapchan's insights are certainly relevant to other contexts, her work has focused on Moroccan performances. Thus, there is still a need for more in-depth studies on the indigenous performance traditions of North Africa, which include the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals of Tunisia.

Drawing on the works of Carlson, Amine, Salhi, and Kapchan, I explore the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals from a performance studies perspective, stressing their relevance to modern theatrical practice through writing three plays where writing and language are also forms of making performance. The aim of this thesis, then, is not only to explore the symbolic and cultural meanings of the music, dance, gestures, and words performed in these rituals, but to also to experiment with the underlying principles that shape these performances in a theatrical context. My plays provide an example of how theatre practitioners can experiment with Sufi modes of performance derived from the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals, thereby stressing the importance of these indigenous Arab traditions, and also creating new opportunities for experimentation. Essential to this are Ibn 'Arabī's writings, which open ways for other theatre practitioners to engage in similar experiments while providing a theoretical framework that elucidates how particular philosophical principles are embodied in *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals.

Turner and Schechner on Theatre as Ritual

Mine is far from the first study to explore the relationship of theatre to ritual. Victor Turner, in this regard, offers a major contribution. According to Turner, cultural performances such as ritual are particularly important for anthropologists because they

make evident the beliefs of the communities studied and are the means through which their social and cultural values are constructed.²⁴ Drawing on Arnold Van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage*, Turner developed the concept of the 'social drama' to explain how cultural performances play a role in the transformation of society. Social dramas, he believes, are performed when conflict erupts in a community, causing the disruption of normal life. A performance activity such as ritual follows, through which reconciliation is established and a new order formed.²⁵ Thus, Turner's model of the social drama is divided into four phases: breach (of a social norm), crisis, redressive action, and reintegration.²⁶

Turner calls such performances 'liminal' because they represent states of ambiguity that create opportunities for change: they challenge the pre-established order, which culminates in the creation of new forms of social organization.²⁷ 'Communitas' and its sense of equality and solidarity emerge during these liminal phases, allowing members of a society to form bonds with each other. However, due to its temporary nature, this period of bond formation eventually subsides, leading to the establishment of new hierarchies.²⁸ The social importance of performance practices like ritual lies in how the pre-established order is renegotiated and restructured through symbolic actions that constantly reshape society.

Turner also examined theatre performances within the model of the 'social drama,' initially developed for the analysis of Ndembu rituals. He describes the state of being 'betwixt and between' with the term 'liminoid' to distinguish modern theatrical activity

in ‘complex’ societies from tribal rituals.²⁹ The major difference is that theatre performances and other cultural activities in industrial societies do not play an important role in the creation of social order. They differ, then, from tribal rituals in that they can critique existing power structures because they do not play an active role in their formation. This does not mean that all theatrical performances resist pre-existing structures; they merely have the potential to do so.³⁰

Another influential figure is Richard Schechner, whose collaboration with Turner led him to a new approach to the study of the performing arts, which he describes as ‘theatre anthropology.’ Schechner, who is both a theatre theorist and a practitioner, examined a wide range of performance traditions, notably from Japan, India, and Indonesia, stressing the importance of adopting an intercultural approach.³¹ In fact, one of Schechner’s major contributions to the field was that he highlighted the value and relevance of non-western traditions to the theatre, including religious performances and rituals. The latter, he argues, can create opportunities for a rich exchange between cultures, theatre-makers, and anthropologists.³² Anthropologists can help theatre practitioners understand the cultural contexts from which these performances have emerged, whereas actors and directors can help anthropologists better understand the techniques utilized in the performance.³³

Schechner asserts that several directors have adopted this intercultural approach to theatre making, principally Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, and Peter Brook.³⁴ How several of their works relate to the present study is discussed at greater length in Chapter Five. However, it should be mentioned here that theatre anthropology, as defined by Schechner

and Barba, allows theatre-makers to explore a variety of methods and performance techniques derived from disparate cultural frames. Barba defines theatre anthropology as ‘the study of human beings’ socio-cultural and physiological behavior in a performance situation.’³⁵ Performances such as the Japanese Noh theatre or Indian Kathakali are grounded in particular principles that give actors the opportunity to experiment with new forms of expression.³⁶ The salient difference between Schechner’s and Barba’s approaches to theatre anthropology is that the latter is interested in what is shared among a wide range of performance traditions, whereas the former emphasizes cultural differences.³⁷ For Schechner, these differences are precisely what create opportunities for ‘intercultural’ exchange. Essential to this is a focus on process, which led Schechner to Turner’s writings on ritual, with special attention to the notions of *communitas* and *liminality*.³⁸

Despite Turner’s significant contributions to the field of performance studies, his work was not pertinent to my study of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya orders. This is primarily because my focus is not on examining how Sufi rituals create a change in the social structure of these communities. My aim is to examine the metaphysical dimensions of the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra*, which necessitates the use of an Islamic intellectual framework that elucidates the meanings of these performances from a religious perspective. Furthermore, although interesting, Schechner’s and Barba’s intercultural approaches are not of much relevance to the present study because my aim is not to experiment with performance principles and traditions from various cultures. This thesis is much more limited in scope in that it is concerned with a specific North African tradition within a specific cultural

context, namely the *ḥaḍra* and *dhikr* rituals of the ‘Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya communities of Tunisia, and how the metaphysical ideas embodied in these performances can be explored by means of a theatrical text.

Studies on the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya Communities

Numerous anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and scholars of religion have studied the Sufi communities of North Africa. One of the earliest and most important contributions comes from Spencer Trimingham, who provides a comprehensive history of the Sufi orders.³⁹ In *The Sufi Orders of Islam*, Trimingham explains how these orders developed into social institutions across various parts the Islamic world, stressing the importance of spiritual genealogy through which new orders were continuously formed.⁴⁰ Since then, several scholars have conducted more in-depth studies of particular Sufi orders. They include Elmer Douglas, who examined the origins of the Shādhiliya order and whose translation of and commentary on the hagiography of Abū Ḥasan al-Shādhilī, the patron saint of the Shādhiliya, provides valuable insight into the history of the order.⁴¹ Although not the first study to stress the importance of al-Shādhilī as a figure in North African Sufism, it reveals important information about the early life, not previously known, of al-Shādhilī.⁴² In addition to the translation of several Shādhiliya litanies, some of which continue to be performed today, the book provides a summary of the teachings of the order, stressing the importance of the social dimensions of al-Shādhilī’s Sufism.⁴³

With regards to the more contemporary activities of the Sufi orders, the work of British Anthropologist Michael Gilsenan is fundamental to the fields of anthropology and

religious studies. Gilsenan examined Shādhiliya rituals in Egypt, focusing on a particular sub-branch of the Shādhiliya (al-Ḥāmidiya) able to better adapt to the changes taking place in twentieth century Egypt.⁴⁴ He argues that the Shādhiliya-Ḥāmidiya was one of the few orders that continued to recruit new members in a period when Sufism was in decline by creating a strong group identity that promoted social solidarity among its members.⁴⁵ Gilsenan's book on the Shādhiliya raises important questions about the influence of the broader social and cultural context on the activities of the Sufi orders, prompting some Sufi communities to develop new strategies to adapt to these changes.

More recent studies on the Sufi communities of Egypt include the work of Michael Frishkopf on the Shādhiliya, Jazūliya, and Bayyuimiya orders.⁴⁶ In contrast to other ethnomusicologists, who primarily focus on the musical dimension of Sufi performances, Frishkopf stresses the fundamental importance of poetry for Sufi ritual.⁴⁷ He introduces the term 'language performance' to describe the sounds, poems, and litanies performed in ritual, arguing that Islam is a 'language centric' religion that gives more attention to language than non-verbal sound.⁴⁸ What Frishkopf is calling for is not a literal interpretation of Sufi texts, but a focus on how language is performed in Sufi ritual. Such an approach draws attention to the function of language in Sufi ritual, not only with regards to the orders examined by Frishkopf, but also to the work of other ethnomusicologists who have primarily focused on the musical dimension of North African rituals.⁴⁹

Commenting more generally on ritual practice, religious studies scholar Kevin Schilbrack argues that ritual is the space where bodies are ‘inscribed’ with metaphysical meaning.⁵⁰ Drawing on Mircea Eliade’s work, Schilbrack argues that myth articulates the worldview and cosmology of a religious community, whereas ritual is the means through which these meanings are embodied.⁵¹ Schilbrack asserts that rituals have epistemological and cultural significance because they influence how participants perceive, experience, understand, and act in the world.⁵²

The value of Schilbrack’s work lies in its emphasis on the interrelation of philosophy and religious practice. Such an approach highlights the importance of metaphysics to religious communities like the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya, who need not study theological texts to understand and experience metaphysics. This does not exclude the possibility that Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya adepts might read such texts, including the works of Ibn ‘Arabī. Rather, it means that adepts are more likely to be exposed to these ideas through embodied performances rather than intellectual inquiry.

Scholars who have stressed the importance of metaphysics for the study of Sufi ritual include Patrick Ryan, who examines the practices of the Tījāniya order in West Africa.⁵³ According to Ryan, Aḥmad al-Tījānī (d.1815) the founder of the order, was significantly influenced by Ibn ‘Arabī, particularly by his writings on sainthood.⁵⁴ He argues that al-Tījānī made Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics much more accessible to the general public by incorporating his ideas into Tījāniya litanies regularly performed by members of the order.⁵⁵ Ryan’s detailed examination of these litanies reveals Ibn ‘Arabī’s influence,

particularly the idea that the Prophet Muhammad is the ontological intermediary between the Sufi adept and God. The influence of Ibn ‘Arabī on the founder of the Tījāniya order not only shows the importance of metaphysics for Tījāniya communities, but also raises the question whether there are other Sufi orders that have such explicit connections to Islamic philosophy.

The influence of Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics on the practices of Sufi communities is not limited to contemporary orders like the Tījāniya. Religious studies scholar Richard McGregor argues that the writings of Muslim philosophers like Ibn ‘Arabī had a significant role in the development of the Wafā’ order in Medieval Egypt; and that that members of the Wafā’ community were not only familiar with the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī, but also incorporated his teachings into the religious practices of the order.⁵⁶ Although McGregor’s book examines the practices of a Medieval Sufi community, it stresses the importance of exploring the relationship between Islamic philosophy and Sufi practice in the present day.

Many studies on contemporary Sufi communities do not explore the relationship between metaphysics and ritual practice. This is not due to any neglect on the part of these researchers but because the particular aspect of the ritual that each scholar concentrates on is greatly influenced by the discipline from which s/he explores the subject. For example, an ethnomusicologist will be much more interested in understanding musical structures and transcribing musical modes.⁵⁷ Anthropologists might prioritize the study of the social structure of a community or its relation to the broader political context.⁵⁸

With regards to the metaphysical dimensions of Sufi ritual, Pnina Werbner's research provides an interesting example of how valuable insights can be acquired when anthropologists give more attention to the religious beliefs of the communities studied.⁵⁹ Werbner conducted fieldwork on the Naqshabandi order in Pakistan. Her book contains a detailed explanation of Naqshabandi cosmology, which she decided to include as part of a consecrated effort to engage in a dialogue with her interlocutors, who considered Sufi cosmology an integral part of their rituals.⁶⁰ Such inclusion of cosmology in the study of Sufi ritual gives anthropologists insight into how members of the Sufi orders perceive their own religious activities. A more holistic understanding of Sufi religious practice requires this perspective, in addition to the other approaches cited above. In other words, Werbner and McGregor's work reveal that metaphysics forms an important aspect of Sufi ritual, which also deserves to be studied.⁶¹

Even though McGregor's primary focus is on the Medieval Wafā' order, he is one of few scholars who has given attention to the ritual practices of the Shādhiliya community in Tunisia.⁶² His article on the Shādhiliya *dhikr* at the shrine of Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan provides a detailed description of how the *dhikr* is performed, including the litanies attributed to the patron saint of the order, which are a fundamental part of the ritual.⁶³ McGregor's article is one of the rare English sources available on the ritual activities of the Shādhiliya community of Tunisia. He was, in fact, one of the first scholars to highlight the importance of these practices for the study of North African Sufism, rather than focus only on theological texts and Sufi treatises.⁶⁴

Although McGregor's article is exemplary in its examination of the *dhikr*, it is not a comprehensive study of the ritual activities of the Shādhiliya order, which also incorporates the women's *ḥaḍra* ritual. I have not been able to find any sources on the Tunisian Shādhiliya women's *ḥaḍra*, regardless of its important part in the religious life of the community. Furthermore, unlike McGregor's work on Wafā' order, his article on the Shādhiliya pays much less attention to the metaphysical dimension of the *dhikr*, which requires further study.⁶⁵

Ethnomusicologist Richard Jankowsky has also stressed the need to examine the socio-cultural significance of ritual in Tunisian society. His principal focus is on Stambeli, a religious tradition brought to Tunisia through the slave trade, comparable to the Gnawa rituals of Morocco.⁶⁶ According to Jankowsky, Stambeli brings about a state of transformation, catharsis, and even healing among its adherents. He also argues that Stambeli embodies the complex history of the sub-Saharan slave trade in Tunisia, which despite having been present for several centuries, continues to be regarded as 'other' in Tunisian society.⁶⁷ His book is the first in-depth study of Tunisian Stambeli rituals, and is a major contribution to the fields of ethnomusicology as well as religious studies.⁶⁸ Jankowsky's chapter on North African music in *Excursions in World Music* briefly mentions the 'Īssāwiya *ḥaḍra* ritual, as an example of how particular musical modes (*nūba*) are performed in Tunisia.⁶⁹ However, while it sheds light on the musical dimension of the *ḥaḍra*, it is not a comprehensive study of the 'Īssāwiya *ḥaḍra* nor does it explore the *dhikr*, which is an important part of the 'Īssāwiya's religious life.⁷⁰

Although much shorter in duration than the *ḥaḍra*, the *dhikr* is extremely important for the ‘Issāwiya community because it prepares adepts for the dangerous acts performed in the *ḥaḍra*. It may be of less interest to ethnomusicologists studying rituals in Tunisia because it does not include the use of musical instruments. However, it is fundamental to those interested in the metaphysical dimension of ‘Issāwiya rituals because it gives insight into the religious meanings of the dangerous acts performed in the *ḥaḍra*.

The lack of English sources on the Shādhiliya and ‘Issāwiya communities of Tunisia has meant that the few articles available are indeed informative and valuable. Yet these two rituals deserve greater study, particularly their metaphysical dimension and how adepts experience the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra*, which raise important questions about the relation between contemporary ritual practices and Islamic intellectual history. This is precisely the perspective from which I explore the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* so as to better understand the metaphysical ideas performed in ‘Issāwiya and Shādhiliya rituals and, as well, how they can be explored in Sufi-inspired plays.

Arabic Sources

Several Arabic books have been published on the Shādhiliya and ‘Issāwiya communities. Among the most important on the Sufi orders in Tunisia is Hishām ‘Ibīd’s on the hagiographies of the saints, containing a comprehensive list of Sufi orders in Tunisia, which he acquired from the Tunisian national archives.⁷¹ In addition to making this material much more accessible, the value of his book is its scope, involving also a

summary of how each Sufi order developed in Tunisia.⁷² Even though the focus of ‘Ibīd’s book is primarily on the history of these Sufi communities, it provides important information for those interested in the contemporary practices of these orders because of its study of the Sufi shrines where rituals continue to be performed in the present day.

More detailed studies on the history of the Shādhiliya order include the books of Muḥammad Būthīna and ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd, which focus on al-Shadhili, the order’s patron saint, and how he developed his own Sufi method and order (*ṭarīqa*).⁷³ They contain a summary of his teachings, sayings, the miracles attributed to him, and an explanation of his understanding of sainthood.⁷⁴ Al-Shādhilī did not leave behind a comprehensive written account of his teachings, but studies like these provide historical context and make it possible to understand better how the Shādhiliya has developed through time, and which teachings, myths, and practices continue to be relevant to Shādhiliya communities in the present day.

One of the most notable works on the ‘Īssāwiya order is ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Malḥūnī’s book on the popular Sufi narratives of Morocco, which focuses on the ‘Īssāwiya myths that have become part of popular Moroccan culture.⁷⁵ Malḥūnī argues that narratives about ‘Īssāwiya saints express complex Sufi ideas in a more accessible language. Although Malḥūnī is more concerned with Sufi myths that circulate within Morocco, he argues that this kind of ‘popular literature’ also exists among the ‘Īssāwiya communities of Tunisia.⁷⁶ In fact, these same myths are performed in the *ḥaḍra*, which confirms Malḥūnī’s claim

that the narratives about the patron saint of the order form an important part of the religious life of Ḥissāwiya adepts in different parts of North Africa.

More recent contributions on the Ḥissāwiya include a book written by a Moroccan Sufi shaykh. ‘Alāl al-Ḥissāwi’s *Al-Shaykh al-Kāmil Sīdī Muḥammad Bin-Ḥissa (The Perfect Shaykh Muḥammad Bin-Ḥissa)* contains poems, litanies, and teachings attributed to the patron saint of the order.⁷⁷ In addition to highlighting important historical connections between the Shādhiliya and Ḥissāwiya orders, the book contains copies of the prayers performed in Moroccan rituals.⁷⁸ This not only makes it possible to create a cross-cultural comparison between Moroccan and Tunisian Ḥissāwiya communities, but also stresses the importance of historical figures like al-Jazūlī, a medieval Sufi saint who composed a prayer that continues to be performed in the *dhikr* ritual to this day.⁷⁹

Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī is another important Sufi figure connected to both the Shādhiliya and Ḥissāwiya communities. In recent years, both Arab and non-Arab scholars have been giving more attention to al-Shushtarī who played a significant role in the development of the Medieval Sufi movement.⁸⁰ Muhammad al-Idrīsī and Sa‘īd Abū Fayūḍ compiled and published al-Shushtarī’s poems, making them available to scholars who may not have access to archives.⁸¹ Although not the first publication of the poems of al-Shushtarī, Idrīsī and Fayūḍ pay special attention to the philosophical ideas embedded in al-Shushtarī’s writing and stresses the importance of the poems composed in Andalusian vernacular.⁸²

Other of Idrīsī's works that highlight the interconnection of Medieval Sufi philosophy and practice include his probing study of the philosophy of al-Shushtarī, stressing the relevance of the intellectual environment of thirteenth-century Andalusia on the spiritual practices of Sufi mystics.⁸³ According to Idrīsī, al-Shushtarī was influenced by several Muslim philosophers, including Ibn 'Arabī.⁸⁴ His work makes it possible to establish a historical connection between the writings of Ibn 'Arabī and the Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya orders.⁸⁵ Such a connection is fundamental for understanding the metaphysical dimension of these rituals especially as it highlights the similarity of the concepts explored in Ibn Arabī's writing, the poems of al-Shushtarī, and the religious practices of the contemporary Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya orders.

The Arab researchers mentioned above have made significant contributions to the fields of religious and Sufi studies. However, one of the limitations of Arab scholarship is that most authors do not examine the contemporary ritual practices of the 'Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya communities. Their focus has been primarily on the history and teachings of these orders, rather than on how these beliefs are put into practice. The exception is al-'Īssāwī's book, which mentions the litanies recited in the *dhikr*, but does not contain a detailed account of how 'Īssāwiya rituals are performed.

The aforementioned books are extremely useful in providing historical context and elucidating how Islamic philosophy has been integrated into popular Sufi culture. My own research aims to build on the works of these Arab scholars by creating connections to contemporary ritual practice, focusing on how this popular Sufi culture is embodied in

the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra*. Thus, the primary focus of my work is on examining the culturally specific Islamic understanding of performance embedded in Ṭīssāwiya and Shādhiliya rituals. Approaching these traditions from this perspective not only highlights the rich cultural life of Tunisia, but also supports the claims of scholars such as Amine and Carlson, who insist that theatrical forms existed in North Africa prior to the introduction of western-style plays.⁸⁶

French Sources

One of the limitations of this thesis is the lack of reference to French studies on Sufism and Islam because, unfortunately, I do not speak French. Several important works on the Ṭīssāwiya community have not been translated or I was unable to access them in English translation. They include Emile Dermenghem's *Le culte des saints dans l'Islam maghrebin* and Rene Brunel's *Essai sur la confrérie religieuse des 'Aïssâoûa au Maroc*.⁸⁷ More contemporary French works on the Moroccan Ṭīssāwiya also include Mehedi Nabti's *Les Aïssawa: Soufisme, musique et rituels de transe au Maroc*.⁸⁸ Other significant contributions on Sufism unavailable in English include Louis's Rinn's *Marabouts et Khouan: étude sur l'Islam en Algérie* on the Sufi orders of Algeria and Louis Gardet's writings on Sufism and Islamic theology.⁸⁹

Unfortunately, the only books available to me in translation in English were Louis Gardet's *Mohammedanism*, an overview of the history of Islam, including Sufism, and Emile Dermenghem's *Muhammad and the Islamic Tradition*, which incorporates a detailed account of the Prophet Muhammad's ascent.⁹⁰ Both books provide a general

introduction to the Islamic tradition and I am certain that, had I been able to speak French, Gardet and Dermenghem's other works on Islam would have been valuable to my research. Perhaps the lack of translations of these French authors allows me to make a modest contribution to the study of the Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya orders in English.

Important books on Sufism translated into English include the work of Louis Massignon, who has made a significant contribution to the field of Islamic studies. One of Massignon's most influential books is *The Passion of al-Ḥallāj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, a detailed study of the tenth-century mystic al-Ḥallāj spanning over several volumes where he carefully examines different sources and accounts on the life and influence of this Medieval Sufi saint.⁹¹ The book was translated into English by Herbert Mason, who also made an important contribution to the field of religious studies with his own study of al-Ḥallāj.⁹² Mason summarizes the main aspects of al-Ḥallāj's life, discussed at length in Massignon's *The Passion of al-Ḥallāj*.

Mason has also written a dramatic narrative titled *The Death of al-Hallaj*, which depicts the trial and martyrdom of the Sufi saint.⁹³ It is worth noting that Ḥallāj has been the subject of several plays by Arab playwrights, including Ṣalāḥ 'Abd al-Ṣabūr.⁹⁴ How Ḥallāj has been portrayed in contemporary Arab theatre is discussed in detail in Chapter Five. However, it is important to mention this here to stress that al-Ḥallāj has become an important figure in the Arab and western imagination, the latter in particular facilitated by the works of Massignon.

Thus, one of Massignon's major contributions to the field of Islamic studies is that he drew attention to the figure of al-Ḥallāj, who was certainly not as well known prior to the publication of his work. Massignon has also stressed that Sufism grew out of the Islamic tradition and is intimately tied to the Qur'ān. His book *Essay on the Origins of the Technical Language of Islamic Mysticism* is useful for anyone studying Sufism as it explores the etymology of Sufi terms that he often traces back to the Qur'ān.⁹⁵ Although his contribution on earlier Sufis like Ḥallāj is extremely valuable, Massignon looked much less favorably on later figures such as Ibn 'Arabī, whose works he describes as 'degenerate' forms of mysticism.⁹⁶ This is because Massignon considered Neoplatonism to be a negative influence on Islamic mysticism, which made it overly esoteric, alienating it from the broader Muslim community.⁹⁷

French scholars who were more sympathetic to the work of later Muslim mystics include Henry Corbin among whose major contribution to the field of Islamic studies is *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, a detailed exploration of the epistemological value of the 'imagination' (*khayāl*) in Ibn 'Arabī's doctrine, which is essential to his cosmology.⁹⁸ Furthermore, Corbin's work valuably highlights the interrelation of Ibn 'Arabī's metaphysical writings and ascetic practice, foregrounding the importance of spiritual experience for his ontology.⁹⁹ Yet it is also important to take into account William Chittick's critique of Corbin's work, which, he argues, relies too heavily on *The Bezels of Wisdom*, failing to sufficiently consult other of Ibn 'Arabī's works. Furthermore, Corbin alludes to the idea that Ibn 'Arabī was influenced by Shi'ism, which, according to Chittick, is unfounded.¹⁰⁰ A similar critique was made by Islamic

studies scholar Michel Chodkiewicz, who asserts that there is no evidence that Ibn ‘Arabī was influenced by Shi‘ism.¹⁰¹

Notable French works on Ibn ‘Arabī include *The Quest for Red Sulphur*, a biography written by Claude Addas, distinguished by her attention to the social, political, and intellectual context in which Ibn ‘Arabī lived, in addition to her detailed examinations of his writing.¹⁰² The translation of the book into English made accessible important information on Ibn ‘Arabī’s life, previously unavailable to those who do not speak Arabic or Spanish.¹⁰³ More detailed explorations of particular aspects of Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrine include the work of Chodkiewicz, who carefully examines his writings on sainthood. Chodkiewicz argues that Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings summarize some of the most important aspects of the Sufi doctrine, including the notion of sainthood, which had an influence on the development of the social institution of the *ṭarīqa* (order).¹⁰⁴ Although he does not explore the practices of the orders, he stresses that Ibn ‘Arabī’s work is an important source for anyone exploring Islamic notions of sainthood.¹⁰⁵ English translation of his book makes available a thorough and succinct explanation of sainthood that provides an excellent introduction to Ibn ‘Arabī’s complex writings on the subject.¹⁰⁶

Ibn ‘Arabī: Works, Commentaries, and Translations

One of the most important sources regarding Ibn ‘Arabī in English is Chittick’s *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Cosmology*, which contains a detailed exploration of Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics.¹⁰⁷ To date, it remains one of the most comprehensive commentaries on Ibn ‘Arabī’s works, and translates several chapters from

the *Meccan Revelations*.¹⁰⁸ Chittick's eloquent translations are commendable, especially given the difficulty of capturing the nuances of Ibn 'Arabī's writing in another language. A valuable asset to those interested in Islamic philosophy, it clearly outlines the main themes of Ibn 'Arabī's ontology, ones to which he constantly returns not only in *The Meccan Revelations*, but in several other works.¹⁰⁹

James Winston Morris, another renowned Islamic studies scholar, has also contributed to the translation of parts of Ibn 'Arabī's works into English.¹¹⁰ His commentary and translation of chapter 367 of *The Meccan Revelations* and an excerpt from *Kitāb al-'Isrā'* (*The Book of Ascent*) are exceptional for their concise and lucid explanation of Ibn 'Arabī's understanding of the ascent experience.¹¹¹ Morris argues that the ascent represents 'a unifying symbolic framework' through which Ibn 'Arabī explores a wide range of metaphysical concepts. He also emphasizes the epistemological significance of spiritual experience in Ibn 'Arabī's doctrine.¹¹² Morris' work raises important questions about the relevance of Ibn 'Arabī's writing to the practices of contemporary orders like the 'Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya, who consider participation in the *ḥaḍra* a form of ascent. As explained in detail in the following chapters, Ibn 'Arabī's writings on the ascent is one of the aspects of his metaphysics most relevant to these Sufī communities. This is because the ascent is the means through which adepts acquire spiritual, philosophical, and cultural knowledge.

Other translations of Ibn 'Arabī's writings on the ascent include Angela Jaffray's *The Universal Tree and its Four Birds*.¹¹³ It is the first English translation of a work titled

Risālat al-Ittiḥād al-Kawnī (Treatise on Unification), previously only available in French, and is thus important to the field of Islamic studies.¹¹⁴ Jaffray's commentary contains important information about the figure of Khālid Ibn Sinān, to whom Ibn 'Arabī dedicates the work. According to Jaffray, Khālid represents the perfect human whose attributes Ibn 'Arabī describes through the image of the universal tree. Jaffray consults a wide range of sources, not least commentaries of Sufi shaykhs, to decipher the symbolic language of the text, elucidating how it relates to Ibn 'Arabī's ontology.¹¹⁵

As Jaffray has shown, consulting commentaries written by Sufi shaykhs can give insight into Ibn 'Arabī's complex metaphysics.¹¹⁶ This includes the work of 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulṣī (d.1731), a Ḥanafī Jurist and Sufi shaykh, associated with the Naqshabandiya and Qādiriya orders, who lived in Damascus under the rule of the Ottoman Empire.¹¹⁷ Al-Nābulṣī was significantly influenced by Ibn 'Arabī's doctrine, which he used to preach religious tolerance. Chittick looks unfavorably on al-Nābulṣī's reading of Ibn 'Arabī, which he asserts is often inaccurate.¹¹⁸ However, al-Nābulṣī's commentary on the chapter on Khālid in *The Bezels of Wisdom* does not contradict Ibn 'Arabī's writings on the subject in *Muḥaḍarat al-Abrār (In the Presence of the Virtuous)*.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, al-Nābulṣī's explanation contains interesting anecdotes not mentioned in other commentaries.¹²⁰ For example, he associates Khālid with the 'Anqā' (the phoenix) who also appears in Ibn 'Arabī's *Treatise on Unification*.¹²¹ According to Jaffray, the 'Anqā' represents a cosmic entity that has the ability to 'embrace all realities,' much like Khālid Ibn Sinān, who is a symbol of the perfect human in Ibn 'Arabī's poem.¹²²

The writings of the Medieval shaykh Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī (d.1350) is another helpful resource for the study of Ibn ‘Arabī. Al-Qayṣarī’s commentary on *The Bezels of Wisdom* provides a clear and concise explanation of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology.¹²³ Chittick asserts that this work differs from other commentaries because of the close attention al-Qayṣarī gives to text, avoiding tangential references to other aspects of metaphysics that do not explicitly relate to Ibn ‘Arabī’s work.¹²⁴ This is because al-Qayṣarī’s commentary contextualizes each chapter with references to the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* (prophetic sayings), and also contextualizes relevant concepts from Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrine that clarify the meaning of the dense text.

More contemporary commentaries on *The Bezels of Wisdom* include the work of ‘Abd al-Baqī Muftāḥ, an Algerian shaykh who published several books on Ibn ‘Arabī.¹²⁵ Muftāḥ’s book is unique in its focus on the sequence of chapters in *The Bezels of Wisdom*, which, according to Muftāḥ, represents the order in which the cosmic spheres were created.¹²⁶ His argument is based on an extensive discussion of numerology that simultaneously clarifies other aspects of Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrine, particularly with regards to the ontological function of the Divine Names.

One of the most frequently cited commentaries is that of Abū ‘Alā’ ‘Afīfī, among the first scholars to give serious attention to *The Bezels of Wisdom*, arguing that it is the most significant of Ibn ‘Arabī’s works because, in his view, it contributed to the development of a Sufī doctrine and terminology, relevant to Sufī communities over several centuries.¹²⁷ ‘Afīfī points out the similarity of certain concepts discussed by Ibn ‘Arabī to

the works of other philosophers such as Plato and Plotinus.¹²⁸ However, he is careful to stress that, although Ibn ‘Arabī drew on Islamic and Neoplatonic philosophy in the development of his ontology, he gave these ideas new meanings in accordance with his doctrine of the ‘unity of being.’¹²⁹ And even though Ibn ‘Arabī does not use this term, ‘Afīfī’s commentary shows Ibn ‘Arabī’s enormous contribution to Islamic philosophy.

The commentaries and translations discussed above have been all the more valuable for elucidating Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics and stressing the importance of his contributions as a philosopher, poet, and mystic. Dealing with Ibn ‘Arabī’s work can often be perplexing: not only has he written a vast number of books but the language he employs to explain his cosmology is complex. The work of the aforementioned authors has been essential in making Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings more accessible to the modern reader.

Ibn ‘Arabī himself is the author of over three hundred poetic, theological, and philosophical works.¹³⁰ The well-known works embrace *The Bezels of Wisdom*, a summary of his doctrine, and *The Meccan Revelations*, an extensive description of his ontology spanning several volumes.¹³¹ Although no less difficult to read, *The Meccan Revelations* contains detailed explanations of themes he refers to in *The Bezels of Wisdom* and other books and treatises which gives the reader a better understanding of his ontology.

Ibn ‘Arabī’s corpus includes several ascent narratives that stress that spiritual experience is a means to acquire metaphysical knowledge. Composed in Fez in 1199, *al-‘Isrā’ ila*

Maqām al-'Asra (*Ascent to the Station of the Night Travellers*) provides a poetic account of his journey through the cosmic spheres, confirming Ibn 'Arabī's elevated status among the saints.¹³² As noted by Morris, Ibn 'Arabī's writing on the ascent in *The Meccan Revelations* provides a better introduction because it is less dense than the previously cited work, which often makes references to complex metaphysical ideas difficult to grasp if one is not familiar with his writings.¹³³ Ibn 'Arabī recounts his ascent experience in Chapter 367, which also contains a lengthy discussion of Muhammad's journey through the spheres, stressing the relationship of spiritual inheritance between prophets and saints.¹³⁴ The chapter reinforces Ibn 'Arabī's claim that knowledge can only be acquired through direct experience (*dhawq*, taste), for it is through his encounter with these different prophets in the ascent that he obtains metaphysical knowledge.¹³⁵

Ibn 'Arabī discusses the practical aspects of mysticism in *Risālat al-Anwār fī Asrār al-Khalwa* (*The Treatise of Lights on the Secrets of Spiritual Retreat*). Written in Konya in 1204-5, the treatise provides advice to advanced Sufi adepts on how to perform spiritual retreats (*khalwa*).¹³⁶ Ibn 'Arabī asserts that to progress along the path one must frequently perform the *dhikr* (remembrance of God), avoid certain foods (such as animal fat), and ensure proper conduct (*sulūk*) when graced with the divine presence.¹³⁷ The work also describes the different stages of the ascent, warns seekers of the dangers of the path, and alludes to many ideas discussed at greater length in other books, including the metaphysics of time.¹³⁸ These works highlight the importance of spiritual practice in the seeker's journey to God, an idea that recurs frequently in Ibn 'Arabī's writings.¹³⁹ In my own work I have attempted to point out the centrality of the idea that knowledge is

acquired through practice for both Ibn ‘Arabī and members of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya, thus stressing the relevance of Islamic intellectual history to contemporary ritual performance.

Because my interest is in examining the relationship between Islamic metaphysics and Tunisian Sufi rituals, I concentrate on the aspects of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology most relevant to the practices of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya communities. For this reason, I focus on Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings on sainthood, the *barzakh* (the intermediate realm), the perfect human, and the ascent experience. Furthermore, because this thesis explores the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals as performance events, it gives particular attention to Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings on embodiment and the more practical dimensions of his mystical doctrine. Thus, it differs from the works of the aforementioned Islamic studies scholars in its primary aim to explore how the metaphysical ideas described in Ibn ‘Arabī’s writing are put into practice in the rituals of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya orders, forming the basis for my theatrical experiment of writing three plays. Reading Ibn ‘Arabī’s work against the backdrop of these Tunisian Sufi orders reveals a shared understanding of embodiment, which, I argue, represents a culturally specific Islamic notion of performance. This had a fundamental influence on my writing process, as explained in detail in the preface to my three plays, which were based on a dialogue between my ethnographic research and the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī.

Fieldwork, Performance Ethnography, and Writing

One of the defining features of PaR is the inclusion of a creative practice that is part of the methodology and presentation of the research findings.¹⁴⁰ This does not mean that PaR excludes the use of quantitative and qualitative methods derived from the fields of anthropology and sociology. Its strength lies in the ability to combine these methods with a creative practice.¹⁴¹

For my own research on Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya rituals I worked in an interdisciplinary way, merging performance ethnography and participant-observation in addition to my own creative practice as a playwright. Playwriting formed an essential part of my research methodology in the sense that it gave me insight into Sufi practices of poetic composition. As is the case in several other Sufi communities, poetry forms a fundamental part of Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya rituals.¹⁴² These poems are composed through intoxication (trance-like states) through which adepts constantly generate new material, including music, which becomes part of the ritual tradition. Thus, my own experience of writing in this performative Sufi manner allowed me to understand better how members of these two Sufi communities constantly develop and transform the tradition.

As explained in detail in Chapter Five, the three plays included in this thesis are a creative representation of the research findings based on my ethnographic fieldwork in Tunisia in tandem with my reading of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writing. The plays incorporate many of the performance techniques used in *ḥaḍra* and *dhikr* rituals, which encompass

repetition, gradual rhythmic acceleration, and the invocation of images of nature to describe encounters with the divine. What is perhaps more significant still is that the plays embody a Sufi understanding of performance which, in both the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī and the rituals of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya, is predicated upon maintaining a tension between the immanent and transcendent attributes of God. This tension forms a fundamental part of the Sufi experience of writing, which represents a human encounter with the divine (Chapter Four).

Performance Ethnography

Nelson stresses the importance of practice-based epistemologies:

In light of the performance turn and an increasingly accepted insight into the centrality of ‘embodied knowledge’ in perception and cognition, there are two practical implications for ‘know-how’ that need highlighting in a PaR context. First, such knowledge is often taken for granted by arts practitioners and, second, beyond articulation in doing, much of it is not easy to make manifest. Indeed, one of the key challenges of PaR is to make the ‘tacit’ more ‘explicit.’¹⁴³

In addition to quantitative and qualitative research, PaR takes into account the subjective experiences of the performer/researcher, which, Nelson notes, are integral to knowledge production.¹⁴⁴

In ethnographic fieldwork, subjective experience is important in what it reveals about the broader cultural context. Cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who conducted fieldwork in Indonesia and Morocco, has addressed the debate on subjective and objective approaches to ethnographic writing, saying that the aim of the anthropologist is

to reveal the ‘conceptual structures’ and values shared among members of a social group.¹⁴⁵ This is symbolic interpretation, as is showing how structures influence people’s behaviour within a social context, which Geertz describes as ‘thick description.’¹⁴⁶ The ethnographer’s work lies precisely at this intersection of the subjective, which is interpretation, and the objective, which relates to the structure of society. An analysis of social actions reveals the cultural patterns that form an objective reality that both structures and is structured by the subjective experiences of members of a social group.¹⁴⁷ Thus, Nelson’s argument requires amendment because ethnographic fieldwork encompasses embodied experience not only as subjective engagement with the society studied, but also is a form of cultural learning about the community.

Social anthropologist Edward Tylor demonstrates the importance of religious beliefs as a constituent part of culture, asserting that ‘Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.’¹⁴⁸ Beliefs also include religious beliefs, which manifest themselves as various forms of religious practice. Like Geertz, Talal Asad considers the anthropologist an ‘interpreter’ who reveals the cultural beliefs embodied in social actions.¹⁴⁹ Concerned with the anthropological study of ‘third world’ societies, Asad asserts that although researchers cannot be completely objective, it is still possible to develop an approach more sensitive to the perspectives of the communities studied. Anthropologists, then, should not try to explain cultural phenomena in Christian or European terms but engage in a serious cultural dialogue with their informants.¹⁵⁰ Asad stresses that the

ethnographer's work is not separate from the power structures in which s/he is operating, and, for this very reason, it is essential to avoid recreating power dynamics that privilege European perspectives in the study of 'third world' societies.¹⁵¹ By drawing attention to the politics of 'cultural translation,' Asad reveals the importance of giving attention to the worldview of the community studied. And this insight is fundamental to my approach throughout, including to my plays.

My own research engages in this kind of cultural dialogue by searching for sources that facilitate my exploration of the ritual practices of the Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya communities within philosophical and religious frameworks. The metaphysical ideas embodied in these rituals are integral to the religious life of these communities, and so placing these traditions in dialogue with Islamic philosophy, as articulated by Ibn 'Arabī, enables understanding how Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya adepts experience *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals. Essential to this was performing all of the actions that were expected of a Sufi adept, including intoxication.

This embodied approach, also known as 'performance ethnography,' makes it possible for the ethnographer to learn from participation on the inside about the culture of her/his research subjects.¹⁵² Like participant observation, it entails spending an extensive amount of time with the community studied in cultural and social activities.¹⁵³ However, performance ethnography differs from participant observation in that it is a form of cultural learning rooted in a practice-based epistemology providing insight into how members of the community internalize, experience, and perform culture through their

own performance practice. It is not uncommon for ethnomusicologists to engage in this kind of performance-based fieldwork by learning to play indigenous instruments, which allows them to acquire a deeper understanding of the cultural meanings associated with the music.¹⁵⁴ It is precisely this kind of cultural learning, fundamental to performance ethnography, that has been foundational for my research.

Danish anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup shares this type of participatory performance-based approach.¹⁵⁵ Drawing on Barba's theatre anthropology, Hastrup argues that:

The ethnographer in the field is comparable to the actor onstage: the ethnographer, too, has to acculturate her body to new patterns of appropriate action. Fieldwork itself can be seen as a second enculturation...both the actor's and ethnographer's enterprise critically involve reflexivity: both have to reflect upon their reflections, or to be aware of their awareness.¹⁵⁶

It is precisely this reflexivity combined with practice that gives epistemological value to the experience of the ethnographer. Essential to this methodological approach is an understanding of which aspects of personal experience are shared with the broader community, which illuminates the social and cultural processes at issue. These cultural performances include reactions, gestures, and even perceptions that are internalized through socialization.¹⁵⁷

In my own work I have taken a similar approach to Hastrup and experienced a second acculturation through my own embodied experiences of eating, drinking, and participating in Sufi rituals, which allowed me to understand the cultural and social

values that are second nature to members of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya communities. However, unlike Hastrup, who had no difficulties conducting the research because she had known the Odin theatre for a long time and was on friendly terms with Barba, I did not know anyone who was part of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya communities prior to going to Tunisia. When I arrived in Tunisia I was aware that the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals were performed at Sufi shrines. I first visited the shrine of Sīdī Miḥriz in the Medina where I met some Shādhiliya followers who told me that the *dhikr* ritual was performed on Wednesdays. I asked to speak to the shaykhs but none of them were there.

I left the shrine and wandered around the Medina until I stopped at a small bookshop owned by a Shādhiliya follower. When I told him about my research, he helped me to arrange a meeting with the Shādhiliya shaykhs. I met him and the shaykhs a few hours later at a nearby café. I explained that I was interested in exploring Shādhiliya rituals in a metaphysical framework, drawing on the works of Ibn ‘Arabī. The shaykhs gave me permission to conduct the research and welcomed me warmly saying ‘you are our daughter,’ a phrase commonly used in Tunisia to make foreigners feel more at home. The shaykhs also informed the adepts that I was there conducting fieldwork and asked them to take care of me, particularly an older woman called Zahra, who regularly attended the rituals.

I contacted members of the ‘Īssāwiya through another woman, Selima, whom I met at the shrine of Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd and whose family, I discovered subsequently, was affiliated with both the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya orders (curiously her father is named Ḥasan al-Shādhilī

and claims to be a descendant of the saint Abū al-Ḥasan al- Shādhilī). Through Selima I met Munthir, an ‘Īssāwiya adept who introduced me to the shaykhs of the order. After the shaykhs gave me permission to conduct the research, I began attending ‘Īssāwiya rituals, usually accompanied by Selima or Eskender, Munthir’s friend who was supposed to help me since Munthir cannot speak to me while he is performing intoxication.

I later learned how to perform intoxication (excluding extreme acts such as eating glass in the ‘Īssāwiya *ḥaḍra*) under the guidance of the shaykhs and adepts. This was invaluable to my understanding what adepts were experiencing in *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals and how this related to the broader cultural Sufi context. Furthermore, performing the songs and litanies of the ‘Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya orders helped me realize the importance of metaphysics for these communities who were not interested in engaging in an intellectual discussion about these ideas. Instead, the aim was to experience them in the body, considered one of the highest forms of knowledge.

Sarah Pink emphasizes the importance of embodied experience in fieldwork, arguing that the senses reveal important information to the ethnographer because they mediate her/his experience of culture.¹⁵⁸ She asserts that participant observation prizes visual data ignoring the other senses, which contribute to the production of cultural and social meaning. Thus, one of the main challenges that face sensory ethnographers is learning how to interpret embodied experience to understand how cultural and social meaning is constructed.¹⁵⁹ Such an approach is particularly suited to the study of Tunisian Sufi rituals in which sensory experience – sharing food, dancing, singing, playing music, and

reciting the Qur’ān – is a fundamental part of the adept’s knowledge of God. Some commentary on Islamic epistemology is necessary here because it provides an example of how these embodied approaches are interpreted in an Islamic context. Its relevance to the Sufi community is that it elucidates the practice-based approach through which shaykhs guide their followers, which also shaped my own research methodology, as is explained in the following section.

Islamic Epistemology: Ibn ‘Arabī and the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya Orders

Although my research necessarily draws on western anthropological writings, it is fundamentally influenced by Islamic epistemology, particularly the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī. His works provide a critical vocabulary and theoretical framework relevant to the practices of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya because they are grounded in the same religious tradition and have a similar approach to epistemology.

According to Ibn ‘Arabī, knowledge is attained by engaging in acts of worship that allow the Sufi to embody particular divine attributes.¹⁶⁰ One’s knowledge of God is limited to that which can be experienced in the finite form of the body. Anything beyond that, which relates to the divine in the form of the Absolute, cannot be known.¹⁶¹ Thus, the body is a medium or vessel for the self-disclosure of God, which allows the human subject to experience the Absolute through its revelation in a limited form.¹⁶²

Performance is an essential part of the Sufi path, for it is through the performance of supererogatory acts such as the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals that members of the Shādhiliya

and the ʿĪssāwiya acquire proximity to God and experience the divine attributes. Sufi shrines are generally not spaces where adepts engage in intellectual discussions. Rather, members of the order explore different aspects of Sufi ontology through embodied performances that are perceived as encounters with God. Thus, epistemology for both Ibn ʿArabī and members of the Shādhiliya and the ʿĪssāwiya is centred on the notion that knowledge is acquired through practice.¹⁶³

I decided to engage in fieldwork with this embodied approach shaped by Ibn ʿArabī's writings on epistemology and my own observations on the experiences of Sufi adepts in *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals. This meant that the only way for me to conduct the research was to become a Sufi adept myself to understand what kind of knowledge such experiences offered to members of the Shādhiliya and ʿĪssāwiya communities and how it was acquired. My early fieldwork experiences encouraged me to engage with the *ḥaḍra* and *dhikr* rituals with this approach, particularly since members of the Shādhiliya and ʿĪssāwiya mostly avoided responding directly to my questions and would recommend that I perform a particular ritual or visit a holy site. This in itself shows the integral importance of doing, of practice, to the study of Sufi ritual.

Prior to my attending any *ḥaḍra* and *dhikr* rituals at the shrines of Sīdī Miḥriz, Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan, Sīdī Bou-Saʿīd, and Sīdī ʿAzīzī, I prepared interview questions and organized meetings with ʿĪssāwiya and Shādhiliya shaykhs and followers. After attending the first *dhikr* ritual, it quickly became evident that none of these interviews was going to be helpful. The shaykh of the Shādhiliya welcomed me warmly, recommending that I attend

the *dhikr* ritual twice a week, and the women's *ḥaḍra* during the *mawsim* – the fourteen weeks of the summer. I then asked the shaykh about the gestures Sufi adepts perform during the *dhikr* ritual and if they had any symbolic meanings. He turned to me and said 'you should perform the evening prayer at al-Zaytūna mosque.'

Initially I thought the shaykh was encouraging me to be a more pious Muslim, and so I ignored his advice. Three days later, I decided to go to al-Zaytūna mosque and pray. Upon completing the prayer, I realized that the gestures performed in both the *ḥaḍra* and *dhikr* rituals were derived from the daily prayers. If you ask 'Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya adepts to tell you about their ascent experience, they respond with statements such as 'knowledge is revelation and this is given in the *dhikr*' or 'knowledge is in the heart.'¹⁶⁴ This early field experience taught me that one of the difficulties of trying to acquire information through interviews is that the spiritual knowledge revealed to those who attend the rituals is considered deeply personal and is often referred to as *sirr* (a secret). This is because epistemology, for members of the 'Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya, is rooted in the idea that knowledge is acquired through practice, which is necessarily personal to the one who practices. It is not a matter of rational formulation.

Thus, the only way I could conduct the fieldwork was through embodied practice-based research that would allow me to understand how Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya adepts internalize and perform Sufi culture. This necessitated long-term (rather than short) ethnographic fieldwork which took place between 2016-2019 (see Table.1 in the appendix for exact dates) and included attending the weekly Shādhiliya rituals and

‘Īssāwiya performances that only take place in the ‘season’ (*mawsim*). The three years I lived in Tunisia allowed me to spend a significant amount of time with my informants at cafés, in their homes, and walking around the Medina and the village of Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd. Engaging in these activities was important not only because it helped me gain the trust of my informants, but also because it gave me insight into how the metaphysical ideas explored in Sufi ritual are integrated into the practices of everyday life.

For this reason, I made sure to live in close proximity to the communities I was studying. During the first phase of the fieldwork, I lived in the Medina, near the shrine of Sīdī Miḥriz and later moved to the suburb of La Marsa to be closer to the ‘Īssāwiya community of Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd. I also visited many Sufi shrines across Tunisia, including the tomb of Sīdī ‘Alī ‘Azūz in Zaghuan, Šīdī ‘Alī al-Makkī in Ghār al-Milḥ, Sīdī Bou-Makhlūf in al-Kāf, and Sīdī ‘Alī al-Nafī in the desert oasis of Naḥḥa, which were not included in the thesis due to limited word length. However, these visits were important because they were part of my acculturation into a Tunisian Sufi way of being.

I attended *dhikr* rituals on Wednesdays and Saturdays at the shrines of Sīdī Miḥriz and Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan. During the season for performing rituals, normally between late May and mid-September, I visited the shrine of Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan on Thursday mornings, where the Shādhiliya *ḥaḍra* takes place. Subsequently, I spent a much more significant amount of time in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd and La Marsa, attending the ‘Īssāwiya *dhikr*, *ḥaḍra*, and *mānga*, which are not performed during the rest of the year. The shaykhs and followers of the orders considered me an adept and I behaved accordingly. I recited litanies, sang, danced,

shared food with other adepts, made supplications to the saint, performed the daily prayers at Sufi shrines, and took blessed incense and candles to my home. I also performed many rituals on my own, prescribed to me by Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya shaykhs, such as reciting certain litanies and verses from the Qur’ān.¹⁶⁵

I first experienced intoxication (*takhmīr*) on 7 January 2017 at a *dhikr* ritual at the shrine of Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan. We had just finished reciting the Litany of the Sea that is attributed to al-Shādhilī and began rhythmically repeating the Divine Name *Huwa*, one of the ninety-nine names of God mentioned in the Qur’ān. I concentrated deeply on the recitation and closed my eyes until all the sounds around me began gradually to fade away. Without realizing what was happening, I lost consciousness, only to wake up in the arms of Zahra who was pouring water on my face.

When the ‘season’ started in June, I attended the women’s *ḥaḍra* ritual. My experience of intoxication at the *dhikr* ritual helped me perform intoxication in the *ḥaḍra* because I understood which bodily techniques induced these heightened emotional states. Although I had danced at prior *ḥaḍra* performances, the experience of intoxication was completely different. I began to move my head from side to side. A woman tied a cloth around my waist and I continued dancing until I lost consciousness. The following week I had a very different experience at the *ḥaḍra*. The musicians were singing a song in praise of Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan. I listened intently then suddenly began to cry because I was so overcome with the beauty of the music. I later learned that this was another way to experience intoxication. This also helped me understand that intoxication was not only about the use

of certain bodily techniques and gestures, but also about how adepts interpret sensory information.

My experience of intoxication at the ‘Īssāwiya *ḥaḍra* ritual was different (adepts do not perform intoxication in the *dhikr*). This is because ‘Īssāwiya shaykhs focus on specific adepts called *fuqarā*’ (impoverished ones). Nonetheless, I was able to experience intoxication along with several other women at the ‘Īssāwiya *ḥaḍra*. Although I did not ingest or expose myself to dangerous objects, my more mild experience of intoxication at the ‘Īssāwiya *ḥaḍra* made it possible for me to comprehend how adepts can experience intense states of concentration that protect them from harm.

The shaykhs of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya encouraged me to engage with the rituals in this manner, constantly offering guidance whenever it was needed. Becoming a Sufi adept allowed me to acquire a better understanding of what my informants were experiencing in *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals. Like the anthropologists who engaged in embodied research, as cited above, I was able to achieve this through extensive self-reflection on my experience of attending and participating in the rituals, understanding how these performances related to a broader Tunisian Sufi culture. The writings of Ibn ‘Arabī, through which I acquired a deeper understanding of Islamic metaphysics, made it possible for me to comprehend how it is embodied in Sufi ritual.

One of the ways in which I engaged in this kind of self-reflection was through writing after attending a ritual, which occasionally included examination of field notes and

recordings. I also ensured that my own observations and analyses of the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* were relevant to the experience of my informants by having casual conversations with the shaykhs and adepts, where they would provide indirect feedback on my research findings through their commentary on my ‘realizations’ as a Sufi adept.

For the shaykhs, the associations I made between metaphysical ideas and the gestures and actions performed in the rituals were part of my integration into a Sufi way of being, but through a more ‘intellectual path,’ as one Shādhiliya shaykh put it. The importance of self-reflection for this kind of fieldwork was that it made apparent which aspects of my personal experience were shared with members of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya communities, and it was a means of understanding how metaphysics is integrated in a popular Sufi culture.

Writing as Fieldwork

My embodied research involved creative writing, which was essential for the development of the three plays integral to this thesis. This practice of writing during and after *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals was an activity I shared with the Tunisian Sufi community, for which creative writing, particularly poetry, is considered a divine revelation (*fath*): it is one of several ways in which members of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya make manifest the intense states experienced in intoxication.

This writing differs from other practices of creative composition in that it is perceived as a human-divine encounter in which God speaks through the Sufi adept. Sufi approaches

to writing are explained in Chapter Four, and more details on the creative process and how I wrote *The Sacred Triangle of Silence*, *Paths to the Infinite Forest*, and *The Eternal Seed* can be found in the preface to my plays. However, it is important to note here that playwriting was part of my research methodology: it allowed me to understand what Sufis were experiencing when they engaged in this kind of divinely inspired writing.

Writing, for the Shādhiliya and ʿĪssāwiya, is closely tied to the intense physical sensations central to the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals. It is also one of several ways in which Sufi adepts perform annihilation in God, and it is precisely this ‘loss of self’ that makes it possible for the divine to speak through them. The writing of my plays was induced by similar experiences of intoxication. Writing in these heightened emotional states allowed me to understand how my informants engaged in the practice of collective poetic composition. However, the main difference between my creative writing practice and that of my Sufi informants was that their poems were integrated into the repertoire of songs performed in *ḥaḍra* rituals, whereas mine were compiled and used to create three plays for the PhD.

This raises the question of what an embodied practice-based approach reveals about Sufi writing practices that *cannot* be captured through participant observation. Performances of intoxication, including divinely inspired writing, are contingent upon maintaining a delicate balance between the transcendent and immanent attributes of God. The centrality of this idea to Shādhiliya and ʿĪssāwiya rituals is made especially apparent in performances of intoxication that allow adepts to feel God’s presence in the body without

asserting that they are identical to God. The notion that intoxication is a human-divine encounter is at the very heart of Sufi practices of poetic composition that allow adepts to write ‘God’s words.’

Essential to reaching these heightened emotional states is engaging in physical practices such as breath regulation through singing, which is vital to *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals. Acquiring a holistic understanding of how intoxication is induced requires some form of performance practice that makes apparent the physical and emotional processes that make divinely inspired writing possible. Performing intoxication made it easier for me to understand the importance of the corporeal techniques used in the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* for writing, through which adepts constantly generate new creative material, ensuring the continuation of the ritual tradition.

Participant Observation

Spending a significant amount of time doing fieldwork allowed me to approach the research in different ways. In addition to embodied ethnographic research, I used the more standard method of participant observation, which helped clarify how my personal experience related to that of my informants. This necessitated attending the rituals without being an active participant because entering into a state of intoxication would make it very difficult for me to observe what others were doing.

Methods of data collection included taking extensive field notes, taking time to write my observations on the ritual after each session, taking videos and photos, recording music,

and conducting interviews that primarily took place in casual settings such as the café, sitting informally and asking my informants for permission to take notes or record. Before conducting any of my research, I made it clear to both the shaykhs and other members of the Sufi communities that I was a PhD student who would be using the material I collected during the time I spent with them to write my dissertation. They agreed to this without any qualms.

I also told the shaykhs and adepts that I was interested in exploring the rituals within the framework of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology and, as a result, many of my questions were more focused on the metaphysical dimensions of the ritual. I tried my best to remain as open as possible to other perspectives that could give me more insight into my informants’ experience of the ritual. This may have occasionally meant that members of the ‘Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya were more likely to try to explain things to me in a metaphysical framework. This made observing the behaviour of my informants in *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* ritual even more important in order to determine if it was compatible with what I had been told in casual meetings and interviews.

It was relatively easy for me to be integrated into both the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya communities. One of the reasons why I did not face difficulties may have been my identity as a Palestinian Muslim woman, who, from the perspective of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya, was part of the broader community of believers (*umma*). This also gave me access to the Shādhiliya *ḥaḍra*, which is exclusive to women, with the exception of the

caretakers of the shrine and a few men who were related to one of the musicians (*tījāniya*).

Furthermore, all but the ‘Īssāwiya *dhikr*, the rituals included in my research are open to all members of the public and are thus relatively easy to access. Attending the ‘Īssāwiya *dhikr* at Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd was more challenging because, in addition to the fact that women are not generally allowed to attend this ritual, it is also private and specifically for Sufi adepts called *fuqarā’* who prepare for the *ḥaḍra* with the shaykhs of the order. After I explained to the shaykhs that it was important for my research to attend the ritual in order to understand how it relates to the other activities of the ‘Īssāwiya, they kindly allowed me to attend and record the *dhikr*.

For the first six months, I avoided taking any video or sound recordings so as not to disturb the adepts. Initially, I thought that I would be able to memorize all of the songs and litanies performed in these rituals. However, this proved to be too difficult and so I asked the shaykhs and Sufi adepts for permission to record, which was quickly granted. Thus, in addition to my field notes, I also relied on video and sound recordings for the analysis of the rituals. As noted by social anthropologist Jack Goody, the use of recording equipment substantially alters the experience of fieldwork, making it much easier for the anthropologist to observe variations in how religious rituals are performed, which may have been difficult to notice with the use of field notes only.¹⁶⁶ The use of video and sound recordings certainly enriched my fieldwork experience because it gave me access to more data that I could analyse later, as opposed to trying my best to take as many notes

as possible during each performance. This was particularly helpful for my analysis of the dance and gestures.

However, the use of recordings also raised important ethical questions that I needed to address with regards to the safety and privacy of the communities involved. Before taking any videos, photographs, or sound recordings, I always made sure that I had the consent of my informants and made it clear that this material would be included in my dissertation. I would begin by introducing myself, explain what the research was, and clarify why I was conducting the research. After I ensured that I had consent, I would begin to record or take photos.

Getting permission to record the rituals was not difficult because recording technologies, particularly phones, are prevalent in Tunisia and it is not uncommon for those who attend the *dhikr* and *ḥadra* to take photos or videos of Shādhiliya and ‘Issāwiya rituals, which are then shared with family and friends on various social media platforms including Youtube and Facebook. Many of these rituals have also been filmed and broadcasted by Tunisian film production companies.¹⁶⁷ It was therefore easy to get permission from the shaykhs and ritual participants, who were accustomed to being recorded.

Furthermore, with the exception of the ‘Issāwiya *dhikr*, the rituals were all public events that anyone could attend, and it was, therefore, generally understood that performances were not a private experience. For the ‘Issāwiya *dhikr*, I acquired permission from the shaykhs and adepts who thought it was acceptable for me to record for the purposes of

research. They also gave me a written copy of the litany performed in the *dhikr*. The only recording equipment I used was an iPhone 6, which can take surprisingly high quality images and recordings.



Figure 1. People taking photos/videos at a *ḥaḍra* ritual at Sīdī Bou-Sa'īd.

I also recorded the interviews that I conducted with Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya shaykhs and adepts. These interviews were informal and the majority of them took place at Sufi shrines, cafés, or in people's homes. I found that my informants were much more responsive to casual discussions, as opposed to more formal interviews, which they avoided because they believed that the best way they could teach me about Sufism was through practice. I regularly obtained consent from my informants by explaining what the research was about and asking for permission to record the session. And when a new person joined, I would stop recording and only resume after obtaining her/his consent.

Manuscripts and Archive Visits

During my fieldwork in Tunisia, I met with members of the Shādhiliya and the ‘Īssāwiya almost daily in the Medina or Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd who were there for a casual coffee, to socialize with friends, or to rest after a *dhikr* or *ḥaḍra* ritual. It was at one of these meetings (on 23 July 2016) that I was given a copy of *Nibrās al-Ittiqiyā’ wa Dalīl al-Inqiyā’* (*The Lamp of Protection and the Signs of Purity*), a prayer book attributed to al-Shadhili that contains the litanies performed in the Shādhiliya *dhikr*.¹⁶⁸ It has two parts: litanies attributed to al-Shādhilī (*aḥzāb*); and prayers composed by anonymous followers (*wazīfa*), which are taught through oral tradition.¹⁶⁹

On 8 August 2017 I was given an ‘Īssāwiya manuscript titled *Safīna*, which was invaluable to my research because it contained all of the songs, litanies, and myths performed in ‘Īssāwiya rituals. I was at a café in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd and ran into Munthir, an adept who performs intoxication with fire. Several other members of the ‘Īssāwiya joined us, and Munthir began to tell us a story about the patron saint of the order. I soon realized that this was the myth performed in the *ḥaḍra* and so I asked him if there were other narratives that were also performed and if they had any metaphysical significance. His first response was that I needed to learn how to perform intoxication, but then told me about the *Safīna* manuscript that had the answers to my questions.

The following day, I met Munthir at the same café. He was accompanied by Eskander, a ‘lover (*muḥib*)’ of the ‘Īssāwiya but not an adept himself. Munthir called several ‘Īssāwiya shaykhs. It was not easy to locate the manuscript because the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra*

are primarily oral traditions that adepts and shaykhs learn through performance. Thus, the *Safīna* does not circulate widely within the ‘Issāwiya community. A few hours later, an ‘Issāwiya adept told Munthir that he found the manuscript at the ‘Issāwiya shrine of Sīdī ‘Ammār in the suburb of Ariyāna. Two hours later, the adept met us at the same café with the manuscript. We then went to a bookshop to scan it. We made three copies, one for me and one for Munthir and Eskander, who decided it would be useful for them to have one too.

According to members of the ‘Issāwiya, this manuscript originates from Morocco. It is possible that it is associated with Morocco because the patron saint of the ‘Issāwiya is from there. There is no indication in the text whether the manuscript was written in Morocco or Tunisia, or when. My informants did not know who wrote the manuscript, either. The only information we have about the author appears in the introduction where he asserts that he was initiated into the ‘Issāwiya order in Fez.¹⁷⁰ He then states that the book contains a summary of the teachings of Muhammad Bin-‘Issa and stories about ‘Issāwiya saints.

The manuscript is composed of 195 pages and is divided into three parts. The first contains the hagiography of Bin-‘Issa and a collection of narratives written in classical Arabic about the miracles (*karāmāt*) attributed to him.¹⁷¹ Many of these narratives are performed in the ‘Issāwiya *ḥaḍra*. In fact, this part of the manuscript was fundamental for understanding the relation between myth and ritual, a connection that can be easily overlooked if one was not familiar with these narratives prior to attending a *ḥaḍra* ritual.

This is because these myths are not recited but performed, even though they circulate widely among members of the ‘Īssāwiya community.

The second part contains the litany Glory to the Eternal (*Ḥizb Subḥān al-Dā’im*), which is performed in the ‘Īssāwiya *dhikr* ritual, and prayers and supplications attributed to Bin-‘Īssa and are written in Tunisian dialect. Many members of the ‘Īssāwiya have printed copies of this litany.¹⁷² In fact, I was given a copy when I attended the *dhikr* ritual.

The third part is the ‘*Safīna*,’ a term used in Tunisia to refer to a collection of *mā’lūf* songs. *Mā’lūf* is a musical tradition that originated in Andalusia and was brought to North Africa by Jews and Muslims between the tenth and fifteenth centuries.¹⁷³ The ‘*Safīna*’ part of the manuscript contains songs of praise, written in Tunisian dialect, to the Prophet Muhammad, Bin-‘Īssa, and other North African saints. The manuscript does not state who composed these songs; it only attributes them to the followers of Bin-‘Īssa.¹⁷⁴ This part of the manuscript also contains notes on the musical modes that each song should be performed in. The songs included in the manuscript are performed in both the *mānga* and *ḥaḍra*. The *mānga* and *ḥaḍra* are oral traditions, thus members of the ‘Īssāwiya do not use the *Safīna* manuscript to learn the songs. All the same, it was very useful for me to have this written account of the narratives and songs that are performed.

I found very little variation between the songs collected in the manuscript and the ones performed in the ritual. If it became apparent that there was a difference, which was extremely rare, I chose to use the recorded version of the song performed in the *ḥaḍra*

ritual. Rarity of this kind suggests that the third part of the manuscript may have been compiled relatively recently because the songs tend to change as they are passed down from one generation to the next.

I also consulted manuscripts from the Rāshidiya Institute in the Medina of Tunis, which contains musical transcriptions of ‘Īssāwiya songs. Other manuscripts I examined include Ibn ‘Arabī’s *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam (The Bezels of Wisdom)*, *Risālat al-Anwār fī Asrār al-Khalwa (The Treatise of Lights on the Secrets of Spiritual Retreat)*, and *Shajarat al-Kawn (The Universal Tree)*. These manuscripts and ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulṣī’s commentary on *The Bezels of Wisdom* titled *Sharḥ al-Fuṣūṣ (Commentary on the Bezels of Wisdom)* were acquired from the Suleymaniye Library in Istanbul, which contains one of the largest collections of Islamic Arabic manuscripts. I obtained PDF copies of these manuscripts during a field visit to Istanbul that took place from 28 July to 10 August 2018.

Notes on Translation and Transliteration

For Arabic names and terms I use the IJMES system of transliteration with the exception of quotations from authors who do not use the IJMES system and in the citation of English books that contain Arabic names in their titles. I translated all of the poems from the *Safīna* manuscript from Tunisian dialect. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own. For the translation of key terms in Ibn ‘Arabī’s writing such as *tanzīh* and *tashbīh* I consulted the translations of Chittick and Binyamin Abrahamov, who, when not using the Arabic terms, translate them as ‘transcendence’ and ‘immanence’ respectively.¹⁷⁵

Chapter Two

The Spiritual Doctrine of Muḥyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī

Muḥyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī was one of the most influential Sufi figures of the Middle Ages whose writings summarize some of the most significant concepts in Sufi metaphysics, which continue to be explored and performed in the ritual practices of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya orders. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, the perfect human has the ability to embody all of the divine attributes, and has thus been described as *‘kāmil’* (perfect, complete).¹ Ibn ‘Arabī attributes this spiritual ability to several saints and prophets including the Prophet Khālīd Ibn Sinān, who becomes one of the characters in my plays.² The idea that the human subject, and the perfect human in particular, is the microcosm of the cosmos is fundamental for understanding how the infinite (God) is revealed in limited forms. This includes the spiritual traveller who acquires the ability to embody the different attributes of God through the Sufi journey of ascent. This chapter introduces the ideas from Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysical doctrine that are essential for understanding the ritual practices of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya, while also examining the *ḥaḍra* and *dhikr*’s relation to the broader sociocultural context.

The Reviver of Faith: The Life and Influence of the Great Shaykh

Muḥammad Bin-‘Alī Bin-Muḥammad Bin-Aḥmad Bin-‘Abd Allāh al-Ḥātīmī al-Ṭā’ī, otherwise known as Ibn ‘Arabī, was one of the most renowned Sufi saints of the twelfth century.³ He was a philosopher, theologian, and spiritual guide whose doctrine influenced

several Sufi orders (*tarīqas*) which incorporated his teachings into their spiritual practices.⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī was born in Murcia, Andalusia in 1165 and died in Damascus in 1240. Like many other Sufis, Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrine places special emphasis on the esoteric dimensions of Islam. Much of his religious commentaries and philosophical writings are dedicated to revealing the hidden meanings of the Qur’ān and the *ḥadīth*.⁵

He was given the title ‘the Reviver of Faith (*Muḥyi al-Dīn*)’ and al-Shaykh al-Akbar (the Great Shaykh) because of the significance of his contribution to the Sufi movement through his sainthood, religious commentaries, and philosophical writings.⁶ The teachings of Ibn ‘Arabī spread to Sufi circles through his travels and disciples. He began his spiritual journey in Andalusia and traveled extensively in both the Eastern and Western parts of the Islamic World. He lived in and visited many parts of North Africa and the Middle East including Fez, Marrakesh, Tunis, Cairo, Konya, Damascus, Jerusalem, and Mecca, to name a few.⁷

According to Ibn ‘Arabī, knowledge is revealed through a direct experience of the divine that he refers to as ‘taste (*dhawq*)’.⁸ This knowledge is acquired through engaging in acts of worship that reveal the esoteric realities hidden in the seeker. In Chapter 248 of *The Meccan Revelations*, Ibn ‘Arabī writes ‘for every manifestation (*tajallī*) there is a principle that is the *dhawq* (taste) of that manifestation, and that does not occur except through the divine self-disclosure in images or in the Divine Names or the cosmic [images of the Names] and nothing other than this.’⁹ In other words, for every existent,

which is considered one of the endless manifestations of God, there is a spiritual experience that reveals its inherent connection to the creator.

Even though Ibn ‘Arabī did not create an order, he nonetheless had a significant role in the Sufi community as a theologian and spiritual guide. One of the reasons he did not develop a Sufi order is the difference in how Sufism was practised in the Eastern and the Western parts of the Islamic World.¹⁰ Claude Addas asserts that in places like Konya, Baghdad, and Damascus, Sufis had more organized orders, which functioned as social institutions, whereas in Andalusia and North Africa, Sufi groups were less developed as social institutions, which meant that adepts learned from different spiritual guides, giving less importance to being part of a particular order. In addition, the more definitive formation of the social institution of the Sufi orders only began to take place at the beginning of the thirteenth century.¹¹ This period was extremely significant for the Sufi movement as it witnessed the development of some of the most important concepts in Sufi metaphysics, described in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī, and practised by members of the Sufi orders.¹²

One of Ibn ‘Arabī’s most significant contributions to Sufism is his writings on sainthood. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, saints are a *barzakh*, intermediaries between the divine and cosmic worlds who guide their followers to encounters with the Beloved (God).¹³ This understanding of sainthood is fundamental to members of the orders who engage in practices of saint veneration to acquire proximity to the subtle spiritual world. Ibn ‘Arabī’s commentaries on sainthood not only helped him gain many followers, but also

critics such as Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328). Ibn Taymiyyah considered Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings on sainthood heretical because they allegedly conflated prophethood with sainthood and, therefore, failed to acknowledge the elevated status of the prophets.¹⁴ Ibn Taymiyyah also accused Ibn ‘Arabī of misinterpreting the Qur’ān to justify his cosmological doctrine which he denounced as a form of polytheism and idolatry because it suggests that God can be worshiped in created forms, be they idols or human beings.¹⁵

Similar accusations of polytheism and idolatry continue to be used against Sufi communities today, with roots originating in the rise of the political-religious movement of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia in the eighteenth century.¹⁶ Wahhabis condemn Sufi practices of saint veneration, even though the founder of the movement, Muhammad ‘Abd-Wahhāb, was not totally anti-Sufi. The Salafī movement, which shares the literalist Wahhabi interpretation of the Qur’ān that is predicated on the return to a so called ‘original Islam,’ spread to Tunisia and other parts of North Africa in the late nineteenth century.¹⁷ The Salafis were responsible for attacks on several Sufi shrines in Tunisia since the 2011 revolution, including the burning of the shrine of Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd, where members of the ‘Īssāwiya order congregate.¹⁸

Greek and Muslim Influences

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, many Muslim philosophers were interested in the writings of Greek philosophers. The majority of these texts were translated under the Abbasid Caliphate between 800-1000 A.D.¹⁹ Among the most influential works

translated in the Middle Ages were the writings of Aristotle, Plato, and Plotinus, author of the *Enneads*, translated and paraphrased into Arabic as the *Theology of Aristotle* (*Thiyūlūjīyā Aristū*) and incorrectly attributed to Aristotle.²⁰

Richard Walzer argues that Muslim philosophers were neither Platonic nor Aristotelian. Instead, they adopted an amalgamation of both philosophies transmitted to Muslims through the Neoplatonists.²¹ Walzer explains that the notion of emanation was central to these Greek philosophical writings: ‘The form in which this [the Greek] metaphysical tradition reached the Arabs was definitely Neoplatonic, i.e. reality was represented as a chain of spiritual forces emanating from the One.’²² The concept of emanation influenced several Muslim philosophers including Ibn Sīna and al-Fārābī, both of whom incorporated it into their cosmological systems.²³ Parviz Morewedge claims that the writings of Aristotle had a significant influence on Islamic sciences and philosophy, whereas the writings of Plato and the Neoplatonic texts, including the so-called *Theology of Aristotle*, exerted a greater influence on Islamic mysticism, which incorporated and developed particular Neoplatonic themes.²⁴

There are indeed several parallels in the writings of the Neoplatonists and Muslim philosophers of the Middle Ages, including Ibn ‘Arabī. The first is the belief that the One brings into existence all other beings.²⁵ In Islamic philosophy, the entity that brings all other forms into being is God, often referred to as the Necessary Existent (*Wājib al-Wujūd*).²⁶ The second, is the notion of emanation, which explains how all beings come into existence from the One.²⁷ In Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology, this infinite being is God, an all-

encompassing entity that brings created forms into existence through the intermediaries of the Divine Names (the ninety-nine names of God mentioned in the Qur'an).²⁸ The third theme is mystical ascent through which the traveller acquires knowledge through an encounter with the One.²⁹ Sufis, including Ibn 'Arabī, explored these experiences of mystical ascent within the framework of Islam, in which the Prophet Muhammad's ascent became the model for the ascent of his followers.³⁰

In the writings of Plotinus, the ascent allows the soul to become more like the divine, thereby taking on the attributes of goodness and beauty.³¹ In a similar vein, Ibn 'Arabī uses the metaphor of the mirror to explain how the further one journeys towards the Real (God, *al-Haqq*) the more s/he 'polishes the mirror' of her/his being, better reflecting the divine attributes revealed to her/him in the ascent.³² In the Islamic tradition, there is a *ḥadīth* which states 'God is beautiful and loves beauty.'³³ And it is through the human-divine intimacy experienced in the ascent that the attribute of beauty is made manifest within the Sufi seeker.³⁴

Another similarity is that both Plotinus and Ibn 'Arabī assert that there is a transcendent dimension of the One (or God) which cannot be known. For example, book six of *The Enneads* states: 'For the nature of the One, being generative of all beings, is to be identified with none of them.'³⁵ This statement is very similar to Ibn 'Arabī's description of the relationship between the Real and the cosmos, which he considers the manifest image of God who cannot be known in the form of the Absolute.³⁶ Ibn 'Arabī asserts that God's essence is beyond comprehension. The only way the Real can be known is through

His similarity to the forms He brings into existence.³⁷ Thus, the One in Plotinus's *Enneads* and Ibn 'Arabī's writings transcends that which can be known yet also encompasses all created entities brought into existence through emanation.³⁸

In Islamic mysticism, and Islam more generally, there is always a mediator figure such as the Angel Gabriel in descriptions of the ascent.³⁹ In the ritual practices of the Sufis, this 'mediator' figure may be an angel, a prophet, a saint, or even the shaykh of the order, who guides the seeker to annihilation in the Beloved. Morewedge argues that the notion of an intermediary entity was important for Muslim mystics who were interested in Neoplatonic ideas but wanted to avoid creating a duality between the sensible and intelligible realms, which would undermine the unity of God.⁴⁰ Even though the cosmos is divided into two realms in Islamic cosmology, the spiritual world of mystery (*'ālam al-ghayb*) and the realm of witnessing (*'ālam al-shahāda*), the problem of duality is resolved through the presence of an intermediary entity that joins the different realms of existence, such that everything that exists in the realm of witnessing is a reflection of what exists in the spiritual world of mystery.⁴¹ Ibn 'Arabī refers to this intermediary as the *barzakh*; its significance in his ontology is its ability to join two opposing things. It can therefore account for how the Real is revealed in manifest forms, the finite images of the One God. In his writings, Ibn 'Arabī describes many different kinds of *barzakh*, essential for maintaining the connection between the corporeal and spiritual worlds, described in detail later in this chapter.⁴²

According to Morewedge, one of the similarities between Islamic mysticism and Plato's allegory of the cave is the presence of a 'mediator' figure.⁴³ In both the allegory of the cave and in Islamic mysticism the sage or the saint is expected to return to her/his community to guide others to knowledge and self-realization.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the sun in the allegory of the cave represents the Form of the Good.⁴⁵ Likewise, the Sun in Ibn 'Arabī's cosmology, is a symbol of the Real and the moon the human subject who reflects the divine light.⁴⁶

Ibn 'Arabī was certainly aware of who Plato was, like many of the mystics and philosophers of his time. In *The Meccan Revelations*, Ibn 'Arabī makes a brief reference to Plato in the context of a more general discussion on the limitations of philosophy. He asserts that Plato had 'taste (*dhawq*) of the states.'⁴⁷ In other words, Plato was among those who had acquired wisdom through a direct experience of the divine, which Ibn 'Arabī considers one of the highest forms of knowledge. Even though Ibn 'Arabī mentions Plato in his works, it is difficult to determine which exact texts he had access to.⁴⁸ Franz Rosenthal argues that even though it is possible that Ibn 'Arabī read *The Theology of Aristotle*, scholars should not simply assume that he was familiar with the text since Ibn 'Arabī does not refer to it in his writings, nor is there any evidence that clearly indicates that he had read it.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, the similarity of certain elements in Ibn 'Arabī's ontology to the writings of Plato and the Neoplatonists suggests that he was familiar with certain aspects of their philosophy which may have been passed down to him through Muslim philosophers.⁵⁰

Salman Bashier maintains that the fixed essences (*a'yān al-thābita*) in Ibn 'Arabī's ontology have similar meanings to Plato's Forms because they represent esoteric realities revealed in manifest images that veil their meanings.⁵¹ In both systems the sensible world is ontologically dependant on the Forms or fixed essences. This is because everything that exists in the sensible world is a reflection of the fixed essences. However, William Chittick cautions against associating the fixed essences with Plato's Forms because it implies the repeatability of a particular 'model' and Ibn 'Arabī clearly states that God never manifests himself in the same form twice.⁵² Chittick argues that the Forms are more similar to Ibn 'Arabī's Divine Names, which exist as a unity in their most perfected form as the One God.⁵³ Nonetheless, Bashier claims that it is still possible that the fixed essences and the Forms have similar meanings because Plato does not provide a definitive explanation of how the Forms act as a 'model' for sensible objects and whether or not there is any repetition.⁵⁴

There are countless Muslim philosophers, saints, and theologians who have influenced the thought and mysticism of Ibn 'Arabī.⁵⁵ However, it is important to briefly describe the impact of the theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058-1111) on Ibn 'Arabī's cosmology. To understand the latter's influence, the concept of the *barzakh* must first be introduced. According to Ibn 'Arabī, God becomes manifest in corporeal forms through the *barzakh*, the intermediary between the manifest and non-manifest forms of the Real.⁵⁶ It is fundamental to the process of creation because it allows God, the Absolute, to become manifest in limited created forms.

The *barzakh* is extremely significant in Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology because it accounts for the paradoxical nature of existents that are limited manifestations of the Absolute. Ibn ‘Arabī derives the term ‘*barzakh*’ from the Qur’ān, which describes it as the barrier between sweet and salty water. It states: ‘It is He (God) who released two bodies of flowing water, one sweet and fresh and the other salty and bitter, and put an insurmountable barrier between them.’⁵⁷ In the Islamic tradition, the *barzakh* is believed to be the place where the soul resides after death until its resurrection on the day of judgement.⁵⁸ Even though the term ‘*barzakh*’ is mentioned in the writings of al-Ghazālī to describe the states of the grave, he does not give it the ontological significance that makes it fundamental to Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics.⁵⁹ Yet al-Ghazālī’s description of the *barzakh* as a space beyond reason and ordinary sense perception helped Ibn ‘Arabī develop his own understanding of the term, which he uses to refer to an intermediary realm where the seeker witnesses the higher spiritual realities.⁶⁰

Furthermore, the idea that God is the origin of all life and that He brings the created world into being through emanation is mentioned in al-Ghazālī’s writings.⁶¹ This notion was further developed by Ibn ‘Arabī, particularly through the concept of the *barzakh*, which can account for how the Real is made manifest in the created world without the creation of a duality. This is because the intermediary realm of the *barzakh* has the ability to join opposing attributes – God’s immanence and transcendence.⁶²

Another theologian who influenced Ibn ‘Arabī is al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (820–910).⁶³ He is considered an important figure in Sufism because his writings stress the significance of

mystical experience, even though the term ‘Sufi’ does not appear in his writings.⁶⁴ There are several similarities in Ibn ‘Arabī’s and al-Tirmidhī’s descriptions of sainthood, particularly the idea that the existence of the cosmos is ontologically dependent on the presence of the saints. Both authors also maintain that saints inherit spiritual knowledge from the prophets.⁶⁵ Furthermore, al-Tirmidhī’s writings include an explanation of the different stages of sainthood, a system further developed by Ibn ‘Arabī who gave a much more extensive description of the different forms of spiritual inheritance.⁶⁶ According to Ibn ‘Arabī, there are different degrees of sainthood, the most elevated being the perfect human (*al-insān al-kāmil*), who acts as an intermediary between the different realms of the cosmos through her/his ability to accept all the images of the Real.⁶⁷

There are several kinds of *barzakh* in Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings. The term can be used to describe the relationship between dense corporeal bodies and subtle spiritual entities, the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of the human body, and the transcendent and immanent attributes of God. In a certain sense, everything in existence is a *barzakh* since it is the intermediary that connects the spirit to embodied forms.⁶⁸ The *barzakh* is also the space where the spirits of the dead and the living meet, and is therefore very significant for members of the Sufi orders who venerate the spirits of deceased saints.

The Self-Disclosure of God

Prior to the existence of the cosmos, God’s attributes were hidden in the divine essence (*dhāt*). These attributes were made manifest in the form of the cosmos because of God’s

desire to witness Himself in an exoteric image.⁶⁹ This occurs through the intermediaries of the Divine Names, which represent the divine attributes that govern the different realms of the cosmos.⁷⁰ According to Ibn ‘Arabī, The cosmos is ‘impoverished’ in the sense that it has no existence in itself and is thus ontologically dependant on the Real.⁷¹ This necessitates the presence of an entity to mediate between God, who is Absolute, and the finite forms created in His image. Ibn ‘Arabī uses different terms to refer this intermediary reality, including the Muhammadan light (*al-nūr al-muḥammadiya*) or first intellect, the imagination (*khayāl*), and the cloud (‘*amā*’).⁷²

The meanings of the Divine Names are revealed through utterances of divine speech that make manifest possible existents. This occurs through the breath of the all-Merciful through which God utters the divine command *Kun* (Be!).⁷³ The divine command is mentioned in a Qur’ānic verse that states: ‘When We (God) will something to happen, all that We say is, ‘Be,’ and it is.’⁷⁴ The first entity to be brought into existence was the cloud.⁷⁵ Ibn ‘Arabī derives this idea from a *ḥadīth* which states:

The prophet was asked, “where (‘*āyn*) did our Lord come to be (*kān*) before He created the creatures (*khalq*)?” He replied, “He came to be in a cloud, neither above which nor below which was any air (*hawā*)”⁷⁶

The cloud was the first *barzakh* to be created. It is the intermediary that accepts all of the images of God, and thus constitutes the Real’s manifest form.⁷⁷ The fixed essences are the revealed images of the Divine Names that are made manifest in the corporeal realm. In other words, the fixed essences represent the esoteric realities that govern the states of the created world.⁷⁸

The state (*ḥāl*) of every existent entity constantly changes through the cyclical movements of annihilation (*fanā'*) and subsistence (*baqā'*). These two states correspond to non-existence and existence, respectively.⁷⁹ They are fundamental to the process of emanation because they are the ontological principles through which the Divine Names are made manifest. Annihilation is integral to the process of creation because it is the state in which the revealed attributes of the Real are annihilated from created beings, making possible the revelation of another divine attribute that 'subsists' through God's self-disclosure in a new form.⁸⁰ The cosmos experiences perpetual transformation from one state to another because it cannot encompass the Absolute. Thus, God's infinite attributes are revealed through His gradual self-disclosure, never in the same form twice.⁸¹

The human subject knows God through His revelation in finite forms. It is impossible to know the divine essence because it is Absolute and is thus beyond that which can be experienced by created entities. This transcendent dimension of God can only be understood through negation. A saying attributed to Abū Bakr, one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad states: 'the inability to attain comprehension is in itself comprehension.'⁸² In other words, part of knowing God is understanding the limits of what can be known. Since it is impossible for any created entity to witness the divine essence, the only way the Sufi can know God is through His self-disclosure in the cosmos, which is composed of signs (*dalīl*) that reflect one of the divine attributes.⁸³

The divine presence (*al-ḥaḍra al-ilāhiya*) encompasses all of the attributes, names, and the essence of God revealed through the imagination. There are two kinds of imagination in Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology: the first is non-delimited divine imagination (*khayāl munfaṣil*) and the second is the limited human imagination (*khayāl muttaṣil*).⁸⁴ The divine imagination constantly brings the cosmos into existence and is independent from the human subject.⁸⁵ The significance of the imagination in the process of creation is that it has the ability to bring together two opposing things – limited and absolute existence. Chittick maintains that the non-delimited imagination is identical to the cloud in the sense that it is the *barzakh* through which the cosmos is created. Thus, it is the entity that allows for the revelation of the divine attributes in exoteric forms (*ẓāhir*).⁸⁶ The divine imagination gives being to the limited imagination (*khayāl muttaṣil*). The latter is the human organ of perception through which the Sufī witnesses the esoteric meanings of the revealed forms.⁸⁷ Ibn ‘Arabī stresses that what the seeker witnesses with the imagination is the spiritual essence of the created world (the images of the Divine Names), and not the essence of God.⁸⁸

The notion that the seeker can experience the ontological principles that bring the cosmos into existence occurs frequently in Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings. This is because the human subject is considered to be the microcosm of the cosmos who encompass all the divine attributes revealed in finite existence.⁸⁹ According to the Ibn ‘Arabī, the Divine Names, which are hidden in the heart of every human being, are made manifest through the performance of supererogatory acts that cause the spiritual traveller to embody one of the divine attributes.⁹⁰ In reference to a *ḥadīth* that describes how God is revealed in the

faculties of the servant who performs acts of worship, Ibn ‘Arabī describes the human subject’s unique ability to embody all of the divine attributes:

If the Real is the manifest, then the created (human being) is hidden in Him, and as a result the created (embraces) all the names of the Real, His hearing, seeing, all His relationships and perceptions. If the created is the manifest, the Real is concealed and hidden in him; the Real, then, is the hearing of the created, his seeing, hand, foot and all his faculties.⁹¹

Thus, the human subject is the microcosm who fulfills God’s desire to be known through His revelation in a finite entity, the mirror image in which the Real witnesses Himself. However, one can only realize God in relation to what is made manifest in herself/himself.⁹² Anything beyond that cannot be witnessed because the human subject does not have the capacity to experience the Absolute.⁹³

Transcendence and Immanence in the Sufi Journey

The cosmos is created in God’s image and is thus composed of signs that reflect His different attributes. However, it is not identical to the Real.⁹⁴ Perfect knowledge requires finding a balance between *tanzīh*, awareness of how God transcends the cosmos, and *tashbīh*, the ability to perceive the divine presence in the manifest forms.⁹⁵ Many of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings explore this tension between the unity and multiplicity of God who is both the One that encompasses all things, and the many revealed in finite forms. In *The Bezels of Wisdom*, Ibn ‘Arabī explains the importance of finding a balance between transcendence and immanence. He writes:

If you hold transcendence, you restrict Him
and if you hold immanence, you limit Him
If you hold the two doctrines, you are right
and you will be a leader and a master in knowledge
Whoever holds His being as two things is a polytheist
and whoever holds that He is one unifies Him
Beware of likening Him if you hold duality
and of making Him transcendent if you unify Him
You are not He, but you are He
and you see Him in the essences of things
both boundless and restricted⁹⁶

This poem from the chapter on the Prophet Noah summarizes Ibn ‘Arabī’s epistemology. The seeker knows the Real through the manifestation of His attributes in her/him with the awareness that s/he is not identical to the Absolute. Created entities are the *barzakh* between the manifest image of the Real that is revealed in a particular instance of God’s self-disclosure and the endless esoteric realities that are brought into existence through the annihilation of that form. The last verse in the poem that states that God is both ‘boundless and restricted’ refers to the immanent and transcendent attributes of the Real. This encounter between God’s infinite and finite attributes leads the seeker to endless knowledge.⁹⁷ This is because each self-disclosure presents the spiritual traveller with the opportunity to know and witness the Real in a new form.

Many of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings explore the possibilities and limits of what can be known, often emphasizing that what the seeker knows in the Sufi journey is her/himself and not God.⁹⁸ In other words, the purpose of the journeying is for the traveller to realize the particular image of the Real that is made manifest in her/him. Ibn ‘Arabī sometimes refers to this idea with term ‘the God of belief,’ which reaffirms the idea that knowledge can only be acquired through direct experience (*dhawq*) since the ‘God of belief’

represents a particular self-disclosure of the Real specific to each traveller who encounters this image in the ascent.⁹⁹ The notion of the ‘God of belief’ is significant in Ibn ‘Arabī’s epistemology because it determines the limits of what can be known. Or, in other words, it helps the seeker to understand God’s transcendent attributes and accounts for how the multiplicity of the images of the Real that are all encompassed by the One God.

In Chapter 209 of *The Meccan Revelations*, Ibn ‘Arabī describes the paradoxical nature of the Sufi journey. He writes: ‘you are guided in Him and your aim is [to reach] Him and He cannot be reached.’¹⁰⁰ This is because the human subject cannot experience the Absolute. There is always a ‘veil’ that separates the seeker from God. Even though it is impossible to remove this veil, the traveller can transcend particular limitations through the ascent that makes these ‘veils’ thinner giving the seeker the ability to witness the Real within a multiplicity of realms and forms. To ‘lift’ a veil means to annihilate a particular image of God within the seeker that reveals yet another image of the Real ad infinitum.¹⁰¹ Thus, there is no end to the spiritual journey or to what can be known of God.

The further the traveller ascends the more s/he becomes capable of witnessing the Real.¹⁰² The spiritual capacity to recognize God in every created entity is described in one of Ibn ‘Arabī’s most famous poems:

My heart has come to accept every form
a pasture for gazelles, a monastery for monks,
a house of idols, a Ka‘ba for pilgrims,
the tablets of the Torah, the book of the Qur’ān
I believe in the religion of Love: wherever its caravans

may lead for love is my religion and my faith.¹⁰³

The heart is the spiritual organ that allows the human subject to accept all of the manifestations of the Real, without limiting God to any form.¹⁰⁴ This ability is unique to the perfect human who witnesses the self-disclosure of the Real in every form. This is because the ontological origin or ‘essence’ of all of these forms is none other than the One God.

Sainthood

The Arabic word ‘*walī*’ means saint or ‘friend of God.’ Saints are exceptional individuals who struggle against their worldly desires through engaging in ascetic practices that make them special recipients of God’s grace.¹⁰⁵ In Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology there are many different degrees of sainthood, including the spiritual station of the perfect human, the *barzakh* who joins the esoteric and exoteric attributes of God.¹⁰⁶

Ibn ‘Arabī asserts that the perfect human is the vicegerent (*khalīfa*) of God on earth.¹⁰⁷ The prophet Adam was the first perfect human who revealed the meanings of the Divine Names that were made manifest in his form. In other words, Adam was the locus for God’s self-disclosure and the *barzakh* between the revealed and non-manifest images of the Real. The existence of the cosmos necessitates the presence of this intermediary figure who not only sustains the connection between the different realms of existence, but is also the mirror in which God witnesses Himself.¹⁰⁸

The perfect human is the most spiritually elevated of the saints. However, there are several degrees of sainthood in Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology. For example, there are saints who occupy special cosmic ranks called the four pillars. The pillars are: the pole (*al-quṭb*); the Imam of the left; the Imam of the right; and the fourth pillar (*wataḍ*).¹⁰⁹ The four pillars (saints) on earth are the mirror images of the four prophets who dwell in the higher cosmic stations: Idrīs (the pole), Jesus (the first Imam), Elijah (the second Imam), and al-Khaḍir (the fourth pillar), who is an exception because he is a saint and not a prophet.¹¹⁰ The ‘pole’ is synonymous with the perfect human in as much as it refers to the most spiritually elevated saint who embodies all of the divine attributes.¹¹¹

However, Ibn ‘Arabī also utilizes the term ‘pole’ to describe several other *barzakh*-like entities.¹¹² He associates each of the cosmic realms with a particular prophet who represents the revealed image of the Divine Names that bring that particular realm into existence.¹¹³ Therefore, every prophet is a ‘pole’ in the sense that he is the intermediary through which the divine light is revealed.¹¹⁴ Because the realm of Muhammad was the first to be brought into existence it considered the ‘pole of the poles (*quṭb al-aqṭāb*),’ which emanates light (being) to all of the realms beneath it.¹¹⁵

Ibn ‘Arabī cites a *ḥadīth* which states ‘I [Muhammad] was a prophet when Adam was between water and clay’ to explain how the ontological attributes associated with the Prophet Muhammad existed prior to the creation of Adam.¹¹⁶ This is because the realm of Muhammad encompasses all the divine attributes that are made manifest in the corporeal realm. Even though it is the lowest realm in the cosmos; the corporeal world is the most complete in the sense that it reflects all of the revelations of the Divine Names in the realms above it. The perfect human is the microcosm of this realm, and is thus the mirror

that perfectly reflects God's endless self-disclosure.

The revelation of light also represents the acquisition of knowledge in Ibn 'Arabī's writings.¹¹⁷ The emanation of this light occurs through the intermediaries of the prophets, who reveal particular ontological truths to the saints. Saints may inherit knowledge from many different prophets throughout the course of their lifetime.¹¹⁸ Muslim saints are graced with blessing (*baraka*) and the ability to perform miraculous acts (*karāmāt*) such as healing the sick, walking on water, flying, or clairvoyance.¹¹⁹ The nature of the miracle the saint is graced with depends on the prophet from whom s/he inherits knowledge. For example, a saint who inherits from the prophet Jesus will have the ability to heal the sick, whereas a saint who flies is one who inherits from the prophet Muhammad.¹²⁰ It should be stressed that Ibn 'Arabī does not equate prophets and saints. All prophets are saints. However, not all saints are prophets. And even though saints act as spiritual guides, their status as a saint is usually revealed after their death, whereas a prophet is known to the public.¹²¹

Another significant difference is that prophets are sent in order to reveal a divine law (*sharī'a*).¹²² *Sharī'a* is the Islamic law; it is derived from interpretations of the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth* usually made by a Muslim jurist (*mufīṭ*).¹²³ *Sharī'a* does not consist of a fixed set of laws; it is constantly reinterpreted in different ways depending on the context. The purpose of the *Sharī'a* is to guide Muslims to virtuous ways of living by providing a legal framework to guide their actions.¹²⁴ Prophethood ends at the day of resurrection, since there will no longer be a need for a divine law. In contrast, sainthood is eternal because it is a divine name that the saints (including the prophets) share with God.¹²⁵

Prophet of the Barzakh

In *The Bezels of Wisdom*, Ibn ‘Arabī asserts that Khālid Ibn Sinān revealed the ‘prophecy of the *barzakh*.’¹²⁶ However, the chapter on the Prophet Khālid does not provide much information as to who this prophet was, or why he is associated with the realm of the *barzakh*. The Prophet Khālid’s relation to the *barzakh* is explained in several commentaries on *The Bezels of Wisdom*, which provide a detailed account of his prophethood.¹²⁷ According to ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulī and Dāwūd al-Qaysarī, Khālid Ibn Sinān was a prophet who lived in Aden in Pre-Islamic Arabia. Both writers refer to same *ḥadīth* to explain why Ibn ‘Arabī describes Khālid as a prophet (*nabī*), since he is not generally considered one in the Islamic tradition.¹²⁸ Al-Nābulī and al-Qaysarī assert that, when the Prophet Muhammad met the daughter of Khālid Ibn Sinān, he said: ‘welcome to the daughter of the prophet who was lost by his people.’¹²⁹

In their commentaries on the chapter of the Prophet Khālid in *The Bezels of Wisdom*, al-Nābulī and al-Qaysarī describe the same story. One day, a great fire emerged from a cave in Aden and Khālid’s people turned to their prophet for help. Khālid began to beat the fire until it gradually retreated into the cave.¹³⁰ Before he followed it into the cave, the prophet told his sons not to call out his name for three days, warning them that if they did so he would die. Before three days had passed, his sons, who were anxious for Khālid’s return, called out his name. Khālid then emerged from the cave and announced he was going to die. He then told his followers to wait for forty days until a flock of sheep and a donkey walked over his grave. It was then that Khālid’s people were meant to remove their prophet from his grave so that he could reveal the states (*aḥwāl*) of the *barzakh* (the

intermediary realm between life and death).¹³¹ When the sheep and the donkey appeared at Khālid's grave, the believers among his people wanted to unearth his body. However, his sons prevented them from doing so for fear of the shame of being known as the children whose father was removed from his grave.¹³² This is reminiscent of the story of Cain's killing of Abel, which Ibn 'Arabī interprets as symbolic of the intellect and light of revelation that remains hidden in the earth, unable to become manifest.¹³³

Angela Jaffray asserts that the prophethood of Khālid Ibn Sinān was the opposite of Muhammad's. Muhammad ascended to the heavens, while Khālid remained hidden in the soil.¹³⁴ The prophet Muhammad perfected his prophethood through finding a balance between seclusion (*khalwa*) and the return to society (*rujū'*) to spread his spiritual message. In contrast, Khālid learned the secrets of the *barzakh* in death, without returning to guide others.¹³⁵ In other words, Khālid acquired esoteric knowledge, but he was unable to make it manifest in the corporeal world. In a certain sense, the relationship between Khālid and Muhammad exemplifies the relationship between a saint and a prophet. A saint remains hidden and inherits wisdom from a prophet, who, in contrast, acquires a spiritual status known to the public, and reveals a divine law.¹³⁶ It is also worth noting that the number forty is associated with the experience of spiritual retreat which makes manifest the divine attributes through the seeker's intimate dialogue with the Beloved.¹³⁷

Khālid is mentioned before the final chapter on the Prophet Muhammad in *The Bezels of Wisdom*.¹³⁸ Each chapter of *The Bezels of Wisdom* focuses on a certain aspect of Ibn 'Arabī's ontology. For example, the chapter on Adam explains the human ability to

embody all of the Divine Names, the chapter on Idrīs describes the nature of the perfect human, the chapter on Noah explains the importance of finding a balance between God’s incomparability and comparability, and so on.¹³⁹ Michel Chodkiewicz argues that the knowledge presented in each of the chapters describes the nature of the knowledge that saints inherit from the prophets.¹⁴⁰

The Bezels of Wisdom is composed of twenty-seven chapters each containing a bezel or ring stone (*faṣ*) of wisdom revealed in the ‘word’ of each prophet. The Qur’ān mentions twenty-seven prophets. However, in *The Bezels of Wisdom*, Ibn ‘Arabī does not dedicate a chapter to the prophets Dhū al-Kifl¹⁴¹ and al-Yasa‘¹⁴², who are mentioned in the Qur’ān, and includes Seth and Khālīd instead. As noted earlier, Khālīd Ibn Sinān’s status as a prophet is a contested issue in the Muslim community.¹⁴³ However, Seth is generally considered a prophet in the Islamic tradition, even though he is not mentioned in the Qur’ān.¹⁴⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī does not explain why he included Seth and Khālīd Ibn Sinān in *The Bezels of Wisdom*. Chodkiewicz argues that Ibn ‘Arabī replaced Dhū al-Kifl and al-Yasa‘ with Seth and Khālīd Ibn Sinān because they are ‘identical,’ in the sense that they are saints who manifest the same divine wisdom.¹⁴⁵ In other words, Ibn ‘Arabī may have included two prophets who were not mentioned in the Qur’ān to allude to the relationship of spiritual inheritance between prophets and saints.

‘Abd al-Bāqī Muftāḥ asserts that each ‘bezel of wisdom’ represents a certain realm of existence, the manifest image of a particular Divine Name.¹⁴⁶ Each ‘bezel’ is the essence of a particular realm that becomes manifest in the ‘word’ of each prophet, who is the

‘pole’ that connects each cosmic sphere to the one above and below it.¹⁴⁷ According to Muftāḥ, the different chapters of *The Bezels of Wisdom* also represent the spiritual stations the traveller encounters in the ascent and the different attributes that are revealed in the perfect human, the manifest image of all these spiritual realms.¹⁴⁸

Muftāḥ argues that the order of the prophets in *The Bezels of Wisdom* is significant because it reveals how the Divine Names were made manifest in the cosmos.¹⁴⁹ The twenty-seventh realm (the realm of Muhammad) is the first to be brought into existence. It is associated with the Name the all-Encompassing (*al-Jāmi‘*) because it contains all of the divine attributes that are made manifest in the spheres beneath it.¹⁵⁰ Khālid is mentioned in the twenty-sixth sphere, which is associated with the divine name the Subtle (*al-Laṭīf*), which represents that which is beyond ordinary sense perception.¹⁵¹ It is also the world of the *jinn* (spirits made of fire), who share the attribute of subtlety (*lutf*). According to Muftāḥ, Khālid’s story of having to put out a fire is a sign that the prophet was connected to the realm of ‘the subtle.’¹⁵² The attribute of subtlety is also associated with the realm of the *barzakh* in which the seeker witnesses God in the form of non-corporeal spiritual entities.

In *The Bezels of Wisdom*, Ibn ‘Arabī describes Khālid’s proximity to the Prophet Muhammad:

Khālid intended that all the people would believe in the messages of the messengers so that mercy would apply to all. He had the honor to be a prophet before Muḥammad, and therefore he knew that God sent Muḥammad as a mercy to all the creatures. Khālid himself was not a messenger, hence he wished to attain a good deal of the mercy which existed in Muḥammad’s mission.¹⁵³

As noted earlier, the Muhammadan light was the first entity to be brought into existence.¹⁵⁴ The cosmic sphere of Muhammad is all-encompassing because it is the entity that emanates the divine light to all of the realms in existence. The ‘mercy which existed in Muhammad’s mission’ is the esoteric knowledge that Khālid inherited from Muhammad that he was unable to make manifest because he was not a messenger (*rasūl*).¹⁵⁵ Khālid preceded the corporeal existence of the prophet Muhammad. However, Muhammad existed prior to Khālid in an ontological sense and is thus the *barzakh* through whom Khālid acquired spiritual knowledge.¹⁵⁶

Khālid is also mentioned in *Risālat al-Ittiḥād al-Kawnī* (*Treatise on Unification*), an ascent narrative composed by Ibn ‘Arabī in 1201/1202.¹⁵⁷ The treatise describes Ibn ‘Arabī’s encounter with the lote tree (*sidrat al-muntahā*), which exists at the edge of the created universe, and its four birds that represent the spiritual faculties of perfect human. According to Jaffray, both Khālid Ibn Sinān, to whom the work is dedicated, and the lote tree are symbols of the perfect human.¹⁵⁸

The lote tree appears in several other of Ibn ‘Arabī works including *Ascent to the Station of the Night Travellers* (*al-‘Isrā’ ila Maqām al-‘Asra*), and *The Universal Tree* (*Shajarat al-Kawn*). In Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology, the lote tree is believed to be the microcosm from which the cosmos emerges when the ‘seed’ of this tree is made manifest through the divine command *Be!*¹⁵⁹ When Ibn ‘Arabī encounters this tree in the *Treatise on Unification*, it says to him: ‘I am the Universal Tree of synthesis and likeness. I have

deep roots and my branches are lofty. The hand of the One planted me in the garden of eternity, protected from the vicissitudes of time. I have spirit and body.¹⁶⁰

Much like the perfect human, the tree is the intermediary between the heavens and the earth, the spirit and the body and is thus the vessel for the endless revelation of the meaning of the Divine Names. It is the ‘synthesis’ that encompasses all of the forms of the cosmos made manifest in the realms beneath it. The term ‘likeness’ in the previously cited quotation refers to God’s similarity to the cosmos that was created in His image. As noted earlier in the section on transcendence and immanence, the human subject can only know the Real through His revelation in finite forms, and the term ‘likeness’ here refers to Ibn ‘Arabī’s idea that God can only be experienced in embodied forms, whether they be spiritual or corporeal. The only entity that transcends the limitations imposed by embodiment is the divine essence, which, as explained earlier, cannot be known. The importance of Khālid, and the perfect human more generally, is that he is the *barzakh* who makes possible the revelation of these attributes through his proximity to both the spiritual and corporeal worlds.

The only time that Khālid is mentioned in *The Treatise on Unification*, other than in the introduction, is the discourse of the Jet-Black Crow, which is a symbol of the universal body. According to Jaffray, the Divine Name associated with it is the Manifest (*al-Zāhir*) because it represents the space in which the celestial spheres are brought into existence. It is from within the darkness of the universal body that the divine light is revealed, for it,

like the Prophet Khālid, is the *barzakh* that makes possible the revelation of God's infinite attributes in the limited forms of the cosmos.¹⁶¹

The Sufi Ascent

The Night Journey (*al-'isrā' wa al-mi'rāj*) was one of the most significant events in the life of the Prophet Muhammad. *Al-'isrā'* refers to the Prophet's journey to al-Aqṣā mosque in Jerusalem on the *burāq*, a creature that resembles a horse and has wings. When the Prophet Muhammad reached Jerusalem he began to pray. He then started his miraculous ascent to the heavens, accompanied by the Angel Gabriel. There he met all of the prophets, witnessed the states of heaven and hell, and reached the highest station in the universe where he was graced with the divine presence (*ḥaḍra ilāhiya*). The Prophet Muhammad then descended back to the earth and returned from Jerusalem to Mecca on the *burāq*.¹⁶²

Despite the theological significance of the Night Journey, there are very few verses in the Qur'ān that directly refer to the Prophet's ascent, such as the chapter of al-'Isrā', that describes the Prophet's journey from Mecca to Jerusalem.¹⁶³ The chapter of al-Najim does not directly refer to the ascent; however, it does mention the lote tree, which is believed to exist at the highest boundary in the universe. It states:

A second time he [Muhammad] saw him [Gabriel]: by the lote tree beyond which none may pass near the Garden of Restfulness, when the tree was covered in nameless [splendor]. His [the prophet's] sight never wavered, nor was it too bold, and he saw some of the greatest signs of his Lord.¹⁶⁴

Many Sufi communities interpret this verse as a reference to the Prophet Muhammad's encounter with the divine presence at the final stages of his ascent.¹⁶⁵ Over time, the story of the Night Journey developed in different ways in relation to the sociocultural context in which it was narrated by incorporating different cultural symbols from popular folklore.¹⁶⁶ Islam spread to many different places, each with its own unique history and cultural traditions and, as a result, multiple ascent narratives were formed.¹⁶⁷

Through their symbolic interpretation of the Prophet's miraculous ascent, Sufi communities transformed the *mi'rāj* from a historic event into a method or 'path (*tarīqa*)' to guide seekers through different spiritual states and stations (*maqāmāt*).¹⁶⁸ However, this does not equate the ascent of the Prophet Muhammad with that of his followers. Like many other Sufis, Ibn 'Arabī maintains that the ascent of Muhammad was in spirit and body, which stresses the miraculous nature of the event and the Prophet's elevated status among created beings, whereas the ascent of his followers occurs only in spirit.¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, Ibn 'Arabī makes a distinction between the ascent of the saints and the prophets: 'the ascent of the prophets is through the fundamental light itself [the Muhammadan light], while the ascent of the saints is through what is providentially granted by that light.'¹⁷⁰ In other words, saints ascend through the spiritual knowledge they inherit from the prophets, the intermediaries through which the divine light is revealed.

Several Sufi saints have drawn on the narrative of the prophet's ascent to describe their own mystical experiences, including Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār, Abū Yazīd al-Basṭāmī, and

Muḥyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī.¹⁷¹ There are seven different heavens that the Sufi may ascend to, each representing a certain station that reveals particular ontological truths to the traveller under the guidance of a particular prophet.¹⁷² For example, in Ibn ‘Arabī’s description of his own ascent he explains how he met Jesus in the second heaven, Joseph in the third, Idrīs in the fourth, and so on.¹⁷³ Each realm is also associated with a particular Divine Name such that the ascent to each sphere of the cosmos reveals to the traveller the esoteric image of the divine attributes that are made manifest in corporeal forms.¹⁷⁴

At the final stages of the ascent, the traveller encounters the lote tree at the boundary of the created universe, which, as noted earlier, is associated with the perfect human in Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology. The Angel Gabriel did not continue with Muhammad beyond the lote tree where God ‘inspired to him [the prophet] what He inspired.’¹⁷⁵ In *Ascent to the Station of the Night Travellers*, Ibn ‘Arabī describes his ascent beyond the lote tree, after which he passed through three hundred realms where he witnessed the ‘God of belief.’¹⁷⁶ Ibn ‘Arabī is careful to remind his readers that, even within the greatest degrees of proximity, God speaks to the human subject ‘behind a veil’ since it is not possible to experience the divine as Absolute.¹⁷⁷ This is also why no matter how far the spiritual traveller ascends s/he does not ‘reach’ God. Instead, s/he encounters the ‘God of belief,’ the particular image of the Real that forms the ontological essence of each seeker.¹⁷⁸

But how can the traveller journey to God if it is impossible to be separate from Him? According to Ibn ‘Arabī, the seeker does not journey ‘to God’ but ‘in God,’ gradually acquiring the ability to perceive the divine presence within her/himself.¹⁷⁹ The purpose of

the ascent is not to reach a particular destination, but to witness God's presence in the cosmos until one becomes like the perfect human who is capable accepting the Real's revelation in every form.¹⁸⁰

The ascent forms a significant part of the experience of sainthood because it is the practical means through which the seeker acquires divinely inspired knowledge. The 'perfect saint' for Ibn 'Arabī is not the seeker who attains the highest degrees of proximity, but the one who returns to the created world.¹⁸¹ During the saint's descent s/he witnesses the seven heavens a second time, taking on the divine attributes that are revealed in each of the cosmic realms.¹⁸² In other words, the further one ascends the more they are annihilated in the Real, which allows her/him to take on the attributes of the creator that subsist within the traveller in her/his descent. This is because perfection of sainthood rests upon emulating the spiritual experiences of the Prophet Muhammad that included both retreat and the return to society.¹⁸³

The manner in which Muslim communities interpreted the life events of the prophet, particularly the ascent, has differed in relation to the various sociocultural contexts in which Islam spread. According to Nazeer El-Azma, earlier versions of the Night Journey were simpler because religious authorities wanted to preserve the original narrative that Muhammad had shared with his companions to stress the story's authenticity.¹⁸⁴ However, the spread of Islam led to the rise of a wide range of ascent narratives, performance practices, and other visual representations (such as painting) that depict the

Prophet's Night Journey in different ways.¹⁸⁵ Many of these narratives included figures and symbols from other religions, El-Azma explains:

The narration of the incident of the *mi'rāj* incorporates elements from the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* as well as populist and religious beliefs in the details about the Angels, the images of heaven and hell, and other elements that are likely from non-Arab, pagan, Jewish, and Christian traditions.¹⁸⁶

The incorporation of these religious and cultural motifs made the story of the Night Journey more accessible to various communities, including Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians.¹⁸⁷ For example, the *Mi'rājnāma*, a translation of the story of the Night Journey from Persian to Middle Turkic, includes a scene where Muhammad encounters virtuous Jews at Mount Qāf who, after meeting the Prophet during his ascent, decide to accept Islam. According to Maria Subtenly, the purpose of including these Jewish characters in the story was to encourage Iranian Jews to convert to Islam by stressing the similarities of the values and beliefs of the Jewish and Islamic faiths.¹⁸⁸

This is just one example of how the narrative of the Prophet's ascent has been used as a missionary text.¹⁸⁹ Ultimately, the manner in which the Night Journey was interpreted depended greatly on the needs of Muslim societies, who developed countless versions of the narrative. According to Azma, Sufis had a significant role in popularizing the story of the Prophet's ascent, which they used to make their spiritual doctrine more accessible to the public.¹⁹⁰ For the 'Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya of Tunis, the Night Journey represents the adept's journey to the Beloved. Many of the metaphysical beliefs explored in the rituals of these orders through performances of the ascent are shared with other Sufi

communities.¹⁹¹ However, the manner in which these ideas and experiences are expressed is particular to the Tunisian context from which members of the Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya derive particular performance techniques and cultural symbols that mediate their encounter with the divine, as explained in detail in the following chapter.

The Sociocultural Performance Context

Tunisian history is rich in performance traditions that have been neglected by theatre scholars. This not only includes the ritual practices of the Sufi orders but a wide variety of traditions, including the shadow theatre,¹⁹² Karagöz (puppet theatre),¹⁹³ the *maqāma* (classical narratives performed in rhymed prose),¹⁹⁴ the *ḥikāya* (storytelling) or *maddāḥ* (the storyteller),¹⁹⁵ the *ḥalqa* (Performing in a circle),¹⁹⁶ weddings, and circumcision celebrations, among many other everyday events. One of the reasons why many of these traditions have been overlooked is the assumption that Islam does not allow the representation of the human form, including in the performing arts.¹⁹⁷ However, there is nothing in the Qurʾān or the *ḥadīth* that explicitly prohibits representations of the human form.¹⁹⁸ This is not to negate that certain religious clerics did indeed propagate the view that the performing arts are forbidden in Islam. Even so, such an attitude did not mean that these art forms were absent from Muslim societies or that they were unanimously condemned. Much like the debate on the use of musical instruments in religious rituals discussed in Chapter Three, the permissibility of engaging with the performing arts is subject to how one decides to interpret the Qurʾān and the *ḥadīth*. Just as music plays a significant role in the Sufi religious experience, so do the recitations, texts, gestures, and corporeal techniques that form a fundamental part of these ritual performances.

Perhaps the *Ta'ziya*, a Shi'ite ritual that is performed in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, is the most obvious example of an Islamic theatre.¹⁹⁹ It commemorates the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn (d.680), the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who was killed in Karbala. The *Ta'ziya* is primarily composed of scenes that depict the death of Ḥusayn.²⁰⁰ However, over the years it has come to include scenes of stories from the Qur'ān and narratives about Sufi saints.²⁰¹ This is not to say that all performance activities within Muslim societies were limited to religious rituals. For example, the primary purpose of the shadow theatre, an art form that was prevalent in the Middle East and North Africa during the Middle Ages, was entertainment.²⁰² The only written Arab shadow plays that have survived from the Middle Ages are three texts composed by Ibn Dāniyāl (1248-1311), an Iraqi eye surgeon who lived in Fatimid Cairo.²⁰³ Ibn Dāniyāl's plays are written in colloquial Arabic in rhymed prose (*saja'*), and include music and dancing.²⁰⁴ They often contain characters who engage in morally reprehensible acts but who decide to repent at the end of the play. For example, *Ṭayf al-Khayāl (The Phantom)* ends with main character's, Prince Wiṣāl, pilgrimage to Mecca.²⁰⁵

Other examples of Medieval Islamic Arab performances include a 'Sufi play' that was performed during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdī (775-85).²⁰⁶ Every Thursday and Monday the 'Sufi' would go to a hill outside Baghdad where the performance took place.²⁰⁷ There the Sufi actor would create a trial for the different caliphs. When the Sufi called upon a particular caliph, a young boy from the audience would approach him. The Sufi would then praise each caliph and ask the next one to come forward. As the performance progressed, the actor becomes more critical of the caliphs, particularly those

who came after ‘Alī Ibn Abī Tālib, the cousin of the Prophet Muhammad. According to Shmuel Moreh, Sufis engaged in these performances in order to disgrace themselves – an act that was meant to help preserve their piety and aid them in their struggle against their egos.²⁰⁸ It is also possible that this was a way of criticizing authority in a manner that allowed the Sufi to protect himself by pretending to be a fool.²⁰⁹

The Arab world contained a wide range of performance traditions that continued to develop in their local contexts until the mid nineteenth century when Arabs began to appropriate European dramatic forms.²¹⁰ The first Arab play based on European dramatic traditions was composed by Abraham Daninos in Algerian colloquial Arabic and printed in 1847.²¹¹ The first European-style play to be performed was *The Miser (al-Bakhīl)*, an adaptation of Molière’s play of this title written by Marūn al-Naqqāsh and performed in his home in Beirut in 1847. Moreh argues that one of the reasons that Arabs began to appropriate western theatre forms was because of the influence of the Ottoman Sultan ‘Abd al-Majīd I (1839-61), who wanted to modernize the Ottoman Empire.²¹²

The first European-style performances took place in Tunisia in 1826. However, they were performed by and for the Italian community living in Tunisia.²¹³ When Tunisia became a protectorate in 1881, several new French and Italian theatres were established, including the Municipal Theatre of Tunis that was built in 1902. Yet even then, very few Tunisians attended these performances made for European audiences in French and Italian.²¹⁴ It was not until 1907 that the Municipal Theatre decided to include the local population in its theatrical activities, inviting various Arab theatre groups from Egypt to perform in

Tunisia.²¹⁵ During the early twentieth century, several Egyptian theatre companies toured in Tunisia, exposing the local population to European-influenced theatrical forms that were written in Arabic. Subsequently, several European plays were translated into Arabic, and various theatre groups were formed.²¹⁶ Such groups continued to form in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s during which certain performances, including shadow plays, were occasionally banned for challenging the French colonial authorities. In 1942 the Germans took control of Tunisia and prohibited all theatrical activity in order to stress their domination over North Africa.²¹⁷ In 1946 and 1947 performances resumed with the formation of several new companies until the Tunisian struggle for independence (1952-1956). Most theatrical activities stopped after the arrest of several Tunisian nationalists in 1952. Performances did not resume until a year later in municipality-supported collaborations between Tunisian artists and Egyptian playwrights and actors.²¹⁸

As noted earlier, the appropriation of European dramatic forms was much more developed in the Lebanese, Syrian, and Egyptian contexts.²¹⁹ This was due to the cultural ‘renaissance (*nahḍa*)’ that took place in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in the Arab world, most notably in Damascus, Cairo, and Beirut.²²⁰ Marvin Carlson explains how this movement developed:

European cultural and political models were introduced into many aspects of Arab life, including literature and the arts, in an attempt to move the still largely feudal Arab cultures into the world of modern commerce, economics, social concerns, and artistic expression. Important as the importation of European ideas and models was to *al-Nahḍa*, however, it would be a serious distortion of the movement to see this influence as its sole or predominant feature.²²¹

According to Carlson, this ‘renaissance’ movement was centred on the revival of an imagined Islamic past in addition to adaptation (*iqtibās*) from European sources. Carlson stresses that, even though European models had a significant influence on Arab theatrical modernism, particularly on earlier works in which adaptation of European plays was a prominent feature such as al-Naqqāsh’s *The Miser*, the movement also developed in relation to its new cultural context, thus leading to the creation of Arab theatre distinct from European traditions.²²² This included several plays about the ‘Abbasid period, performances that made references to the Qur’ān, and the inclusion of certain indigenous traditions such as storytelling.²²³

In the post-colonial period, several North African theatre practitioners began to include indigenous traditions in their productions, which contributed to the creation of a distinctly Arab avant-garde theatre tradition, discussed in detail in Chapter Five.²²⁴ Prior to this, several performance traditions such as the shadow theatre, Karagöz, and the *maqāmāt* became less prevalent and performers began to rely less on improvisation.²²⁵ In contrast to the aforementioned performance traditions that began to experience a decline in the middle of the nineteenth century, the decline in Sufi practices occurred in post-independence Tunisia. Several rituals, including those of the ‘Īssāwiya community, were banned under the regime of President Ḥabīb Būrquiba, who viewed them and other Sufi practices as backward and incompatible with his modernist agenda.²²⁶ The majority of these Sufi performances were preserved through oral tradition, which made it particularly difficult for several of them to survive under the pressure of the Tunisian government; the latter either outlawed such practices or attempted to modernize and institutionalize

them.²²⁷ Furthermore, after independence, the Tunisian government took control of the *awqāf* (religious endowments).²²⁸ This led to the transformation of several Sufi shrines in the Medina of Tunis into cultural centres or museums where the performance of rituals was prohibited.

Khalid Amine argues that the interest of Arab theatre practitioners in indigenous performance traditions after the 1960s led to the development of a ‘hybrid theatre’ with influences from both European and local traditions, bringing into existence a distinctly Arab postcolonial theatre.²²⁹ According to Amine, the return to indigenous traditions represents an act of ‘performative agency’ through which playwrights and directors challenged the idea that theatre did not exist in the Arab world prior to the introduction of European-style theatre.²³⁰ Amine claims that many Arab indigenous performance traditions were marginalized because they were not based on written scripts that were performed in the space of the theatre.²³¹ However, one should be careful not to reinforce the idea that writing for performance was a phenomenon specific to European theatre. In addition to the shadow plays of Ibn Dāniyāl, such traditions certainly existed within the Arab world, including in Sufi communities who composed and performed poetry in their rituals.²³²

What makes this Sufi tradition different from European plays was that these poems were composed collectively by members of the order, and constantly transitioned between written and oral forms.²³³ For Sufi communities like the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya, creative writing is one of the spiritual activities carried out by the order. This is because

the creative act is contingent upon having an encounter with God who speaks through the Sufi at the final stages of the ascent. The poems composed in these trance-like states are then distributed among members of the order who memorize and perform them in Sufi rituals.²³⁴ Sufi approaches to writings are explored at length in Chapter Four. However, it is important to briefly mention them here to stress that the difference between European and Arab indigenous performance traditions is not the absence of written texts, but how creative material is generated and performed.

Over the centuries, many Tunisian performance traditions have ceased to exist. The *ḥaḍra* and the *dhikr* of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya communities are examples of indigenous traditions that have survived; despite various new challenges posed by attempts to secularize these rituals.²³⁵ The *ḥaḍra* and the *dhikr* present theatre scholars with the opportunity to examine local Tunisian understandings of what constitutes performance, embodiment, and experiences of the sacred, as explored in the following chapter.

Chapter Three

Performances of the Sufi Ascent in Tunisian Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya Rituals

Sufi metaphysics forms a significant part of the religious life of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya communities in Tunisia. Even though these concepts are not often discussed among members of the order, they are fundamental to the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals, where they are explored through embodied performances. According to Kevin Schilbrack, ritual is the space where adherents embody metaphysical meanings that shape how they perceive and experience reality.¹ This dimension of the ritual forms an essential part of the participant’s experience whose behaviour is altered through the performance of these religious rites.² The metaphysical principles performed in the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals are described in the writings of many Sufis, including Ibn ‘Arabī. However, the manner in which members of the ‘Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya articulate these ideas is specific to the Tunisian context from which they derive particular symbols, myths, gestures, and musical techniques to perform the Sufi ascent.

Michael Frishkopf argues that there are various genres of Islamic performance that vary in uniformity, depending on the nature of the performance.³ Practices that are part of the broader framework of the religious law (*sharī‘a*), which all Muslims are obliged to follow, are more homogenous. This includes the five daily prayers that are generally performed in the same manner across different parts of the Islamic world. In contrast, supererogatory performances such as local festivals, *mawlid* (birth of the Prophet)

celebrations, and Sufi rituals are much more heterogeneous because they draw on various local musical and performance traditions.⁴ Tunisian *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals are part of this genre of Islamic traditions that are highly localized. For example, members of the ‘Issāwiya include *mā’lūf* in their ritual performances, a musical tradition which originated in Andalusia, now prevalent in many parts of North Africa.⁵

Even though the ‘Issāwiya use the *mā’lūf* exclusively for religious purposes, there are also other forms of *mā’lūf* which are considered non-religious; which form a significant part of the musical heritage of Tunisia. In addition to using Tunisian musical modes, the songs included in ‘Issāwiya and Shādhiliya performances often include references to local saints and shrines. Furthermore, the songs performed in the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals are composed in the local Tunisian dialect. This allows the Sufi orders to propagate certain metaphysical concepts in a culturally specific manner relevant to people’s lived realities. Performances of the ascent would be impossible without a shared understanding of the states and gestures performed in the social space of the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra*, which allows the shaykhs to guide Sufi adepts to God. This shared understanding, which is shaped by the cultural context, is the reason *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals vary greatly across Sufi orders in different parts of the Islamic world.⁶

The Sufi Orders

The Tunisian ‘Issāwiya and Shādhiliya communities do not consider Sufism a sect of Islam because they are obliged to follow the same religious laws and obligations as other Muslims (the majority of Tunisians follow the Sunnī-Mālikī school of *fiqh*).⁷ Members of

both the Shādhiliya and ‘Issāwiya emphasize the connection between the Sufi path and the divine law. For these communities, Sufism represents ‘the essence of Islam.’⁸ In other words, engaging with the esoteric dimensions of Islam does not negate one’s responsibility towards following religious commandments. The majority of the religious activities of the Tunisian Sufi orders centre on the performance of supererogatory acts that bring adepts closer to God.

The term ‘*ṭarīqa*’ (the path) represents the general spiritual framework that the seeker follows to acquire proximity to God. Over time, the term has come to also refer to the communities that follow certain spiritual teachings and methods.⁹ Many different communities, across several countries, may be part of the same Sufi order. Although there are variations in each context, communities that are part of the same order generally share similar ritual traditions.¹⁰

The Sufi movement began in the seventh century in Iraq.¹¹ Initially, it was composed of individuals who engaged in ascetic practices until it gradually developed into the social institution of the *ṭarīqa* (the order) in the twelfth century.¹² New orders were continuously formed across several parts of the Islamic world until the nineteenth century, when Sufi movements began to experience a decline.¹³ Each Sufi order has a patron saint, who may or may not be the founder of the order. Certain orders developed through the teachings of a saint and his disciples such as Abū Ḥasan al-Shādhilī. Others were created through popular myths about particular historical personalities who were known for their piety and the performance of *karāmāt* –miraculous acts which occur

through the grace of God. The development of the Sufi orders forms a significant evolution in the history of Sufism, since membership in these ‘paths’ meant not only ascribing to a particular spiritual method, but also becoming part of a community, participating in rituals, such as the *dhikr*, and following particular modes of conduct (*sulūk*).¹⁴

Sufi orders are sometimes attributed to ascetic individuals who did not necessarily intend to create a social organization. One such figure is ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (1077-166), the patron saint of the Qādiriya.¹⁵ Contradictory accounts have been given about the origin of this Sufi order. Spencer Trimingham argues that no historical evidence exists for many of the traditions attributed to Jīlānī, who may have not even been a Sufi.¹⁶ Malise Ruthven asserts that Jīlānī was the disciple of a Sufi shaykh named al-Dabbās (d.1131) and had trained several disciples who spread his spiritual method to many parts of the Muslim world, ranging from West Africa to South East Asia.¹⁷

The ambiguity surrounding the order’s spiritual genealogy allowed for the development of diverse spiritual practices, teachings, narratives about miraculous acts, and prayers attributed to Jīlānī, which cannot be accurately traced back to the historical figure.¹⁸ Perhaps what is most intriguing about Jīlānī is not the historical accuracy of the spiritual lineages and methods attributed to him, but how the image and teachings of Jīlānī have become part of popular imagination and practice. For many Sufis in Tunisia, Jīlānī is considered one of the founding figures of Sufism.¹⁹ Jīlānī is praised in the songs of the ‘Īssāwiya²⁰; in Stambeli rituals he is considered one of the *ṣāliḥīn* (the virtuous ones, the

saints)²¹; and in the Shādhiliya community he has a prayer attributed to him called *Wird al-Jalāla*.²²

The orders are connected to each other through spiritual genealogies called *silsilas* (chains of spiritual authority).²³ Through the *silsila*, spiritual knowledge is passed down from the founding saint to the shaykhs of the order who are responsible for guiding adepts. It is believed that these spiritual genealogies lead back to the first Sufi, the Prophet Muhammad. The descendants of the Prophet are called the *shurafā'* (the honorable ones) who pass down blessings to members of the order.²⁴ This connection to the Prophet Muhammad is constantly stressed in the 'Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya communities. Both the patron saint of the 'Īssāwiya, Muhammad Bin-'Īssa, and the Shādhiliya, Abū Ḥasan al-Shādhilī, are believed to be the blood descendants of the Prophet.²⁵

According to Trimingham, the adept is required to give alliance to a certain Sufi order after which s/he receives a secret prayer (*wird*) that makes her/him part of the community, a process Trimingham describes as 'initiation.'²⁶ However, 'initiation' in the Tunisian context does not imply exclusivity because membership in most orders is not restrictive. The adept may take the *ṭarīqa* (spiritual method) from many different shaykhs and may even later develop her/his own method thus continuing the chain of spiritual genealogy.

The patron saint of the ‘Īssāwiya provides an ideal example of this form of spiritual inheritance. Muhammad Bin-‘Īssa (d.1524) took the *ṭarīqa* Jazūliya from ‘Umar al-Hārithī (d.1495-1504), who was a companion and disciple of the patron saint of the order Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Jazūlī (d.1465-70). Bin-‘Īssa was later re-initiated into the order by al-Jazūlī himself, through a non-corporeal meeting in the *barzakh*, where spirits of the dead and the living meet. This extraordinary event occurred during Bin-‘Īssa’s visit to al-Jazūlī’s grave in Marrakech.²⁷ The Jazūliya is a sub-branch of the Shādhiliya order. Al-Jazūlī was initiated into the order by the Shādhiliya follower Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad Amghār.²⁸

Tunisia is home to many Sufī orders including the Shādhiliya, ‘Īssāwiya, Qādiriya, ‘Arūsiya, and Tījāniya. In Tunis, there are several Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya communities, each centering their ritual practices around a particular Sufi shrine (*zāwiya*). For example, the ‘Īssāwiya of Ariyāna are responsible for the rituals performed at the shrine of Sīdī ‘Umar, the ‘Īssāwiya of La Marsa for the shrine of Sīdī ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, and so on. Members of the same order perform the same litanies, songs, prayers, and gestures in their rituals, and can therefore easily participate in the rituals of other communities that are part of the same order. Despite the various differences in the methods utilized by each Sufī order, these communities are closely connected through spiritual genealogies and ritual traditions.

In Tunisia members of the Shādhiliya perform *dhikr* rituals at Sufī shrines associated with other orders such as the ‘Īssāwiya shrine of Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd and at the Qādiriya

shrine of Sīdī Sharīf. The ‘Issāwiya also perform a *ḥadra* at the shrine of Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan during the *mawsim*, the season for performing rituals. These activities are all understood within the framework of spiritual genealogy. Since all the orders lead to the same ultimate destination (God), through different paths or spiritual methods, the seeker is free to attend all rituals and benefit from the religious teachings of multiple saints.

Saints are fundamental to the Sufi orders and their ritual practices. They compose prayers and supplications, introduce new spiritual methods, and are seen as exemplars of asceticism (*zuhd*). Furthermore, it is believed that saints have the ability to intercede on behalf of their followers.²⁹ In the Islamic tradition, it is believed that the death of the corporeal body is followed by the return of the spirit to the intermediary realm of the *barzakh* until the Day of Resurrection.³⁰ The *ṣāliḥīn* (the virtuous ones) are saints whose spirits are able to return to the corporeal realm after their physical death. It is believed that the saint’s spirit continues to be present near her/his tomb and shrine, and is thus the place where followers of the order perform a visit (*ziyāra*) to obtain the blessings and intercession of the saint, who acts as an intermediary between the spiritual and corporeal worlds.³¹ This includes the patron saints of the ‘Issāwiya and Shādhiliya communities, who are introduced in the following pages.

Al-Shādhilī and the Sultan of the Medina

Abū Ḥasan al-Shādhilī is the patron saint of the Shādhiliya. His shrine is one of the most significant religious sites in Tunis, visited year-round by people who wish to obtain the blessings of the saint. Many shrines across Tunisia are affiliated with his order, including

Sīdī Miḥriz in the Medina; Sayyida Manūbia in Manūba; Sīdī ‘Alī ‘Azūz in Zaghouan; and Sīdī ‘Alī Ḥaṭṭāb in Mornag.

Al-Shādhilī was born in Ghumara (Northern Morocco) in 1196 and died in 1258 in Humathara (Egypt) on his way back from the pilgrimage to Mecca.³² He received his religious education in Fez before traveling to the eastern parts of the Islamic world in search of the most spiritually elevated Sufī saint (the *qutb*, pole). He eventually discovered that the ‘pole,’ ‘Abd al-Salām Ibn Mashīsh (d.1225-8), was in Morocco, where he returned to become his disciple. Several years later, al-Shādhilī acquired the spiritual status of the ‘pole.’³³

When al-Shādhilī completed his spiritual training, Ibn Mashīsh told him to move to Ifrīqyā (Tunisia) to a village called Shadhīla (Jabal Zaghwān).³⁴ There he met ‘Alī al-Ḥaṭṭāb (d.1273), who became his first disciple in Ifrīqyā.³⁵ Some attribute al-Shādhilī’s name to the village where he had gone to contemplate. Others believe he was named ‘al-Shādhilī’ by God, the name signifying al-shādh (the literal translation is ‘deviant’ but is interpreted by the Shādhiliya as ‘exceptional’) lī (to me), as in the one who has been set aside for the love and worship of God.³⁶ Al-Shādhilī then moved to Tunis where he performed spiritual retreats in a cave in Jallāz Mountain.³⁷ There he acquired many followers. Among the saints believed to have been al-Shādhilī’s disciples or part of his order are: Sayyida ‘Āisha al-Manūbia, Sīdī ‘Alī Ḥaṭṭāb, Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥabībī, and Abū ‘Abbās al-Mursī.³⁸ Al-Shādhilī later moved to Egypt after he had a vision of the Prophet Muhammad, who told him to leave Tunis.³⁹

The Shādhiliya emphasizes the social dimensions of mysticism. For al-Shādhilī, Sufism should not be a reclusive movement, but be integrated into a society in order to lead its followers to ideal modes of social behavior by following certain modes of conduct.⁴⁰ Through his teachings and sainthood, al-Shādhilī stressed the importance of returning to the community after periods of isolated contemplation to guide others to God. Within the Tunisian Shādhiliya community, the return to the collective social world is considered a means to follow the example of the Prophet Muhammad, who, after receiving revelations during spiritual retreats in a cave called *Ghār Hirā'*, returned to his community to guide others to Islam.⁴¹

The shrine of Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan, located at the top of Jallāz Mountain in Bāb 'Alīwa, is surrounded by a cemetery where several of al-Shādhilī's disciples are buried. The tomb-shrine of Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan contains three small rooms with a courtyard in the middle. Near the tomb-shrine there is a mosque with a large courtyard overlooking Ḥalq al-Wād and a small lake. Beneath the shrine is a *maghāra*, the cave where al-Shādhilī used to meditate. The shrine complex has several water wells – one in the courtyard of the mosque and another at the tomb-shrine. It also has two cafes and a small market where sweets, incense, and candles are sold.

The tomb-shrine is usually the place where the saint is buried.⁴² However, al-Shādhilī is buried in Egypt, where he died. The Shādhiliya community believes that the blessings of al-Shādhilī are transmitted to his tomb-shrine in Tunis through his spiritual presence in it. The tomb-shrine is considered a sacred space because it is where al-Shādhilī had a vision

of the Prophet Muhammad who revealed to al-Shādhilī that his spirit would be present in this part of Jallāz Mountain every Thursday of the fourteen weeks of the summer. For this reason, *ḥaḍra* rituals are performed during the fourteen-week cycle and the tomb-shrine is only open for visits in the summer.⁴³

The Shādhiliya perform the *ḥaḍra* ritual at the tomb-shrine of Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan, and the *dhikr* ritual in the mosque, which is also part of the shrine complex, or at the shrine of Abū Muḥammad Miḥriz Bin Khalaf (Sīdī Miḥriz) in the Medina. Sīdī Miḥriz (d.1022) is one of the patron saints and protectors of the Medina of Tunis, and was thus given the title ‘Sultan of the Medina.’⁴⁴ Sīdī Miḥriz was not part of a particular Sufi order, and it is unclear how he became affiliated with the Shādhiliya community, particularly because he died almost two centuries before the birth of al-Shādhilī.

It is possible that the Shādhiliya incorporated Sīdī Miḥriz into the network of saints venerated by the order because he had a similar approach to al-Shādhilī in that he stressed the importance of the social responsibility of the mystic who must guide and teach others.⁴⁵ According to Richard McGregor, members of the Shādhiliya perform the *dhikr* ritual at the shrine of Sīdī Miḥriz because al-Shādhilī recited a prayer at his tomb when he first arrived in Tunis, thus acknowledging Sīdī Miḥriz’s special status as a saint.⁴⁶ Sīdī Miḥriz’s shrine is much smaller than Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan’s. It contains two large rooms where the *dhikr* is performed, and two smaller ones that are used for storage, a small courtyard, and a well.

Muḥammad Bin-‘Īssa and the ‘Īssāwiya of Tunisia

Muḥammad Bin-‘Īssa, the ‘Īssāwiya’s patron saint, was born in 1467 and died in 1526 in Meknas, Morocco, where he has a shrine named after him.⁴⁷ He was named Shaykh al-Kamāl (the perfect/complete) because he was believed to be the perfect human and ‘pole’ of his time.⁴⁸ Bin-‘Īssa was known for his extraordinary healing powers and miracles (*karāmāt*) such as healing the blind and walking on water.⁴⁹ The miraculous acts performed by Bin-‘Īssa are very similar to the prophetic miracles (*mu’jiza*) of Jesus, who is named ‘Īssa in Arabic.

Sīdī al-Ḥarī is the saint who first introduced the ‘Īssāwiya to Tunisia. His shrine is located in Sūq al-Qalālīn in the Medina of Tunis. The ‘Īssāwiya order then spread to many different areas, establishing multiple shrines across Tunisia, including the shrines of Sīdī ‘Amār in Ariyāna, Sīdī ‘Abd al-‘Azīz in La Marsa, and Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd and Sīdī ‘Azīzī in the village of Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd.⁵⁰ It is not clear how Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd came to be affiliated with the ‘Īssāwiya.

Abū Sa‘īd al-Bajī (1156-1235) was known for undergoing spiritual retreats in al-Manār Mountain, later named the village of Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd in honor of the saint.⁵¹ Al-Bajī met al-Shādhilī while he was living in Tunis.⁵² ‘Īssāwiya adepts claim that al-Bajī was a disciple of al-Shādhilī, who taught him the Qur’ān, and told him to go to al-Manār to contemplate and teach his disciples.⁵³ In contrast, within the Shādhiliya community it is believed that al-Shādhilī was the student of Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd.⁵⁴

The hagiography of al-Bajī does not state that he was affiliated with a Sufi order.⁵⁵ However, in the present day, his shrine hosts the rituals of the ʿĪssāwiya, including performances of the *ḥaḍra* and *dhikr*. Al-Bajī’s shrine is located at the top of a hill in the village of Sīdī Boū-Saʿīd. Facing his tomb-shrine, there is a small mosque, where members of the ʿĪssāwiya perform the daily prayers. There are two courtyards, a smaller one between the mosque and the tomb-shrine, and a much larger one at the entrance of the shrine; both overlook the Mediterranean Sea.

One of the myths within the ʿĪssāwiya community is that Sīdī Boū-Saʿīd is not buried at his tomb-shrine. It is *‘maqām ramzī,’* a symbolic tomb. The whereabouts of his body are not known. Some say that he was last seen entering a cave hidden in Manār Mountain, which faces the sea. Others believe that he walked from Tunis to Egypt and died there.⁵⁶ Therefore, the tomb-shrines of both Sīdī Boū-Saʿīd and al-Shādhilī are symbolic. However, this does not detract from the sanctity of the shrine. One of the members of the ʿĪssāwiya explains: ‘saints do not remain in one place;’ it is the power of the invocation that causes the saints to be present, rather than the remains of their physical bodies. The shrine of Sīdī Boū-Saʿīd is the sacred space in which many spirits are invoked, including the patron saint of the order, Sīdī Bin-ʿĪssa.

Many Tunisians visit Sufi shrines to benefit from the saint’s intercession. The belief in intercession – the ability of prophets and saints to mediate between their followers and God – is common in many parts of the Islamic world, particularly in practices related to saint veneration.⁵⁷ However, it must be stressed that the source of healing and blessing is

God. The saint is only a vessel, a polished mirror through which seekers come into contact with the divine light.

Ascent of the Spiritual Traveller

The ascent of the Prophet Muhammad was in body and spirit. This is the miracle of the *mi'rāj*. The ascent began with a horizontal movement from sacred place (Mecca) to sacred place (Jerusalem), the gateway to the heavens. Then there was a vertical ascent through taste (*dhawq*). He ascended through all the heavens until he reached the lote tree. But before his ascent the angels opened his chest and washed his heart. They washed his heart three times before the ascent.⁵⁸

This quotation from a member of the Shādhiliya order creates a clear distinction between the ascent of the Prophet Muhammad that was 'in body and spirit' and the ascent of his followers, which occurs in spirit alone (*al-ruqiyy al-ruhī*). The miraculous nature of Muhammad's ascent is attributed to his ability to witness the heavens and the angels in a corporeal form.⁵⁹ Sufi communities do not equate their ascent experiences with those of the Prophet's. Instead, they interpret the narrative in a symbolic manner whereby it represents the different spiritual stations the traveller encounters in the Sufi path.⁶⁰ This includes the Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya communities of Tunis for whom the ascent is considered a method for the acquisition of metaphysical knowledge.

The seeker acquires a wide range of spiritual experiences through the ascent. *Kashf*, refers to the revelation of a spiritual realm to the traveller. Each of the seven heavens represents a particular spiritual station with distinct attributes. In each realm the traveller meets a certain saint or prophet until s/he reaches the seventh heaven, where the Prophet Muhammad was given the commandment of performing the five daily prayers.⁶¹ At each

spiritual station the traveller receives a specific *fath* (an opening, revelation) that can take the form of prayers/litanies (*wazīfa*) or poetry (*shi‘ir*). *Fath* can take on many forms and need not be expressed in words, for example, having miraculous healing abilities is a form of *fath*. The acquisition of metaphysical knowledge is also considered *fath*.⁶² Thus, *fath* refers to the spiritual ability to act as an intermediary between the divine and the cosmic. One of the most intense states experienced in the ascent is *jadhb* (spiritual attraction) that causes the seeker’s intellect to ‘lose balance’ and awareness of what s/he is doing or saying. *Jadhb* corresponds to the state of annihilation (*fanā’*) in God. This can manifest itself in a number of ways. The seeker might cry in longing for God (*shawq*), pass out, or recite poetry that s/he will not remember when s/he returns to a state of sobriety (*ṣahū*).

The traveller must try her/his best not to be overwhelmed by the states, realms, or spiritual entities witnessed in the ascent and continue the journey towards God. A member of the Shādhiliya explains:

The path of the Sufi is the walk towards God because you wish to see God, to know God, to become the companion of the Beloved. Along the way you will see angels and lights. You must not stop at a particular vision or station. You must continue on the path. If you see the Prophet, peace be upon him, greet him and then continue along the path. The purpose is to reach God, to be present with God, until you become like Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya, she is with you but is also absent from you because of her presence with God.⁶³

The purpose of Shādhiliya and ‘Issāwiya rituals is to help adepts reach this state of constant awareness of God’s presence in the cosmos. The ‘*mawsim* (season)’ begins in the summer at the shrine of Sīdī ‘Alī al-Ḥaṭṭab in Mornāg where members of several Sufi

orders congregate. The first ‘Īssāwiya *ḥaḍra* of the *mawsim* is performed there each year. The ‘Īssāwiya then perform a *ḥaḍra* at the shrines of Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan, Sīdī ‘Amār, Sīdī ‘Alī al-Makkī, and Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd. The Sufī adepts (*murīdīn*) and the *muḥibīn* (those fond of Sufī rituals but do not attend them regularly) are also expected to perform a visit or attend a *dhikr* ritual at the shrines of Sīdī Miḥriz, Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan, Sīdī Bin-‘Arūs, Sīdī ‘Umar Bukhtiwa, and Sīdī al-Ḥārī. During the ‘season,’ the Shādhiliya perform a *dhikr* ritual at the shrines of Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd and Sīdī Sharīf and a *ḥaḍra* every Thursday at the tomb-shrine of Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan. In addition, a weekly Shādhiliya *dhikr* is performed at the shrine of Sīdī Miḥriz and Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan throughout the year.

No clear distinction is made between who is or is not part of the ‘Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya orders, particularly because the majority of these rituals are open to the public. The shaykhs who guide performances of the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals are viewed as performing spiritual works (*khidma*) that complement each other as they lead seekers to the same truths, but with different spiritual methods. No initiation ceremonies are necessary to attend Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya rituals and the only requirement for being part of the community is having the desire to venerate the saints. The caretaker of the shrine of Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan once asked me if I was a member of the Shādhiliya order. I said that I was not a member but loved al-Shādhilī, to which she responded ‘if you love al-Shādhilī you are Shādhiliya.’⁶⁴ In contrast, the shaykhs must be committed to a particular order to ensure they learn all aspects of the tradition so they can safely guide adepts through a wide range of spiritual states.

The process of becoming a shaykh begins at childhood and is more often than not a hereditary phenomenon. It requires an entire lifetime of learning in order to understand the particularities of the spiritual work, to know the *dhikr*, rhythms, songs, and how to help the seeker transition from one spiritual station to the next. Thus, the shrines also represent social-spiritual networks that utilize different rituals (*dhikr*, *ḥaḍra*, *ziyāra*) and the intercession of several saints to help seekers acquire proximity to God. How this proximity is performed is dependent on the traditions and methods inherited from the shaykhs of the order.

The Shādhiliya Dhikr Ritual

The Shādhiliya *dhikr* takes place twice a week. It is performed at the mosque of Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan on Saturdays and at the shrine of Sīdī Miḥriz on Wednesday mornings. A *dhikr* may also be performed on special occasions such as the *mawlid*, the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birth, or at the shrines of other Sufi orders during the 'season.' The *dhikr* is led by Shādhiliya shaykhs who guide adepts through the ritual. However, the ritual itself is open to the public, one need not be a member of the Shādhiliya to attend the *dhikr*.

The term *dhikr* has more than one meaning. In the Sufi context, *dhikr* refers to the seeker's remembrance of God through the rhythmic repetition of one of the Divine Names. Because this is one of the primary activities performed in the *dhikr*, the ritual was named after it. However, the term *dhikr* may also be used to refer to segments of other

rituals during which the repetition of the Divine Names is performed, as will be illustrated in the section on the ‘Īssāwiya *ḥaḍra*.



Figure 2. The Shādhiliya performing a *dhikr* ritual at the shrine of Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd.

Going to a Sufi shrine without performing a *dhikr* or *ḥaḍra* ritual is considered a ‘visit (*ziyāra*).’ Entering a shrine, for the purpose of a visit or any other ritual, requires the performance of particular rites through which the visitor greets the saint. First, the seeker knocks on the shrine’s door to request permission to enter the sacred space. The visitor must then drink from the blessed water collected from the shrine’s well and give a small donation to one of the caretakers of the shrine. S/he must then walk to the saint’s tomb

and recite the Fātiḥa (the opening chapter of the Qur'ān) then make a supplication or special request.

The *dhikr* begins after the morning prayer (*ṣalāt al-fajr*) and lasts several hours. The *dhikr* ritual is composed of recitations of the Qur'ān, a *ḥizb* (litany) and *wazīfa* (prayers composed by Shādhiliya followers), accompanied by *inshād*, religious hymns that praise the Prophets and the saints. The *ḥizb* and *wird* are a collection of prayers and supplications attributed to al-Shādhilī, which contain excerpts from the Qur'ān. The *wird* is the entire collection of prayers known only to the shaykhs; it is believed that *wird* encompasses the spiritual message of the *ṭarīqa*. The litanies are the parts of the *wird* that shaykhs reveal to adepts.⁶⁵ The following pages provide an account of a Shādhiliya *dhikr* that took place at the shrine of Sīdī Miḥriz. The *dhikr* at Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan is performed in the same manner. The only difference between the two, other than the space in which they are performed, is the spirit of the saint invoked to mediate between the seeker and God.

The smell of incense fills the shrine while people gather around the tomb of Sīdī Miḥriz. Adepts make offerings of bread, olives, sugar, sweets, couscous, *bsisa*,⁶⁶ and candles that are distributed to those present at the ritual. The *dhikr* begins with the recitation of the Fātiḥa,⁶⁷ to greet the spirits of the saints who are believed to be present at the shrine. During the recitation, the adepts stand in front of Sīdī Miḥriz's tomb with their palms pointing upwards to receive blessings. Once the recitation is over, adepts place their palms over their faces to transmit blessings to the rest of the body. The Fātiḥa is recited

again, followed by other chapters of the Qur'ān including al-Ikhlās⁶⁸, al-Nās⁶⁹, and al-Falaq,⁷⁰ which are all repeated several times. It is believed that these chapters of the Qur'ān (*al-mu'awithāt*) protect whoever recites them from evil and envy. Other chapters that are often also recited in the *dhikr* ritual include al-Qadar⁷¹, certain verses from al-Raḥmān⁷², the verse of al-Kursī from al-Baqara⁷³, and al-Faḥ.⁷⁴

Following the Qur'ānic recitations, the *munshid* (singer) performs religious hymns that praise the prophet Muhammad, without the accompaniment of musical instruments. He may include a supplication for the wellbeing of the Muslim community. The performance of the litany then begins under the guidance of *shaykh al-dhikr* and the *muqadim*. *Shaykh al-dhikr* is responsible for guiding adepts through the recitation of the litany and controlling the rhythmic acceleration of the *dhikr*, the segment that includes the repetition of God's most beautiful Names (*'asmā' Allāh al-ḥusna*), which is always preceded by the recitation of a litany. The *muqadim* is responsible for caring for adepts, distributing blessed food and rose water, burning incense, and organising the transitions between the different parts of the ritual. *Shaykh al-ṭarīqa*, who has the highest spiritual authority, is often also present at the ritual.

Upon the completion of the performance of the litany, the *dhikr* (repetition of the Divine Names) begins. The Divine Names are recited rhythmically and slowly with long exhalations. The Divine Names that the Shādhiliya community frequently meditates on are: *Allāh* (God), *Ya Laṭīf* (the Subtle), and *Huwa* (He). During the recitation of the Divine Names adepts stand in two lines parallel to each other while moving forwards and

backwards in a manner that resembles *rukū* – bowing down in a standing position, which is one of the gestures performed in the daily prayers. The rhythm of the recitation increases gradually until the tempo becomes so quick that the words are barely audible. The *dhikr* then stops abruptly and the recitation of the Qur’ān resumes. Women ululate to celebrate the presence of the spirits of the saints.

The same Qur’ānic verses are repeated several times and the recitation undergoes a gradual acceleration of rhythm in the same manner as the *dhikr* that preceded it. Once this part of the ritual has ended, the *munshid* begins to sing. This performance cycle is repeated several times depending on the number of litanies included in the *dhikr* ritual. The adepts then circumambulate the tomb of Sīdī Miḥriz and recite the first chapter of the Qur’ān once more. The *dhikr* ends with supplications and a song that praises the Prophet Muhammad. One of the hymns that is often performed at Sīdī Miḥriz is ‘prayers upon the Prophet Muhammad the beloved of humankind, the sea of perfection (*kamāl*) and beauty Muhammad.’

The hymns performed in the *dhikr* ritual often allude to the ascent, for example one song states: ‘My longing/love (*shawq*) has caused me to become perplexed if you reach Muhammad send my greetings to the guide.’⁷⁵ The ascent occurs through the love of God and Muhammad, which reveals different spiritual stations to the seeker.⁷⁶ In other words, the Shādhiliya song is referring to the experience of annihilation, which causes adepts to realize their inherent unity with the creator who also transcends the limitations imposed on finite entities. This tension between the immanent and transcendent attributes of the Real manifests itself in the state of perplexity in which adepts comprehend that God is both the One and the many.

During the more intense segments of rhythmic acceleration, certain individuals may experience spiritual intoxication (*takhmīr*). The term *takhmīr* comes from the Arabic word *khamr* (alcohol). Within the Sufi ritual context it represents an essential part of the ascent experience because it refers to intoxication in the love of God. Spiritual intoxication can manifest itself in several ways, the seeker might yell, move backwards and forwards vigorously, cry, or pass out. Intoxication is associated with the spiritual state of annihilation (*fanā'*), whereas sobriety (*ṣaḥū*) corresponds to subsistence (*baqā'*), the return to the corporeal realm after the ascent.⁷⁷

According to Hiba, a member of the Shādhiliya community who regularly attends the *dhikr* ritual, in the state of pre-existence God existed outside of space-time. The Real then created the cosmos through His revelation in limited forms that exist in space-time because He wished to be known.⁷⁸ According to Ibn 'Arabī, God comes to know Himself through created beings, particularly the human subject, who is considered the microcosm of the universe because of her/his ability to embody all of the Divine Names, thus becoming the 'polished mirror' through which God witnesses Himself.⁷⁹ One of the sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad that Ibn 'Arabī frequently cites states: 'He who knows himself knows his Lord.' According to Ibn 'Arabī, this saying reveals that the only way to know God is through the revelation of His attributes in the spiritual traveller, who is a vessel for the manifestation of the Divine Names, allowing God to witness Himself in a finite form.⁸⁰

Litany of the Sea (*Ḥizb al-Baḥr*), which is attributed to al-Shādhilī, is one of the most frequently recited litanies at the *dhikr* ritual. It is believed that al-Shādhilī's composed it

while he was on his way to the ḥajj, when he was sailing on a ship that suddenly began to experience turbulence. After al-Shādhilī recited Litany of the Sea, the winds miraculously changed direction and the ship continued its journey towards Mecca. It is believed that this litany was revealed to al-Shādhilī through a divinely inspired vision of the Prophet Muhammad.⁸¹ According to the Shādhiliya shaykhs and adepts, this litany contains the greatest Name of God, and is a source of divine protection. The title of the litany (*al-baḥr*, the sea) not only references the conditions in which al-Shādhilī received the revelation, while he was sailing across the sea, it also represents the different ‘seas’ (realms) of existence that adepts witness during their ascent. The litany says:

Subject to us this sea as you subjected the sea to Moses and the fire to Abraham and the mountains and iron to David and the wind and the devils and *jinn* to Solomon and subject to us every sea that is yours in the earth and the heavens in this [earthly] manifest realm and the spiritual world of mystery and the sea of this life and the sea of the next life subject to us everything – oh He whose hands encompass the essence of all things.⁸²

Asking God to ‘subject’ the sea is a supplication for protection from all that is harmful in this world through the blessings and mercy of God, in the same manner that God’s grace protected Abraham when his opponents cast him into a fire.⁸³ Thus, the request for having the sea (of existence) ‘submit’ to us may be interpreted as the desire to acquire divine protection through the human-divine intimacy experienced in the ascent. This proximity to the Real causes saints to be special recipients of God’s grace and protection, an idea derived from the Qur’ān: ‘verily *awliyā*’ [saints] of Allah – no fear shall be upon them and neither shall they grieve.’⁸⁴

At the shrine of Sīdī Miḥriz, there is a large frame that contains a photograph of clouds

and a quotation that says: ‘However you imagine God, He does not resemble it,’ thus reminding adepts that even though the ascent allows them to experience the Real as immanent, He transcends the limitations imposed on finite forms, and also exists in other forms (the Absolute) inaccessible to the human subject. The importance of remembering God’s transcendence is also mentioned in several Qur’ānic verses recited by Shādhiliya adepts after the *dhikr* such as ‘Glory to your Lord the Lord who transcends what they ascribe to Him.’⁸⁵ Ibn ‘Arabī has a similar approach, constantly stressing that although created entities reveal the meanings of the Divine Names, they are not identical to the divine essence, which cannot be known.⁸⁶ Thus, the spiritual traveller knows God through performances of intoxication that allow her/him to perceive God’s presence in the body and other created forms. This leads adepts to a state of bewilderment (*hīra*) in which they realize that God exists simultaneously as both immanent and transcendent. Even though the ‘veil’ that separates adepts from the Real cannot be completely lifted, since they can only experience the divine in limited forms, the ascent makes this veil ‘thinner’ by purifying the heart, bringing the traveller closer to the source of light and life.

The Shādhiliya Women’s Ḥaḍra

Members of the Shādhiliya perform the *ḥaḍra* ritual at the shrine of Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan. Many of those who regularly attend the Shādhiliya *dhikr* at Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan or Sīdī Miḥriz will also participate in the *ḥaḍra* ritual. The most significant difference between the *ḥaḍra* and the *dhikr* rituals is that the *ḥaḍra* includes the use of musical instruments. Although the *ḥaḍra* is performed in a distinct manner that differs greatly from the *dhikr* ritual, it nonetheless shares similar aesthetic techniques and explores many of the same

ontological principles. The following pages provide an account of a *ḥaḍra* ritual that took place during the fourteen weeks of the summer.

Every Thursday morning of the ‘the season’ women gather at the tomb-shrine of Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan for the *ḥaḍra* ritual. A group of women musicians called the *tījāniya* perform sacred music. In Tunisia the term ‘*tījāniya*’ is used to refer to a Sufī women’s group and should not be confused with the Tījāniya order, which is a different Sufī community. The musicians prepare for the ritual, under the guidance of the *muqadima*, an older woman with advanced spiritual knowledge. One of the musicians burns incense in large clay bowls filled with coal. The heat is used to stretch the leather of the *bandīr* (frame drum) and *mazhar* (a large tambourine). On the *mazhar* there is a small drawing of a fish made with *ḥinna* (red dye), a symbol of luck and fertility in Tunisia. Women slowly gather at the tomb-shrine of Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes while they wait for the ritual to begin. Water from the nearby well is distributed in clay cups.

As the musicians reach for their instruments, everyone gathers around them. They begin with a song that praises the Prophet Muhammad. The women present at the ritual sing along with the *tījāniya*. The music begins at a slower pace, and then gradually accelerates. One woman takes an extra *mazhar* and begins to perform with the musicians. However, this does not last long as the music quickly causes her to experience intoxication. She sways side to side and up and down, almost involuntarily, throwing the *mazhar* into the air. Another woman catches it and ties a scarf around the intoxicated woman’s waist to enable her to continue dancing without falling to the ground. The sounds of the *bandīr* and *ṭabla* (drum) are powerful yet the intoxicated woman continues

to move closer to the musicians. The rhythm continues to accelerate. The woman experiencing intoxication then prostrates onto the ground. She sways her head from side to side, in great proximity to the instruments and the *tījāniya*. The *muqadima* changes the musical mode (*nūba*), and the *tījāniya* perform a musical *dhikr*, rhythmically repeating the divine Name Allāh while the surrounding women begin to ululate. The rhythm continues to accelerate until the intoxicated woman loses consciousness. The other women attending the ritual pour water on her face, offer her food, spray her with perfume, and request spiritual protection for her by saying *bism allāh* (in the Name of God).

If it is a special occasion such as the celebration of an upcoming marriage or a circumcision, then a sacrifice, usually a sheep, is made. The animal is slaughtered at al-Shādhilī's tomb-shrine during the *ḥaḍra* and the meat is distributed to whoever is present at the ritual. Food is widely available at every *ḥaḍra*, because it is believed that consuming food that has come into contact with the sacred space is a means of transmitting its blessings to the body. Bread, sugar, *bambalūnī* (Tunisian doughnut), couscous, and *mloukhiya* (bush okra) are distributed throughout the ritual, sometimes at the request of a saint who communicates with Shādhiliya followers through dreams, as one woman recalls: 'I dreamt that I was eating *mloukhiya* at the shrine so I brought *mloukhiya* to the *ḥaḍra*.'⁸⁷ Seeing a saint in a dream may also be a reminder that the dreamer needs to visit or make an offering to the saint's shrine.

The *ḥaḍra* is composed of songs that praise several saints including al-Shādhilī, Bābā Ḥmīda, Sayyida Manūbia, Sīdī ‘Abd al-Qādir, Sīdī Miḥriz, Sīdī ‘Alī Ḥaṭṭāb, and Sīdī Maṣṣūr. The music is ‘improvised’ in the sense that the songs, musical modes, and the progression of the rhythmic acceleration are determined by the spiritual state of the listener, and the *muqadima* who guides the musicians to help the seeker experience intoxication. The music is part of an oral tradition, an embodied knowledge that is passed down from one generation to the next through the performance of the *ḥaḍra*. It is common for members of the *tījāniya* to bring their children and grandchildren to the ritual to ensure that they learn the songs and traditions surrounding Sufi shrines.

The instruments used in the *ḥaḍra* include the *bandīr* (frame drum), *daf* or *mazhar* (a large tambourine), and a *ṭabla* (drum).⁸⁸ The use of musical instruments in religious rituals is a contested issue within the Muslim community. The arguments for both the banning and use of musical instruments in acts of worship are justified by interpretations of the Qur’ān, even though the Qur’ān does not explicitly state if it is permissible or prohibited, and references to the *ḥadīth*.⁸⁹ In the Tunisian Sufi context, the use of musical instruments is permitted at shrines of saints, whereas the space of the mosque is reserved for vocal performances including *inshād*, the songs performed during the *dhikr* ritual, the rhythmic repetition of the Divine Names, the *ādhān* (call to prayer), and Qur’ānic recitations.

Ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget examined a diverse range of musical traditions used in trance rituals.⁹⁰ The term ‘trance’ does not accurately describe the experience of

intoxication because it implies that it is a state of absence which is fleeting, whereas intoxication is part of a much more complex process of spiritual development. Nonetheless, Rouget makes a significant observation about ritual music. He argues that it is not music that causes the ‘trance.’ Rather, the ritual is part of a broader sociocultural system that socializes states of transcendence through music.⁹¹ This means that the group participating in the ritual activity has a shared understanding of the symbolic meanings of the actions performed and the appropriate way of responding to them. This is certainly true for performances of intoxication, which are part of a broader system of representations that structure the *ḥaḍra* ritual.



Figure 3. Two *mazhars* at the Shrine of Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan.

The music of the *ḥaḍra* structures socio-spiritual interactions through the use of particular aesthetic techniques that include cyclical repetition, transitions from one musical mode to another, and gradual rhythmic acceleration, which guide adepts through the different stages of the ascent. Furthermore, the gestures performed in the ritual are part of a sociocultural system of signs, which facilitate communication between the *tījāniya* and the women performing intoxication. These are the same gestures that Muslims perform in the daily prayers. However, they acquire specific sociocultural meanings in the context of the *ḥaḍra* ritual. The spiritual states (*aḥwāl*) experienced in the *ḥaḍra* are not discussed, but embodied. Particular actions such as raising the index finger or prostrating onto the floor will make the musicians ‘feel’ that changes in the musical mode/rhythm are necessary. Not all of the women will experience intoxication in the ritual; some might experience the divine in more subtle ways such as crying, gently moving from side to side while concentrating on the music, or simply closing their eyes.

The aesthetic techniques utilized by the *tījāniya* have symbolic meanings that are closely tied to Sufi cosmology. The repetition of cyclical rhythms and the gradual rhythmic acceleration represent the annihilation of the seeker’s lower self, which allows her to ascend and witness God in a higher realm. Each realm contains particular attributes of the seeker’s inner reality, which is the revealed form of the Divine Names. The dancer responds to the changes in the rhythm/musical mode by moving backwards and forwards more vigorously, prostrating while violently hitting her palms against the ground, and performing particular gestures, such as raising her index finger at the end of the ascent, to signify that she has reached the final stages of *fanā’* (annihilation in God). It is worth

noting that similar aesthetic techniques, particularly gradual rhythmic acceleration, are used in *dhikr* rituals.

The use of these techniques is not limited to the Shādhiliya community. Jozef Pacholczyk explains that this ‘spiral model,’ represented in the form of gradual rhythmic acceleration and transitions in musical modes, is prevalent in many parts of the Islamic world.⁹² Jonathan Shannon, who examined the vocal musical aesthetics of *dhikr* rituals in Aleppo, mentions two techniques that were performed in the ritual to help listeners experience spiritual transformation.⁹³ The first is the *tarqiyya*, melodic modulation, and the second the *kartah*, rhythmic acceleration. The term *tarqiyya*, which describes the transition from one melodic mode to another in the *dhikr* ritual, also refers to the ascent and spiritual elevation of the Sufi adept.⁹⁴ Even traditions that do not conform to the Arabic musical *maqām* system utilize the technique of gradual rhythmic acceleration to alter the spiritual state of their listeners. This includes Stambeli rituals in Tunisia,⁹⁵ as well as Hamadsha⁹⁶ and Gnawa rituals in Morocco.⁹⁷ Rouget points out that the abrupt breaking of a rhythm, followed by the introduction of a more complex one, and the gradual acceleration of the tempo are two of the most common musical techniques found in rituals of ‘trance.’⁹⁸

Shannon argues that the aesthetics of the *dhikr* reveal the importance of the body in Muslim rituals. Spiritual transformation occurs through visual, olfactory, and sonic stimulation that are accompanied by particular ways of breathing.⁹⁹ Therefore, experiencing intoxication is not merely a response to the music performed in the *ḥaḍra*; it is also a response to sensations experienced and actions performed by the body.

In Ibn ‘Arabī’s cosmology, the body is considered a *barzakh*, an intermediary that reveals the meanings of the Divine Names. Ibn ‘Arabī asserts that God created Adam in his own image then cast him down to ‘the lowest of the low.’¹⁰⁰ The corporeal realm, the darkest of the realms and the furthest from the divine light, is paradoxically also the most complete because it reflects all of the images of the Divine Names present in the realms that precede it. The human subject is considered the microcosm of the universe because s/he has the ability to embody all the divine attributes, and is thus the locus for the manifestation of the Real.¹⁰¹

Ibn ‘Arabī distinguishes between three kinds of bodies: angelic luminous bodies, the bodies of ‘intermediate realities’ made of fire (*jinn*), and non-luminous earthly bodies made of clay.¹⁰² The attributes of God can only be witnessed through their manifestation in luminous or elemental bodies. This is because it is not possible to experience God beyond the limitations of time and space. Each of these bodies possesses different ontological properties, revealing particular attributes of the Real. The spiritual traveller witnesses the ‘subtle’ or ‘corporeous’ (luminous/fiery) bodies in the *barzakh* with the same sensations s/he experiences in the corporeal body (sight, taste, smell, hearing), even though the bodies perceived in the higher realms are not sensible entities.¹⁰³ The ability to perceive these realities is acquired through the dialectic of love between the Sufi and the Beloved, as is described in following prophetic saying:

My servant does not cease to approach Me [God] through supererogatory acts until I love him. And when I love him, I become his hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he grasps, and his foot with which he walks. And if he asks Me [for something], I give it to him. If he seeks refuge with Me, I place him under My protection.¹⁰⁴

Ibn ‘Arabī describes the sensory faculties as the vicegerents of God on earth because they represent the divine attributes that are made manifest in corporeal existence.¹⁰⁵ In other words, the sensory faculties used to perceive the sensible world are reflections of the spiritual faculties in the higher realities, the manifest forms of the Divine Names al-Baṣīr (the All-Perceiving) and al-Samī‘ (the All-Hearing), which allow the traveller to witness the Real in non-corporeal forms.¹⁰⁶ Intoxication represents the state of intimacy between the seeker and the Beloved that causes the adept to become absent from the corporeal realm, and present with the Real in the higher cosmic realities where she witnesses God in subtle bodies. Perception, both spiritual and corporeal, necessitates that the Real become manifest in a form, either in a subtle luminous body, or a dense corporeal body, because the human subject cannot witness God as non-manifest in the form of the Absolute.¹⁰⁷ Through the ascent, one experiences the esoteric dimensions of the corporeal body and acquires the ability to embody/reflect the divine attributes s/he witnesses in each realm.

Ibn ‘Arabī describes the reciprocal relationship between the lover and the Beloved through the metaphor of nourishment. In *The Bezels of Wisdom*, he writes ‘You are His [God’s] nourishment in the decrees (*aḥkām*) and He is your nourishment in existence (*wujūd*).’¹⁰⁸ Created beings are ontologically dependent on the Real who ‘nourishes’ the cosmos when He brings it into existence. This is reciprocated by the human subject who embodies the Divine Names through *fanā’* (annihilation), which ‘nourishes’ the Real by allowing Him to witness Himself in limited manifest forms.¹⁰⁹ The further the seeker ascends, the greater her/his capacity to embody the attributes revealed in each realm.

There are several ways in which the adept can open up her/his body to the higher realities. This includes intoxication through performances of the *dhikr* and sacred music, reciting Qur'ānic verses, touching the tomb of the saint, drinking blessed water from the shrine, and eating food endowed with blessings. The act of ingesting food within the sacred space of the shrine is perhaps the most interesting example in the light of the previously cited quotation on nourishment from *The Bezels of Wisdom*. Ronald Nettler asserts that the metaphor of digested food in the chapter of Abraham in *The Bezels of Wisdom* represents the intermingling of the spiritual and the corporeal.¹¹⁰ The act of eating and drinking sacred food/water symbolizes the *barzakh*-like nature of the human body, the vessel through which the spirit becomes manifest. The *barzakh*-like qualities of bodies (luminous and corporeal) allows them to act as transmitters of spiritual knowledge. For this reason, the seeker may acquire blessings from deceased saints (luminous bodies) who descend to the sacred space of the shrine when their spirits are invoked through recitations of divinely inspired texts and performances of sacred songs and music.

Even though the traveller witnesses the Real in both dense and subtle forms during the ascent, s/he must be careful not to limit God to a particular form. True knowledge requires finding a balance between knowing the Real through His self-disclosure and realizing the impossibility of reaching the Absolute.¹¹¹ Even though the Shādhiliya *ḥaḍra* gives adepts the opportunity to experience the divine in immanent forms, the *tījāniya* are always careful to remind the intoxicated traveller that God transcends the spiritual entities

witnessed in the ascent through the recitation of Qur'ānic verses that stress God's transcendent attributes at the end of each performance.¹¹²

The 'Īssāwiya Dhikr Ritual

Four 'Īssāwiya rituals are performed during the 'season.' The first is the *dhikr* ritual, primarily composed of the rhythmic repetition of the Divine Names. The second is the *kharja*, a public procession that includes music and dancing. It is performed during the 'Īssāwiya of Ariyāna's annual visit to Sīdī Boū-Sa'īd's shrine. The third is the *ḥaḍra*, a ritual primarily centered on performances of intoxication. The fourth is the *mānga*, which includes the performance of religious hymns. It is usually performed outside of Sufi shrines and, in contrast to the *ḥaḍra*, its purpose is not to inspire intoxication. The following pages provide an account of a *dhikr* ritual that took place at Sīdī Boū-Sa'īd and examine the performance techniques utilized in the 'Īssāwiya *dhikr*. The other three 'Īssāwiya rituals are discussed in the following section. Even though intoxication is not performed during the *dhikr* ritual, it nonetheless forms a fundamental part of the religious life of the 'Īssāwiya because it prepares adepts for the ascent. No *ḥaḍra* ever takes place without the performance of a *dhikr* prior to it to ensure that members of the order are protected during their ascent.

The 'Īssāwiya *dhikr* does not include the use of musical instruments and is performed at the shrines of saints affiliated with the order. It has a similar structure to the Shādhiliya *dhikr*, it includes recitations of the Qur'ān and a litany titled Glory to the Eternal (*Subḥān al-Dā'im*), the performance of religious hymns (*inshād*), and the rhythmic repetition of

the Divine Names *Allāh*, *Huwa* (He), and the phrase ‘there is no God but God.’ In contrast to the Shādhiliya, the *dhikr* ritual of the ‘Īssāwiya community of Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd is not a weekly ritual, and is only performed in preparation for an upcoming *ḥaḍra*.¹¹³

The most significant difference between Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya *dhikr* performances is that seekers may experience spiritual intoxication in Shādhiliya rituals, whereas, for the ‘Īssāwiya, the *dhikr* only prepares adepts for the intoxication that will take place in the *ḥaḍra*. Furthermore, in contrast to the Shādhiliya *dhikr*, which is open to the public, the ‘Īssāwiya *dhikr* is a private ritual that only the shaykhs and a particular group of adepts called the *fuqarā*’ (the impoverished ones) attend. This is because of the difference in how Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya shaykhs guide their followers. Even though the shaykhs of the Shādhiliya may pay more attention to those who regularly attend the *dhikr*, they provide spiritual guidance to everyone present at the ritual. In contrast, the purpose of the *dhikr* for ‘Īssāwiya shaykhs is to prepare the *fuqarā*’ for the *ḥaḍra* ritual.

The ‘Īssāwiya *dhikr* is performed in the courtyard of Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd’s shrine. The *dhikr* ritual may also be performed at the nearby shrine of Sīdī ‘Azīzī, who is one of the saints venerated by the ‘Īssāwiya community. The ritual begins with the recitation of the Fātiḥa,¹¹⁴ followed by a song that praises the Prophet Muhammad. The shaykhs and adepts then collectively recite the litany titled ‘Glory to the Eternal.’ The litany is composed of several passages that describe the process of creation, the Sufi path, and supplications that praise God, the Prophet Muhammad, and ‘Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya saints. The saints mentioned in the litany include Sīdī Miḥriz, Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan, Mawla

Idrīs, al-Jazūlī, Sīdī Bin-‘Īssa, and Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd. Several phrases from the litany are repeated multiple times at a slow pace with long exhalations. The *dhikr* (repetition of the Divine Names) is then performed.

The phrase ‘there is no God but God’ is repeated one hundred times. As the recitation progresses, the rhythm gradually accelerates, eventually becoming very fast. At the height of the rhythmic acceleration, the *munshid* (singer) ends the rhythmic repetition of the phrase ‘there is no God but God’ with the performance of a religious hymn. The adepts then form a chorus that responds to the singing of the *munshid* with the repetition of the sentence ‘there is no God but God.’ The *dhikr* (rhythmic repetition) of the Divine Name ‘Allāh’ then begins. It starts at a slow pace and then accelerates. During this part of the ritual, the *fuqarā’* stand in parallel lines, moving backwards and forwards and shout ‘Allāh’ with gestures that resemble *rukū’* (bowing down in a standing position) with raised index fingers. As the rhythm accelerates, they move backwards and forwards more vigorously. When the tempo cannot accelerate further, *shaykh al-dhikr*, who is responsible for guiding the adepts, starts a new *dhikr* cycle repeating the Divine Name *Huwa* (He). Once again, the tempo is extremely slow and then gradually accelerates. When the *dhikr* becomes very fast, the *munshid* interrupts the recitation with a song ‘the Prophet Muhammad is the Prophet of God, peace be upon him.’ Then, together with the adepts, the *munshid* sings a song that describes the different attributes of the prophets. A supplication is then made, followed by Qur’ānic recitations,¹¹⁵ and a collective recitation of the verse ‘Glory to your Lord the Lord who transcends what they ascribe to Him.’¹¹⁶ The ritual ends with a hymn that describes the Prophet Muhammad as a sea of ‘perfection

and beauty,’ which is also performed in the Shādhiliya *dhikr*.

The litany recited in the ‘Īssāwiya *dhikr* (Glory to the Eternal) was composed by al-Jazūlī and taught to Bin-‘Īssa by al-Ḥārithī.¹¹⁷ The *dhikr* prepares the *fuqarā*’, ‘Akāsha (the most spiritually advanced adept), and the shaykhs for the *ḥaḍra* ritual. ‘Akāsha is the name of a clan whose members are believed to be the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions (*ṣaḥāba*). In ‘Īssāwiya rituals the person called ‘Akāsha is not literally part of this clan, but is named after it because he acts as the intermediary between the Muhammadan light and the *fuqarā*’.

The verses of this litany provide an ontological explanation as to why ‘Īssāwiya adepts are described as *fuqarā*’ (impoverished). It states:

The blessed *Mawla*¹¹⁸ is necessary and the created being is a possibility
the blessed *Mawla* is ancient and the created being is a manifest [form]
the blessed *Mawla* is everlasting and the created being perishes
the blessed *Mawla* is Rich (Ghanī)¹¹⁹ and the created being is poor¹²⁰

Created beings are impoverished because they are ontologically dependent on God, al-Ghanī (the Rich, the Independent), who brings them into existence. The litany describes the Real as ancient because He is the Everlasting (*al-Dā’im*) who existed before the creation of space and time. In contrast, ‘created beings’ are limited manifest forms that perish. However, limited beings have metaphysical significance because they are the manifest images of the Divine Names through which God witnesses Himself. The ‘Īssāwiya litany contains several verses that remind the *fuqarā*’ of the purpose of the creation of the cosmos. For example, it says: ‘He brought into existence the existents so

that the sublime God can be known.’ This verse resembles a prophetic saying that states: ‘I [God] was a hidden treasure that desired to be known, then I created the universe so that I might be known,’¹²¹ which Ibn ‘Arabī often refers to in order to stress that the purpose of the existence of the cosmos was for God to witness Himself in a finite form.¹²²

The *fuqarā*’ are a group of dedicated adepts who struggle against the self (*nafs*) in order to ‘polish the mirror’ of their being to better reflect the divine attributes. Thus, the *dhikr* prepares these adepts for the acquisition of these spiritual attributes through performances of intoxication in the *ḥadra* ritual. However, the litany is also careful to mention the importance of finding a balance between immanence (*tashbīh*) and transcendence (*tanzīh*):

the blessed *Mawla* is sublime He does not resemble created beings
the blessed *Mawla* the sublime is in the hearts of the gnostics (‘*ārifīn*)
the blessed *Mawla* is beautiful in the hearts of those who worship Him
the blessed *Mawla* is complete in the hearts of those who have arrived
the Almighty God cannot be encompassed by place
place is one of the characteristics of created beings
God was our *Mawla* before time and space
time is created space is created
time is impoverished space is impoverished¹²³

God transcends all created forms, yet the Real is present in the heart of the Sufī. This is because the human subject is the microcosm of the cosmos and her/his heart the mirror in which the meanings of the Divine Names are revealed.¹²⁴ The gnostic is the person who has the ability to reflect images of the Names in the corporeal realm. The ones who ‘have arrived’ are those who have attained the highest degrees of intimacy with God, who

perfectly reflect the divine attributes after ascending through all the cosmic realms, making the Real ‘complete/beautiful’ in their hearts.

It is extremely important that all of the props (glass, coal, chains, stacks of hay, cactus, nails, and raw meat) that will be used in the ‘Īssāwiya *ḥaḍra* are present at the preparatory *dhikr* ritual, which always takes place a few days earlier. The recitation of the litany and the Qur’ān endows these objects with blessings that protect the *fuqarā’* when they later use these props in performances of intoxication in the *ḥaḍra* ritual. As noted earlier, intoxication does not occur in the ‘Īssāwiya’s *dhikr*, its main purpose is to ‘purify the hearts’ of the adepts for the *ḥaḍra* ritual.

One of the songs performed in the ‘Īssāwiya *dhikr* describes the attributes of the prophets, which correspond to the different stages of the ascent. It states:

Muhammad is the beloved of God (*ḥabīb Allāh*) the greetings of God upon him, Abraham is the friend of God (*khalīl Allāh*) the greetings of God upon him, Moses is the interlocutor of God (*kalīm Allāh*) the greetings of God upon him, Jesus is the spirit of God (*rūḥ Allāh*) the greetings of God upon him, the Khidr is the saint of God the greetings of God upon him.¹²⁵

It is very similar to the Shādhiliya’s *Litany of Revelation* (*Ḥizb al-Faṭḥ*), also known as the *Litany of Secrets* (*Ḥizb al-Asrār*), which attributes the same properties to the aforementioned prophets:

there is no God but God the light of the secret of the being of the Prophet of God there is not God but God Adam is the vicegerent (*khalīfa*) of God there is not God but God Noah is the prophet of God there is no God but God Abraham is the friend of God there is not God but God Moses is the interlocutor of God there is no God but God Jesus is the spirit

of God there is no God but God Muhammad is the beloved of God there is no God but God the prophets are the attributes of God there is no God but God the saints are the allies (*anṣār*) of God¹²⁶

The properties attributed to each of the prophets are derived from the Qur'ān and prophetic tradition.¹²⁷ Although praise of the prophets is expressed in different ways, the Shādhiliya, 'Īssāwiya, and Ibn 'Arabī associate each of the prophets with the same ontological attributes. Adam represents the perfect human, the vicegerent of God on earth.¹²⁸ Jesus symbolizes the breath of the all-Merciful that gives existence to embodied forms.¹²⁹ Moses represents the intimate dialogue between the lover and the Beloved that precedes the state of annihilation.¹³⁰ The Prophet Muhammad is described as the beloved of God because of his proximity to the divine. Muhammad is also the manifest form of the Muhammadan light, the first *barzakh* to be brought into existence making possible the revelation of the Real in limited forms.¹³¹ Al-Khidr, who is referred to in the previously cited 'Īssāwiya litany, is considered a saint and not a prophet. He is mentioned in the litany to remind the 'Īssāwiya adepts of the relationship of spiritual inheritance between prophets and saints, particularly since several other passages in the litany further reinforce the idea that the saints are the intermediaries who join the spiritual and corporeal worlds.¹³²

The 'Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya also share many of the performance techniques utilized in the *dhikr* ritual. This includes gradual rhythmic acceleration, the use of long exhalations, and the abrupt breaking of a rhythm during the repetition of the Divine Names. The two communities also perform the same gestures of moving forwards and backwards while

raising their index fingers. They also sing the same songs during the *dhikr* in praise of the Prophet Muhammad and the saints. The main difference is what each of the two communities considers the purpose of the ritual. For the Shādhiliya it is one of several rituals that guide seekers to metaphysical knowledge, whereas the ‘Īssāwiya consider the *dhikr* necessary for preparing adepts for the extreme physical and spiritual states experienced in the *ḥaḍra* ritual.

‘Īssāwiya Rituals of the Mawsim

As noted earlier, several ‘Īssāwiya rituals take place during the ‘season,’ each with its own traditions. The ascent is primarily performed in the *ḥaḍra* ritual. However, the other ‘Īssāwiya rituals are also significant because each contributes in some way to the spiritual development of the adept that makes it possible for him to perform extreme acts in the *ḥaḍra* without incurring any bodily harm.

In the Shādhiliya *ḥaḍra* the ascent can be performed by anyone who is present in the ritual. In contrast, the purpose of the ‘Īssāwiya *ḥaḍra* is to allow the *fuqarā*’ (a group of male adepts) to perform intoxication. This is because performances of the ascent in the ‘Īssāwiya *ḥaḍra* include engaging in extreme acts such as eating glass or jumping on cactus, which requires many years of spiritual training. Even though others, including the women present at the ‘Īssāwiya *ḥaḍra*, may experience intoxication, they are not the primary concern of the shaykhs and the musicians, nor are they allowed to participate in any of the extreme acts that are considered far too dangerous for someone who is not sufficiently acquainted with the tradition. Despite the differences in how members of the

‘Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya perform the *ḥaḍra*, they nevertheless share particular performance techniques, gestures, and perceptions of the body that are fundamental to the practice of intoxication.

The *kharja* is one of the most popular rituals of the *mawsim*. It is performed by two ‘Īssāwiya groups, from Ariyāna and Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd, gathering large crowds from all over Tunis. After the *kharja*, which takes place early in the day, several *ḥaḍra* rituals are performed at Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd’s shrine. During both the *ḥaḍra* and the *kharja*, the shaykhs and *fuqarā’* wear a white *jibba* – traditional Tunisian robes made of silk or wool – except ‘Akāsha, the most powerful of the adepts, who distinguishes himself with a striped Moroccan *jalaba* (long robe with a hood). A *ḥaḍra* may be performed without a *kharja* preceding it. In fact several *ḥaḍras* are performed throughout the season, whereas there is usually only one *kharja* at Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd’s shrine each year. This is because at least one *kharja* must be performed for each saint during the season. The instruments used in the *kharja* and *ḥaḍra* are the *ṭār* (tambourine), *bandīr* (frame drum), and *naqārāt* (kettle drums).

The *kharja* begins with two musical processions led by the ‘Īssāwiya of Ariyāna and Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd who meet halfway up the hill that leads to Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd’s shrine. In both processions members of the ‘Īssāwiya sing songs that praise the Prophet Muhammad and the saints with the accompaniment of musical instruments. The two groups then sing and perform music together while they slowly make their way towards the shrine of Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd. According to tradition, an animal sacrifice must be made during the *kharja*, usually

a calf or sheep. The meat is distributed to whoever is present at the shrine at the end of the ritual.

After the *kharja*, several *ḥaḍra* rituals are performed in the courtyard of Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd’s shrine for three consecutive days. There are several different names for the *ḥaḍra*, depending on the time of day in which the ritual is performed. If it takes place after *ṣalāt al-‘ishā’* (the last of the five daily prayers), it is called *mbīta*. The *ḥaḍra* performed between *ṣalāt al-maghrib* (the sunset prayer) and *ṣalāt al-‘ishā’* (the last prayer) it is referred to as *‘ishwiya*. Or the *ḥaḍra* may simply be called *‘Īssāwiya*, the same as the name of the order. A *ḥaḍra* may be performed at a Sufi shrine or a private home. In both cases, the purpose of the ritual is to cause intoxication. For the *‘Īssāwiya*, intoxication is a metaphor for the love of God that allows the seeker to ascend to the higher realms.¹³³

The *mānga* differs from both of the aforementioned rituals in that its purpose is not to inspire ascent or intoxication, despite the religious connotations of the songs performed. According to tradition, the *mānga* must be performed at Café al-‘Āliya, whose owners have been members of the *‘Īssāwiya* for several generations. The *mānga* takes place after the Shādhiliya perform a *dhikr* ritual at Sīdī Boū-Sa‘īd’s shrine, located a few meters away from the cafe. The Shādhiliya *dhikr* takes place a few weeks after the *kharja*. It is one the last rituals that the Shādhiliya perform at shrines affiliated with other Sufi orders, marking the end of the season. A *mānga* may also be performed at a private home for special occasions such as wedding celebrations.

Even though the *mānga* is considered more ‘artistic’ than the *ḥaḍra* because it does not cause intoxication, it is still interpreted within a religious framework in the sense that its purpose is to praise the prophets and saints. The songs performed in the *mānga*, particularly in the segments that do not include musical instruments called the *mjarriid*, have clear religious meanings. Many *mānga* songs are part of a religious genre of music called *madīh*, which praises the Prophet Muhammad and the saints, including Bin-‘Īssā, al-Shādhilī, and al-Jilānī. However, other songs, particularly those performed later in the night, do not always have clear religious connotations, but are interpreted as such by members of the ‘Īssāwiya. For example, one of the songs sung during a *mānga* I attended at a private home included a love song about a woman named Layla. The song refers to the pre-Islamic story of *Majnūn Layla* (the one mad for Layla) about a man named Qays, who goes mad because of his longing for his beloved Layla. For many Sufi communities, the narrative symbolizes the seeker’s annihilation in God, her/his Beloved.¹³⁴ This is just one example of how love songs are interpreted within a religious framework in *mānga* performances.

The *mānga* also includes performances of *mā’lūf*, a Tunisian musical tradition that originated in Andalusia, and was brought to North Africa by Jews and Muslims who were expelled from Spain between the tenth and fifteenth centuries. Over the years, *mā’lūf* developed within the North African context adopting many local musical techniques.¹³⁵ In the *mā’lūf* tradition musical modes are referred to as *ṭbū’*. The *ṭbū’* performed by the ‘Īssāwiya include: Sīkā, Ḥsīn, al-‘Irāq, Ḥayir al-Irāq, and al-Kurdī. According to Ruth Davis, each *ṭab’* (singular of *ṭbū’*, musical mode) is associated with a particular time of

day, elements, and physical-emotional states, and has certain therapeutic effects on its listeners.¹³⁶ The *munshid* of the 'Īssāwiya describes the *ṭbū'* as 'an emotional/spiritual state', whereby each *ṭab'* inspires a certain spiritual realization (*wajd*).¹³⁷ Furthermore, people respond to the *ṭbū'* in different ways, each requiring a musical mode that pertains to her/his particular emotional/spiritual state in order to experience intoxication.

The lyrics of the songs are part of a genre called *muwashahāt* or *zajal*, love songs composed in classical Arabic or colloquial dialect, that describe states of intoxication and longing for the beloved.¹³⁸ *Mā'lūf* songs, particularly ones with images of longing and drunkenness, are interpreted by the 'Īssāwiya as a metaphor for the soul's journey towards God, the Beloved. The 'Īssāwiya draw a clear distinction between religious *mā'lūf* performed at Sufi shrines, which is considered a religious expression of the love of the creator known as '*mā'lūf al-jadd*,' and non-religious *mā'lūf* love songs performed in secular contexts called *mā'lūf hazal*. For example, an 'Īssāwiya shaykh explains the esoteric meaning of the metaphor of alcohol, which often appears in 'Īssāwiya poems, as follows: 'the alcohol is the *dhikr* [remembrance of God], which intoxicates the spirit, the more your heart is filled with *dhikr* the more you will ascend.'¹³⁹ Thus, the metaphor of drinking symbolizes the seeker's journey towards the Real through spiritual intoxication.

Mā'lūf al-jadd is associated with an Andalusian saint named Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī who is known for writing poetry that describes states of intoxication and proximity to the Beloved. Within the 'Īssāwiya community it is believed that al-Shushtarī was one of the first people to introduce the *mā'lūf al-jadd* tradition to Tunisia.¹⁴⁰ His influence

on the ‘Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya communities is discussed in detail in the following chapter. However, it is important to briefly mention him here because of how closely he is associated with the *mā’lūf* tradition. In fact, performances of *mā’lūf al-jadd* are sometimes referred to simply as ‘Shushtarī.’¹⁴¹

The instruments used in the *mānga* are the *tār* (tambourine), and *naqārāt* (kettle drums). It is much shorter in duration than the *ḥaḍra*, which lasts several hours. Like the *ḥaḍra*, the *mānga* is composed of vocal *inshād* performances that do not include the use of musical instruments (*mjarriid*), the rhythmic repetition of God’s most beautiful Names (*dhikr*), and songs accompanied by musical instruments (*birāwil*) that form the ‘*nūba*,’ the ‘repertoire’ or ‘song cycle’ that is performed in a particular musical mode.¹⁴² Even though some of the songs performed in the *mānga* are the same as those of the *ḥaḍra*, intoxication never occurs during a *mānga* because the rhythm of the songs and music performed in the *mānga* differ from those of the *ḥaḍra*.¹⁴³ Another difference between the *ḥaḍra* and *mānga* is that the *bandīr*, which is considered a sacred instrument, is not used in the *mānga*. Furthermore, the *mānga* does not include dance, which is essential to ascent performances in the *ḥaḍra*.¹⁴⁴

The ‘Īssāwiya *ḥaḍra*, which contains the ‘spiritual work’ that allows adepts to ascend, requires the participation of several shaykhs. *Shaykh al-ṭarīqa* is responsible for all of the religious activities of the ‘Īssāwiya. *Shaykh al-‘amal* chooses the songs (*birāwil*) that will be performed by the *hilāla*, a group of male singers who perform music for the *fuqarā*. *Shaykh al-‘amal* also guides the transitions from one musical mode to another. *Shaykh al-*

ḥaḍra attends to the *fuqarā'* and controls the rhythm of the songs by clapping his hands, causing it to accelerate gradually as the ritual progresses and the seekers ascend. The shaykhs, who must not become intoxicated in order to guide the adepts, wear prayer beads (*misbaḥa*) around their necks; this prevents them from experiencing ascent. The songs and music performed in the ritual are improvised. The shaykhs and the *hilāla* are aware of which particular musical mode causes each of the *fuqarā'* to become intoxicated, and they will therefore alter the performance depending on who is present at the ritual. The *fuqarā'*, *hilāla*, and shaykhs have memorized all of the 'Īssāwiya songs/rhythms, which were passed down to them through oral traditions, making it possible to transition from one song/musical mode to another without disrupting the performance. The following pages contain an account of a *ḥaḍra* performed at the shrine of Sīdī Boū-Sa'īd. It is generally performed in the same manner among members of other 'Īssāwiya communities in Tunis.¹⁴⁵

The *ḥaḍra* begins with the recitation of the Fātiḥa.¹⁴⁶ It is followed by *ward al-quḍūm*, vocal performances that are not accompanied by musical instruments. The first song performed is a prayer for the Prophet Muhammad (*ṣalāh 'ala al-nabī*), followed by songs about Sīdī Bin-'Īssa, Sīdī 'Abd al-Qādir, Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan, Sīdī 'Alī Ḥaṭṭāb, and other saints. During *ward al-quḍūm*, the *fuqarā'* stand in a line (*ṣaf*) and hold each other's hands while they move backwards and forwards (bowing down in a standing position). As the ritual progresses, the rhythm of the songs accelerates. When the tempo becomes very fast, the *mjarriḍ* is introduced. The *mjarriḍ* includes the performance of songs that are accompanied by handclapping, without the use of musical instruments.¹⁴⁷

As the rhythm of *mjarriid* accelerates, the *fuqarā'* continue to move forwards and backwards, and begin taking long and loud exhalations. The *hilāla* sing while the adepts rhythmically repeat the Divine Name *Huwa* (He). The repetition of the Divine Names and the songs of the *hilāla* overlap, both gradually accelerate, until the tempo can no longer increase. The singing then stops, and the *dhikr* (repetition of the Divine Names) continues into the next *mjarriid* cycle. Several cycles are performed which include recitations of the Divine Names *Huwa* (He), *Allāh*, and *Allāh Dā'im Ḥay* (God the Eternal Living). In the final cycle, when the rhythm cannot accelerate further, the *mjarriid* ends abruptly with the introduction of musical instruments (*birāwil*). Several songs about the Prophet Muhammad, Bin-ʿĪssa and his followers, as well as several other saints, are performed. The *fuqarā'* do not all experience intoxication at the same time, each responds to a particular song and musical mode. As a result, several *birāwil* cycles must be performed until each of the adepts has performed intoxication. ʿAkāsha is the last one to become intoxicated because it is believed that he protects the *fuqarā'* during their ascent. After *birāwil al-istiftāḥ* (the opening songs), the *birāwil* of ʿAkāsha are performed, after which he is taken to the room that contains Sīdī Boū-Saʿīd's tomb, only to return to the crowded courtyard of the shrine near the end of the ritual.

After a few of the *birāwil* songs are performed, two of the *fuqarā'* begin to experience intoxication. They leave the line of adepts and begin to move forwards and backwards on their own. The rhythm gradually accelerates while they fall deeper into states of intoxication. When their movements become very fast, *shaykh al-ḥaḍra* covers the floor with thorn-filled cactus stems. The two *fuqarā'* take off their shirts and jump onto the

cactus, they do this several times. One of them even takes a large bite out of it while the sound of ululations fills the courtyard. At the end of the intoxication the adept raises his index finger, and the shaykhs rush towards him, attempting to catch him moments before he loses consciousness. To make the adept come out of intoxication, the shaykh whispers the Qur'ānic verse of al-Kursī into his ear, which stresses God's transcendent attributes (the Self-Subsisting, the all-Sustaining, the all-Knowing).¹⁴⁸ After each of the *fuqarā'* has performed intoxication, 'Akāsha returns to the courtyard, tied in heavy metal chains. While the instrumental sequences of the *birāwil* continue, 'Akāsha strikes the chains against the ground, creating loud sounds. The third time he strikes the chains they break. Women ululate in celebration of 'Akāsha, who has become free from the limitations of the corporeal body.

All of the songs performed in the *birāwil* part of the *ḥaḍra* follow the same pattern of gradual rhythmic acceleration, which, together with the transition in the musical modes, causes the intoxication of one or more of the adepts. There are seven different ways in which the *fuqarā'* may perform intoxication. Each adept is given a particular name, depending on which dangerous act he engages in when performing intoxication. The adept named the *jmal* (camel) eats and jumps on thorn-filled cactus that pierce his skin and lips. There may be more than one adept who performs intoxication this way; all are called the 'camel.' The *šba'* (lion) eats glass, the *katūs* or *nimir* (cat/tiger) eats raw meat, the *na'āma* (ostrich) eats nails, and the shaykh who feeds them is called the *bāshūsh*. The *ašayd* (another name for lion in Tunisian dialect) is the adept who 'dies' and stops breathing for several minutes; he becomes a corpse protected from the dangers of the

wild animals as it is believed within the ‘Īssāwiya community that lions do not eat dead prey and will therefore not approach a person who is breathless and appears dead.¹⁴⁹ The sixth kind of intoxication is with a *ḥalfā*, a burning stack of hay that the adept places on different parts of his body. The seventh kind of intoxication is that of ‘Akāsha who breaks heavy metal chains.

In addition to the musical modes, there are modes of dance (*maqāmāt al-raqs*) that guide the rhythm of the adept’s movement (*ih̄tizāz*). As the music accelerates, the adepts progress from one dance mode to the next, gradually increasing the pace of their movements the more they become intoxicated.¹⁵⁰ When the *mjarriid* begins, the movements of the *fuqarā’* changes. They transition from *rukū’*, moving backwards and forwards while holding hands in the line, to letting go of each other’s hands, with half of the line taking a step forward while raising their index fingers during the recitation of one of the Divine Names. Once they return to their original position, the other half of the line of *fuqarā’* steps forward with raised index fingers, thereby completing the recitation. When the *birāwil* part of the *ḥaḍra* begins, the *fuqarā’* once again form a line, moving backwards and forwards while holding each other’s hands, except when they experience intoxication. The dances of Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya *ḥaḍras* are not identical. However, members of both Sufi orders utilize the same gestures of moving backwards and forwards and raising their index fingers in performances of intoxication.

Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Becker introduces the term ‘habitus of listening,’ to explain the musical-emotional predispositions of people who experience

‘trance’ in religious rituals.¹⁵¹ She argues that the ‘the habitus of listening’ represents a socialized subjectivity that allows listeners to respond to ritual music in culturally appropriate ways, by which she means that those who attend the ritual have a shared understanding of the music, perceived as a vehicle for ‘spiritual communion,’ without having to think about it.¹⁵² Furthermore, she asserts that the ‘Sufi habitus of listening’ includes a particular sequence of emotions that eventually leads ritual participants into a ‘trance.’ This sequence, which Becker refers to as a ‘script,’ represents the framework for the possible actions that may be performed in a ritual, which allows musicians to both anticipate and induce states of ‘trance.’¹⁵³

During the *ḥaḍra* ritual, members of both the ‘Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya perform the gestures of *ṣalā* (five daily prayers). These gestures include bowing down in a standing position (*rukūʿ*), raising the index finger (*tashahhud*), prostration (*sujūd*), and moving the head from side (*taslīm*). The daily prayers are one of the five pillars of Islam that every Muslim must perform five times a day. Thus, the daily prayers form a significant part of the religious life of members of the ‘Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya, particularly since the shaykhs of both orders stress that the performance of supererogatory acts such as the *ḥaḍra* and *dhikr* rituals does not negate adepts’ other religious obligations. For these Sufi communities, the *ṣalā* represents the intimate dialogue between the seeker and the Beloved, and is believed to be one of the spiritual methods introduced by the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁵⁴

There is nothing in the Qur'ān that prescribes performing the daily prayers in a particular way. The gestures are derived from the prophetic tradition, which attributes particular sayings and actions to the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁵⁵ The feelings of intimacy experienced when performing the daily prayers emerge from the practice of *ṣalā*, which endows adepts with particular bodily dispositions. Even though adepts describe these emotions as being instinctual, they are in fact socialized. One learns to perceive and experience the daily prayers as states of intimacy with the Beloved, in the same manner that members of the 'Issāwiya and Shādhiliya are socialized into having particular responses to ritual music. In other words, Shādhiliya and 'Issāwiya adepts revert to the gestures of the daily prayers in performances of intoxication because they are socialized into associating them with feelings of intimacy with God. This is evident from the many different social meanings attributed to the practice of *ṣalā* in different contexts.¹⁵⁶ The daily prayers are generally performed the same way across the Muslim world, with only slight variations in the ritual gestures. However, the emotions and meanings associated with performance of these gestures are dependent on how each community perceives and interprets the practice.¹⁵⁷

The 'habitus of listening' facilitates the unspoken communication between the musicians and adepts who are dancing. The musicians alter the musical rhythms in relation to the gestures performed by the dancer, which signify how close s/he is to experiencing intoxication, whereas the dancers respond to ritual music, altering their movements, increasing their pace, or even fainting. This also includes the association of the practice

of intoxication with particular rhythms, which accounts for why adepts do not experience intoxication during *mānga* performances.

Furthermore, intoxication in the *ḥaḍra* ritual is performed in a very structured manner, following a particular sequence of performances. An ‘Īssāwiya adept cannot experience intoxication in the *birāwil* segment of the *ḥaḍra* without the performance of the *mjarriid*, and *dhikr* (recitation of the Divine Names) prior to it. Likewise, the women who attend the Shādhiliya *ḥaḍra* will not perform intoxication, unless the music is performed in a particular manner (gradual rhythmic acceleration, changes in the musical mode). This, in addition to the distribution of sacred water, and the burning of incense, constitute a ‘script,’ a set of actions that must be performed at every *ḥaḍra* ritual. The performance of these actions guides the gradual development of the adept’s emotional state culminating in intoxication. The seeker does not necessarily experience intoxication at every *ḥaḍra*. Instead, this ‘script’ represents all possible states, emotions, and actions that may be experienced and performed in the ritual, leaving it to the adept to ‘feel’ if they will ascend.

The existence of a ‘script’ in *ḥaḍra* rituals does not mean that the ritual is static. The traditions surrounding the *ḥaḍra* are constantly changing. An ‘Īssāwiya singer explains: ‘the *ḥaḍra* changes with time. Whenever someone inherits [ritual] knowledge, they add a small personal element into the music, *dhikr*, and dance that becomes part of the tradition.’¹⁵⁸ Within the ‘Īssāwiya community it is believed that the patron saint of the order, Bin-‘Īssa, did not even perform the *ḥaḍra* ritual. The development of this religious

tradition represents the formation of a spiritual method that was inherited from the followers of Bin-‘Īssa. As the tradition is passed down from one generation to the next it constantly acquires new meanings, which, for the ‘Īssāwiya, represents the collective refinement of a spiritual method through an endless series of divinely inspired revelations.¹⁵⁹

The dance gestures of the *ḥaḍra* also have symbolic significance. The Prophet Muhammad received the commandment of the five daily prayers in the final stages of his ascent. This is referenced in one of the songs performed in the ‘Īssāwiya *ḥaḍra*:

The Mustafa [Muhammad] from Quraysh¹⁶⁰
is the lamp of light
the place of miracles
praises to the All-Forgiving Lord
he [Muhammad] was guided to the prayers [in the ascent]
and through it [prayer] was guided to light.¹⁶¹

The manner in which Muhammad performed the daily prayers represents a method, a practical means for Muslims to experience an intimate dialogue with the divine, as the Prophet did during his ascent. The ‘Īssāwiya poem describes Muhammad as ‘the lamp of light’ referencing the chapter of al-Nūr in the Qur’ān.¹⁶² Muhammad is likened to a ‘lamp of light’ because it is through the intermediary of the Muhammadan light/reality and the guidance of the Prophet that members of the ‘Īssāwiya have an experience of God. For both Ibn ‘Arabī and the ‘Īssāwiya, Muhammad represents the ontological entity that mediates God’s self-disclosure in finite forms, including the body.¹⁶³ The gestures of the daily prayers, which are performed in the *ḥaḍra*, are corporeal techniques inherited from

Muhammad (since it is believed that he used the same gestures when he performed the *ṣalā*). In a certain sense these gestures are a *barzakh*, intermediaries that allow for the revelation of the spiritual meanings hidden in the heart of the seeker. It is through the performance of these sacred gestures that adepts ‘polish the glass’ (purify their hearts) until they embody/reflect particular divine attributes.

Intoxication usually occurs near the end of a ritual. All of the preceding actions, including the *kharja*, prepare adepts for the ascent. One of the ‘Īssāwiya shaykhs explains the importance of the *mjarriid* in performances of intoxication: ‘in the *mjarriid* you start to move (*tih taz*) and it [longing for the Beloved] becomes warm in you [and continues] until you become intoxicated, it [the *ḥaḍra*] is like a painting. Each part completes the other.’¹⁶⁴ The *birāwil* perform the spiritual work that allows the *fuqarā*’ to transcend the limitations of corporeal bodies through ingesting and exposing themselves to dangerous objects. Subjecting their physical bodies to these extreme acts does not harm adepts, who are protected through the intercession of the saints and the blessings of the litany recited on the props in the ‘Īssāwiya *dhikr* ritual. The sacred words in the *inshād* (songs), the Qur’ān, the supplications, and the litany transform these objects into special receptacles of God’s protection and grace, which is transmitted to adepts when they come into contact with these objects in the *ḥaḍra* ritual.

The tradition of intoxication is attributed to a myth about Bin-‘Īssa that is performed in the *ḥaḍra* ritual. ‘Īssāwiya adepts explain the practice of intoxication with the following narrative:

Intoxication began with Sīdī Bin-‘Īssa, who was taught Islam and the *suna*.¹⁶⁵ He was once on his way to the ḥajj with his followers when they were lost in the desert and no longer had food or water. In this state of desperation, Bin-‘Īssa, who was a saint, made a supplication for help and God all-Mighty said to him: tell your disciples that whatever they find in the desert let them recite *bism allāh* (in the Name of God) on it and eat it. Whoever found cactus ate it, whoever found glass ate it, each found something different in the desert.¹⁶⁶

Myths form a significant part of a community’s religious life, particularly in Sufī orders like the ‘Īssāwiya who reenact these narratives in the *ḥaḍra* ritual. The myth about Bin-‘Īssa and his followers not only represents a particular interpretation and perception of reality, but also provides a method for acquiring esoteric knowledge. Members of the ‘Īssāwiya rarely discuss metaphysics, but some of the most significant concepts in Sufi cosmology (annihilation, subsistence, the *barzakh*, sainthood) are embodied in the ritual practices of the order. According to the ‘Īssāwiya shaykhs, Bin-‘Īssa’s disciples were protected from harm through the ascent, mediated by the intercession of the saint.¹⁶⁷ The reenactment of the myth about Bin-‘Īssa and his disciples causes the *fuqarā’* to experience the same spiritual states. Thus, what is performed in the ritual are not the particular characteristics of Bin-‘Īssa’s disciples, but their ability to transcend corporeal time-space through the ascent.

All of the ritual actions symbolize one of the miraculous acts attributed to Bin-‘Īssa. Intoxication with a burning stack of hay references a story about Abū Rawā’īn al-Mahjūb, who was one of Bin-‘Īssa’s disciples. Abū Rawā’īn met Bin-‘Īssa while he was searching for the greatest Sufī saint of his time. Abū Rawā’īn would test the spiritual abilities of the saints he met by making them touch an axe that he would then take to a

blacksmith, asking him to place it in an oven, convinced that only the most spiritually elevated saint would have the ability to protect the axe from fire. The axe turned red every time Abū Rawāʿīn took it to the blacksmith, until he met Bin-ʿĪssa, who blessed the axe when he touched it. As a result, when the blacksmith placed the axe in the oven it remained cold, unaffected by the flames of fire. When this happened Abū Rawāʿīn told the blacksmith that he would go to heaven and went into the streets yelling ‘I am the disciple of Bin-ʿĪssa.’¹⁶⁸

Schilbrack argues that metaphysical beliefs are often articulated through religious myths.¹⁶⁹ Embedded within these narratives are the archetypal models and metaphysical processes that are believed to bring the universe into existence. It is through these ‘metaphoric images’ that people come to understand the structure of the cosmos because myths provide a religious framework for the interpretation of reality.¹⁷⁰ The story about Abū Rawāʿīn and his axe is extremely significant because it is a symbolic representation of Sufi understandings of sainthood. First, it emphasizes Bin-ʿĪssa’s elevated status among the saints. Abū Rawāʿīn attempted to be the spiritual disciple of many saints, but remained sceptical of their spiritual powers. Every time he took the axe to the blacksmith it turned red, indicating that the other Sufis did not possess the blessings of the most spiritually elevated saint. Therefore, the narrative reveals that there are different degrees of sainthood, the ‘pole’ being the most effective transmitter of divine blessings.

The story also illustrates Sufi attitudes towards the body. The saint is the corporeal vessel through which blessings are transmitted, the *barzakh* that allows spiritual entities to

become manifest in the sensible world. In the narrative, Bin-‘Īssa touches Abū Rawā’īn’s axe, thus transmitting his blessing to it through physical contact. Abū Rawā’īn takes the axe to the blacksmith who is not able to heat it because it is under the saint’s protection. He then announces that the blacksmith will go to heaven because Bin-‘Īssa’s divine protection and blessings have been passed down to him through contact with a sacred object (the axe). Like many other Sufi saints, Bin-‘Īssa is known for having the ability to intercede on the behalf of his followers and protect them from fire, including the fire of hell on the Day of Judgement.

Intoxication with fire also references the prophetic miracle (*mu’jiza*) through which God protected the Prophet Abraham from fire. The Qur’ān states: ‘We [God] said, fire be cool and safe for Abraham.’¹⁷¹ Each ‘Īssāwiya adept experiences intoxication in a different manner depending on which cosmic realm/image of the Divine Names he ascends to. It is possible that intoxication with fire represents the ascent to the realm of Abraham through which the adept makes manifest the Divine Name that governs that realm in the form of a miracle (*karāma*), protection from fire.

Within the ‘Īssāwiya community, it is believed that intoxication does not have fixed meanings, but rather depends on the subjective experience of the person who performs it. When I asked the ‘Īssāwiya adept who becomes intoxicated with fire if he ascends to the realm of Abraham, he responded ‘it is possible,’ and later explained that this is one of many possible interpretations.¹⁷²



Figure 4. The *bāshūsh* feeding an adept (the *šbaʿ*, lion) glass with a line of *fuqarāʿ* standing behind them.

The supernatural abilities of ʿAkāsha are derived from another myth about Bin-ʿĪssa. The mother of a prisoner once asked Bin-ʿĪssa to make a supplication for her son to be set free. After his release, the prisoner’s mother asked her son who had freed him and her son described a man who resembled Bin-ʿĪssa. When the woman and her son went to thank Bin-ʿĪssa, he responded ‘it was not I who broke the chains but God.’¹⁷³ Breaking chains is a symbolic act; it makes the evil fly away (*tār al-shar*), and protects the *fuqarāʿ* from harm during their bodily ascent (*al-irtiqāʿ fī al-jasad*).¹⁷⁴ In the narrative, Bin-ʿĪssa insists that it was not he who performed the miracle but God. This is because the saint is no more than a *barzakh* who transmits God’s blessings to adepts through the ascent.

The music and singing in the *ḥaḍra* allows the *fuqarā'* take on the attributes of different animals. One of the 'Īssāwiya shaykhs explains: 'the adept is called the camel, not because he becomes a camel but because he takes on the attribute (*ṣifa*) that allows the camel to eat cactus without being harmed.'¹⁷⁵ In the framework of Ibn 'Arabī's cosmology, the human subject is considered the 'microcosm' who encompasses all of the Divine Names. This means that all of the attributes that are made manifest in the cosmos are also hidden in each human being.¹⁷⁶ The ascent is the spiritual-corporeal process that allows these esoteric attributes to become manifest in exoteric forms, transforming the *fuqarā'* into a *barzakh* between the sensible world and the images of the Divine Names in the higher realms, transmitting blessings to everyone present at the ritual.

According to the *fuqarā'*, intoxication occurs when 'the seeker progresses on a particular path that brings him closer to God until the spirit ascends beyond [the limitations] of the corporeal body, causing it to lose sensation and no longer be affected by glass, cactus, fire; and this may be described as an ascent.'¹⁷⁷ The ascent occurs through annihilation, in which the adept's spiritual nature overtakes her/his earthly nature. The adept loses corporeal sensation because of his presence in a higher realm, where he witnesses the manifestations of the Real in the fixed essences, the revealed images of the Divine Names.



Figure 5. An adept performing intoxication with fire.

Intoxication is not a disembodied experience; the seeker's ascent is to luminous bodies, the spiritual entities from which the corporeal body derives existence. Luminous bodies are not subject to the laws of corruption imposed on elemental earthly bodies. Abū 'Alā' 'Afīfī asserts that the figure of Jesus in Ibn Arabī's *The Bezels of Wisdom* represents the non-corruptible nature of luminous bodies because he is associated with the breath of the All-Merciful.¹⁷⁸ In the Islamic tradition, it is believed that Jesus will remain present in this world until the day of resurrection. This is possible because he possesses a non-elemental body that is not subject to corruption because he is the manifest form of God's spirit that Gabriel blew into Maryam.¹⁷⁹

The adept's body is protected from harm because the ascent causes him to take on the attributes of the higher realms. This is made possible by the *barzakh*, which allows corporeal bodies to take on the non-corruptible attributes of luminous bodies. The movement of the divine attributes from an esoteric to an exoteric state occurs through the recitation of the Divine Names, described in 'Īssāwiya songs as the keys to the higher realities:

Praise be to God I began [the ascent]
the Name of God is my key
in the house of friends
we speak to our friend [the saint]
I wish to lighten my burden
and to heal my wounds
today becomes manifest all that is hidden
the seed expands in space
God prays on our intercessor [Muhammad]
the light of the Real the guide¹⁸⁰

This poem is sung in the *birāwil* segment of the *ḥaḍra*, during which adepts experience intoxication. The song describes how the Divine Names become manifest in corporeal forms through the creation of the cosmos. The 'seed' represents the esoteric realities which become manifest in space revealing the divine attributes. According to Ibn 'Arabī, the body is a sign (*dalīl*) that reveals the meanings of the Divine Names through their revelation in manifest forms that can be experienced and witnessed.¹⁸¹

God can only be known through His revelation in finite forms. The human subject does not have the ability to experience the Absolute. Therefore, knowing God requires that He become manifest in embodied forms (luminous or corporeal). Ibn 'Arabī describes the

cosmos as both He/not He (God/not God), a term he derives from the divine name He (*Huwa*).¹⁸² Limited forms are God in the sense that they are manifestations of the divine attributes, yet are distinct from God as a totality in the form of the Absolute. And it is precisely this tension between the immanent and transcendent attributes of God that is central to performances of the ascent in *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals, which allows adepts to experience the divine without asserting that they are identical to the Absolute.

Chapter Four

Sufi Ritual, Ontology, and Language: Performing the Infinite Transcendent

As explained in the previous chapter, the tension between embodying the divine attributes and recognizing God's transcendence forms a fundamental part of *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals. This culturally specific understanding of performance, viewed as a human-divine encounter, is in accordance with Ibn 'Arabī's approach to writing, which he considers a form of divinely inspired revelation.¹ For both members of the Shādhiliya and the 'Iṣṣāwiya and Ibn 'Arabī, performances of the loss of self, either through intoxication or writing, have epistemological value because they are the means through which the adept acquires knowledge of God.² *The Sacred Triangle of Silence, Paths to the Infinite Forest, and The Eternal Seed* explore this relationship between language, epistemology, and writing through a narrative about the ascent of three Sufi saints. These ideas did not only have an important influence on the form and content of my plays, but also on the writing process, as explained in detail in my preface to them. The focus of the present chapter is on Sufi performances of language and writing and how they relate to particular concepts in Ibn 'Arabī's metaphysics.

In both the *ḥaḍra* and *dhikr* rituals and in Ibn 'Arabī's ontology, language mediates the seeker's experience of the sacred, either through the Divine Names, the writing of the divine pen onto the tablet (which brings the world into existence), or the recitation of sacred words and texts (the Qur'ān, litanies, and poetry).³ With the exception of the Qur'ān, performances of language in the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* are quite fluid. The songs and

litanies included in these rituals constantly change in relation to the broader cultural context, which led to the development of different spiritual practices that have varied across several generations. The constant revelation of litanies, songs, and gestures provides Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya adepts with new opportunities to experience the divine in performances of the Sufi ascent by integrating this new material into their ritual practices. Likewise, writing for Ibn ‘Arabī is a performance of the loss of self, which transforms the seeker into an intermediary for the revelation of God’s words.

Several Sufi authors, including Ibn-‘Arabī, claim that their poems, mystical treatise, and prayers were composed in moments of revelation in which the Real spoke through them. Among them is the Andalusian saint Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī, who incorporated several of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas into his poetry. One of his most important contributions to the Sufi movement was that he made certain aspects of Islamic metaphysics, including the concepts he derived from Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings, much more accessible to the general public. Al-Shushtarī is a well-known figure in the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya communities of Tunis. Many of the songs performed by members of the ‘Īssāwiya are attributed to him, even though many of these poems cannot be accurately traced back to the historical figure. His influence can be observed in ‘Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya poems and litanies that explore many of the same metaphysical themes found in his writing.

The writings of Ibn ‘Arabī, the poems of al-Shushtarī, and the songs performed in the *ḥaḍra* and *dhikr* rituals utilize the same symbols to describe certain aspects of the ascent experience, including images of landscapes that are associated with particular ontological

principles. Many of these landscapes appear in *The Sacred Triangle of Silence*, *Paths to the Infinite Forest*, and *The Eternal Seed*. Therefore, this chapter is fundamental for understanding how my three plays derive various symbols, metaphysical principles, and approaches to language and writing from the rituals of the Sufi orders and the writings of Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Shushtarī.

Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī: Intoxication, Poetry, and Sufi Ritual

The Andalusian saint Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī (d.1269) was the devotee of a well-known Sufi called Ibn Sab‘īn (d.1268). When he became his disciple Ibn Sab‘īn told al-Shushtarī to sell his clothes, wear wool, and go to the market and sing, a symbolic act that represented the renunciation of his social status.⁴ For three days al-Shushtarī continuously sang the phrase ‘I began with the invocation of the beloved’ while playing the tambourine (*bandīr*), until he experienced a revelation and composed the rest of the poem.⁵

Al-Shushtarī travelled throughout North Africa spending time in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, and Egypt, where he met many Shādhiliya followers.⁶ He created his own Sufi order (*ṭarīqa al-Shushtariya*), named after its founder, which eventually became a sub-branch of the Shādhiliya.⁷ Al-Shushtarī is known for writing wine poems that describe states of intoxication and proximity to the Beloved. According to Muḥammad al-Idrīsī and Sa‘īd Abū Fayūḍ, members of the Shādhiliya order in Egypt copied many of al-Shushtarī’s poems.⁸ Many Shādhiliya love songs (*muwashahāt*, *zajal*) incorporated poetry from al-Shushtarī’s *Dīwān* (collection of poems). Likewise, many of the songs performed by the Shushtariya order included Shādhiliya poems and hymns.⁹

Within the ‘Issāwiya community of Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd, al-Shushtarī is considered a saint and a gnostic. His poetry is sung in ‘Issāwiya rituals and *mānga* performances, explored in detail in the previous chapter. The tradition of *mā’lūf al-jadd*, a musical genre that focuses on remembrance (*dhikr*) of the Beloved, is attributed to al-Shushtarī, who is believed to have introduced *mā’lūf al-jadd* to Tunisia during his travels.¹⁰

Lourdes Maria Alvarez maintains that the formation of the social institution of the *ṭarīqa* (Sufi order) in the twelfth century coincided with the development of mystical poetry, much of which was incorporated into the religious practices of the orders.¹¹ Alvarez asserts that there are many similarities in the metaphysical beliefs of Ibn ‘Arabī and al-Shushtarī. She argues, however, that the poetic expression of their mystical experiences differed greatly, especially because al-Shushtarī’s poetry was composed in the Andalusian vernacular.¹² One of al-Shushtarī’s most significant contributions to the Sufi movement was that he was able to express these complex metaphysical ideas in vernacular poetry sung in Sufi rituals, making them much more directly accessible to the public. In other words, the inclusion of al-Shushtarī’s poetry in the practices of the Sufi orders integrated metaphysics into the social world of shaykhs and adepts, who may not have otherwise been exposed to these ideas:

It is not that Shushtarī’s message is in any significant way different from that of say, Ibn al-Fāriḍ or Ibn al-‘Arabī. What is new here is the possibility of addressing an uneducated public through the medium of popular songs in the plain language of the street.¹³

Al-Shushtarī remains a significant figure in North African Sufism. His poetry and songs continue to be performed, and even recorded, in both ritual and non-ritual contexts in

Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt.¹⁴ As noted earlier, al-Shushtarī was also known for performing music that accompanied the recitation and, at times, even the composition, of his poems.

It is not possible to trace back many of the ‘Īssāwiya poems attributed to al-Shushtarī to the historical figure. Performances of them have come into being through centuries of intermingling of oral, written, and musical traditions. Nonetheless, the ‘Īssāwiya insist that al-Shushtarī composed many of the poems included in their rituals. For the ‘Īssāwiya, the inclusion of these poems represents the continuation of a poetic-musical Sufī tradition, particularly since al-Shushtarī was known for performing at the marketplace with a tambourine, the same instrument ‘Īssāwiya musicians use in the *ḥadra* ritual. Furthermore, the fact that al-Shushtarī was an Andalusian poet, and had spent time in Tunisia (Gabes), further emphasizes the ‘Īssāwiya community’s connection to Andalusia, the birthplace of the *mā’lūf* tradition.

According to Michael Frishkopf, Sufīs often integrate verses from other poems into their own compositions.¹⁵ They may also include other Sufī poems in their ritual practices, even if the poet is not a member of that order. Furthermore, the poems attributed to the patron saint of a Sufī order may be composed by someone else. This is further complicated by Sufī understandings of the process of poetic composition. Frishkopf notes that it is believed that many Sufī poems are revealed in trance-like states in which a shaykh recites a poem while his disciples transcribe it. The shaykh or one of his followers then ‘polishes’ the poem, before it is included in the community’s ritual practices.

Frishkopf uses the term ‘interauthor’ to describe this collective method of composition in which a poem is created by a social network instead of a single author. This includes deceased shaykhs who ‘speak’ through their disciples. Therefore, the process of poetic composition continues as various poems and songs continue to circulate within Sufi communities.¹⁶

As noted in Chapter Three, Shādhiliya adepts believe that the ascent to each spiritual station results in a particular spiritual experience, which might cause the traveller to write poetry or to utter certain divinely inspired words. These utterances and writings are revealed in states of intoxication, which occur through the adept’s presence with God. These experiences may be so intense that, upon returning to the state of sobriety, the speaker/writer may not remember what s/he has said or written.¹⁷

Al-Shādhilī did not leave behind a written comprehensive description of his teachings and spiritual method.¹⁸ The prayer booklet that circulates among member of the Shādhiliya, titled *Nibrās al-Ittiqyā’ wa Dalīl al-Inqiyā’* (*The Lamp of Protection and the Signs of Purity*), contains several litanies attributed to al-Shādhilī. It also includes prayers called *wazīfa* composed by anonymous Shādhiliya followers through revelation (writing in a state of intoxication). The *dhikr* is primarily an oral tradition, and it is therefore not clear exactly who of al-Shādhilī’s followers composed these litanies. Most Shādhiliya adepts memorize these litanies by frequenting the ritual. This prayer booklet is usually distributed to those new to the ritual. In contrast, the songs performed in the *dhikr* and the *ḥaḍra* are not transcribed, but passed down orally.

Sufi poetry is ‘fluid’ in the sense that it is incorporated into both oral and written traditions.¹⁹ Many of the poems performed in Sufi rituals also exist in written forms, either in manuscripts, published books, or Sufi manuals. For many Sufi communities, poetry is a means of inducing and expressing an experience of the divine. Frishkopf explains:

Sufis produce Sufi poetry in order to achieve spiritual goals, not as an aesthetic end in itself...As consequence of mystical practices, the Sufi may become supersaturated with spiritual feeling: painful longing for the absent beloved (*shawq*), or the ecstasy of closeness (*wajd*). When such feeling overflows the soul (*fayḍ*), it becomes impossible to bear, requiring release through cathartic expression. Poetry (written or performed) is but one means of such expression.²⁰

The poems and songs performed in ‘Issāwiya rituals are derived from a wide range of sources and are constantly altered. Members of the order openly acknowledge that their ritual traditions change as they are passed down from one generation to the next. The addition of poetic verses, changes in rhythms, and dance gestures performed in the *ḥaḍra* are believed to be divine revelations. According to members of the ‘Issāwiya, the *ḥaḍra* was never performed by the patron saint of the order. Bin-‘Issa’s disciples developed the ritual after his death, incorporating music, poetry, and litanies from many different sources.²¹ This includes the *mā’lūf*, a musical tradition that originated in Andalusia, a litany composed by a medieval saint named al-Jazūlī, who created a sub branch of the Shādhiliya order, and myths about Muhammad Bin-‘Issa and his followers, which were preserved through oral tradition.

The belief that al-Shushtarī is the author of many ‘Īssāwiya poems reinforces the connection between his metaphysical doctrine, described in many of his poems, and the order’s ritual practices. Even though the poems attributed to al-Shushtarī cannot be accurately traced back to the saint, his influence on the order can be observed through the use of particular metaphors to explore certain ontological principles that al-Shushtarī derived from Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings. Understanding how al-Shushtarī expressed these metaphysical concepts is significant, particularly because he made these ideas much more accessible to several Sufi communities, including the ‘Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya.

Al-Shushtarī was familiar with several of Ibn ‘Arabī’s works, including *The Bezels of Wisdom (Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam)* and *The Meccan Revelations (al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya)*.²² He even wrote a poem that directly refers to Ibn ‘Arabī, among several other Sufis and philosophers.²³ Al-Idrīsī asserts that certain metaphysical concepts discussed in Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings significantly influenced al-Shushtarī.²⁴ This includes the imagination (*khayāl*), the intermediary realm (*barzakh*), the Muhammadan light/reality, and the idea that nothing can be created out of nothing (*‘adam*), thus leading al-Shushtarī to the conclusion that the cosmos is created through emanation, as well as other aspects of Ibn ‘Arabī’s cosmology that stress the unity of existence.²⁵ For example, in the following poem al-Shushtarī references the idea that creation occurs through the revelation of the Divine Names that are ‘written’ into existence by the supreme pen:

The existence of existence
your secret is the Real
we see [God’s existence] is necessary
our existence is translations [of the Divine Names]
the spheres in you turn
illuminate and shine

and the suns and the moons
in you set and rise
examine the meanings of the lines
that are gathered in you.²⁶

This excerpt from al-Shushtarī's *Dīwān* illustrates Ibn 'Arabī's influence on him, particularly the notion of emanation (*fayḍ*), which occurs through the revelation of the meanings of the Divine Names.²⁷ 'The existence of existence' is God, the essence of the created world who brings it into being through the writing of the supreme pen, a notion that is explored at length in Ibn 'Arabī's writings. According to Ibn 'Arabī, the ontological significance of the divine pen is that it inscribes the meanings of the Divine Names onto the preserved tablet (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*) that encompasses all of the realms in existence.²⁸ Both Ibn 'Arabī and al-Shushtarī stress the importance of the Divine Names in the process of emanation, which is described either as the pen's writing the cosmos into existence or as utterances of divine speech (the divine command *Be*) that reveal the meanings of the Divine Names.²⁹ Al-Shushtarī's poem also alludes to the idea that the human subject is the 'microcosm' in whom God's attributes are hidden, a concept that is fundamental to Ibn 'Arabī's ontology, with the verse that states that the Divine Names are 'gathered' in the seeker.³⁰

In other poems, al-Shushtarī explores the tension between the unity and multiplicity of God, one of the most frequently recurring themes in Ibn 'Arabī's writings.³¹ For example, in a poem titled the *Nūniyya*, al-Shushtarī writes:

And we find the existence of the cosmos to be but
delusion.
Nothing is fixed. This is the essence of extinction.

The rejection of multiplicity is a duty for us,
because our creed is to obliterate polytheism and doubt.
But how to reject [multiplicity],
for those who reject are [themselves the] rejected: us
and we are not.
So you who speak of union while at the station that
is veiled from [union]; listen well, as we have already
done....
Don't stop in any station, for they are
a veil; be earnest in the journey and seek aid.
No matter what levels appear before
you, let them go. Those we abandoned were much
the same.
And say: I have no desire but Your essence.
Therefore, no image appears, no rare treasure is collected.³²

The existence of the cosmos is a 'delusion (*wahm*)' because the only entity that possesses absolute existence is God. All other entities are finite images of the Absolute that are continuously annihilated, thus there both is/is not a multiplicity because the origin of all these different forms is God. The idea that the cosmos is brought into existence through emanation can be found in the writing of several Muslim philosophers including Ibn Sīna, al-Farabī, and Ibn 'Arabī, who considers created entities limited manifestations of the Absolute.³³ Al-Shushtari alludes to this idea when he asserts that one must realize God while being veiled from Him, since it is not possible for the human subject to experience the Absolute.

As explained in previous chapters, maintaining this balance between God's transcendence and immanence is fundamental to Ibn 'Arabī's ontology. The human subject has a paradoxical relationship to the Real who is hidden in the seeker's heart, but also transcends limitation in a finite form. Remaining aware of God's transcendent attributes leads the Sufi to endless knowledge as it prevents the seeker from limiting God

to a particular form.³⁴ Al-Shushtarī's previously cited poem also explores this tension between God's transcendence and immanence. For example, the declaration 'I have no desire but Your [God's] essence' is followed by the statement 'no image appears.' The divine essence is unattainable to the human subject because it is impossible for the Absolute to become manifest in a single instance of God's self-disclosure. One can only realize the Absolute through its gradual revelation in finite forms without end. As described in several of Ibn 'Arabī's commentaries on the ascent, perfect knowledge requires that one acknowledge the impossibility of knowing the divine essence, while simultaneously witnessing God's presence in limited manifest forms.³⁵

In the same poem, al-Shushtarī alludes to the idea that there is no end to the Sufī journey, warning the seeker of the dangers of becoming attached to certain stations, which limit the Real to a particular form. This is reminiscent of the advice given by one of the members of the Shādhiliya, also mentioned in Chapter Three, who asserts that even if the adept sees the Prophet Muhammad, which is considered one of the most profound visions that can be experienced, s/he must not stop but continue the path towards God.³⁶

Despite the fact that 'Īssāwiya poems cannot be traced back to al-Shushtarī, his influence on the Sufī order can be observed through the use of the metaphors of wine and intoxication to describe the journey of ascent. Take, for example, the following poem composed by Shushtarī:

I drink wine from the goblet
and from myself I come closer to myself.
In myself it is myself I love.

For he is my essence, my true soul,
the fine wine that fills me and quenches my thirst.
I care not what others may say.³⁷

Here, drinking represents the journey to the Beloved, who is hidden in the Sufi seeker. The more intoxicated the traveller becomes the further s/he ascends towards God, the essence of every created being. In a similar vein, the following ‘Īssāwiya poem describes the state of ‘drunkenness’ that reveals the divine presence to the adept:

You [Muhammad] have caused the drunkenness of my drunkenness
from the most delicious drink
then you revealed the moon of your face
when the veil was lifted
then you spoke to me in certainty
and I understood the dialogue
through my cup
my words are strange
you are my life and you are in my being
present you are never absent³⁸

As explained in Chapter Three, ‘intoxication’ has specific spiritual and cultural meanings for the ‘Īssāwiya. A comparison between the ‘Īssāwiya poems attributed to al-Shushtarī and the ones compiled in al-Shushtarī’s *Dīwān* reveal al-Shushtarī’s influence on the order in the sense that the metaphors of intoxication and drinking are associated with particular ontological principles, particularly those that pertain to the journey of ascent.

Both poems stress the unity of the Real and the cosmos. The last verse of the ‘Īssāwiya poem ‘present you are never absent’ alludes to the idea that the cosmos is ontologically dependant on God, who encompasses every entity in existence. This is because the Prophet Muhammad, to whom the poem is addressed, is the intermediary through which

God reveals the divine light. The same concept is referenced in al-Shushtarī's poem in the phrase 'for he [God] is my essence, my true soul' and 'in myself it is myself I love.' Other verses from the 'Īssāwiya poem that refer to the same idea include 'you are my being,' in reference to the notion that God is the only true existent.

The similarity of the metaphysical principles alluded to in the 'Īssāwiya poem to Ibn 'Arabī's ontology is quite striking. As noted in the preceding chapters, the Muhammadan light in Ibn 'Arabī's cosmology is the intermediary between God and the created world.³⁹ The dedication of the 'Īssāwiya poem to the Prophet Muhammad is not only a reference to the historical figure. Here, the prophet represents the intermediary through which members of the order ascend to God. The ascent occurs through the adept's love for the Prophet, which causes 'drunkenness.' The 'Īssāwiya poem utilizes the image of the moon to describe the manifest forms of the Real that are revealed through the lifting of the 'veil,' which allows the seeker to witness the esoteric reality of created forms, described in Ibn 'Arabī's writings as 'the face of God.'⁴⁰

'Īssāwiya adepts engage in this spiritual dialogue through the heart – symbolized in the poem by the cup – which, according to Ibn 'Arabī, is the spiritual organ that encompasses all of the Divine Names.⁴¹ Whether or not this understanding has been derived directly from Ibn 'Arabī's writings (many 'Īssāwiya shaykhs are familiar with Ibn 'Arabī's works) or passed down to these Sufi communities through al-Shushtarī, it is clear that members of the 'Īssāwiya attribute the same metaphysical meanings to the heart.

Similar ideas are alluded to in many of the songs performed in the ‘Īssāwiya *ḥaḍra*. For example:

The Beloved is in my chest
in the midst of my heart
my Lord do not reveal my condition
[you are] the Life Giver (Al-Muḥyi)⁴²
[who resurrects] the dust of annihilating bones
and resurrects me after my annihilation
[make me] drink ancient wine
so that whoever sees me
will say oh poor lover⁴³

The verse ‘the Life Giver [who resurrects] the dust of annihilating bones’ references the Qur’ānic chapter of Yāsīn, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in response to an unbeliever who presented him with a decaying bone challenging the Prophet to prove that his God was all-Mighty by resurrecting the dust remnants of the bone. In response God sent down the chapter of Yāsīn, which asserts that those who question God’s ability to resurrect the dust remnants of bones have forgotten their own creation, since it was He who has created everything in the heavens and the earth.⁴⁴

These Qur’ānic verses are referenced in the ‘Īssāwiya song because, as indicated in the lines that follow, the creation of the cosmos is the greatest sign of God’s all-Mighty power. The verse ‘resurrects me after my annihilation’ in particular references the ontological principles of annihilation and subsistence. The significance of these concepts in Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology is explained in Chapter Two. However, it is worth noting that the creation of the cosmos is always described as a continuous process in ‘Īssāwiya

poems, composed of death and resurrection, which is in accordance with Ibn ‘Arabī’s descriptions of the process of emanation.⁴⁵

The verse ‘and resurrects me after my annihilation’ also references one of the most significant concepts in Sufi epistemology, namely, that knowledge can only be acquired through direct experience (taste, *dhawq*). One comprehends the divine attribute ‘the Life Giver’ through her/his own acquisition of existence from the Real. In other words, one realizes how God resurrects the cosmos through her/his own annihilation and subsistence in the Beloved, symbolized in the poem by the drinking of wine that causes intoxication. Ibn ‘Arabī has written extensively on the concept of ‘taste,’ which represents an encounter with the Real through His revelation in an embodied form.⁴⁶ ‘Īssāwiya performances of the ascent represent one form of such an encounter. It is not surprising that the poetry sung in *ḥaḍra* rituals makes explicit references to the aforementioned metaphysical concepts, especially because ‘Īssāwiya adepts place so much emphasis on the words that ‘guide’ them to states of intoxication.⁴⁷

Several Shādhiliya litanies explore similar metaphysical themes that stress God’s unity.

For example, *Ḥizb al-Tawḥīd (The Litany of Oneness)* states:

We have unified you [God] with [the verse] there is no God but God
we have made you transcendent with there is no God but God
we have remembered you in there is no God but God
the blessing of the *dhikr* (remembrance) is there is no God but God
oh you who are mentioned in there is no God but God
who are described in there is no God but God
I bear witness there is no God but God
when I recite [the verse] there is no God but God
we have asked you in [reciting] there is no God but God

for the secret of unity there is no God but God⁴⁸

The verse ‘there is no God but God (*la illāh ila Allāh*)’ is one of the phrases recited in performances of the daily prayers. It is also one of the phrases that ‘Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya adepts meditate on in the *dhikr* ritual. Like many other litanies in the Shādhiliya prayer book, *The Litany of Oneness* maintains a delicate balance between transcendent and immanent attributes of God. Verses that explore God’s presence in created forms are countered with statements that stress His incomparability. Like the ‘Īssāwiya *ḥaḍra*, the Shādhiliya *dhikr* gives adepts the opportunity to have a direct experience of God (*dhawq*), with the awareness that they are not identical to the Absolute.

Seas, Mountains, and The Universal Tree: Symbols of the Sufi Ascent

Omaima Abou-Bakr asserts that Sufi approaches to Qur’ānic exegesis influenced Sufi poetry of the Middle Ages. According to Abou-Bakr, Sufis distinguish between two kinds of meaning, the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and the esoteric (*bāṭin*).⁴⁹ Therefore, understanding the Qur’ān requires interpretation (*tā’wīl*) in order to reveal the endless meanings of the sacred text, believed to be the literal word of God. Abou-Bakr asserts that this approach to the interpretation of the Qur’ān influenced Sufi writers who placed great emphasis on the esoteric meanings hidden in the text, including al-Shushtarī.⁵⁰

Ian Almond reaffirms Abou-Bakr’s assertion that the practice of Qur’ānic exegesis influenced Sufi composition and interpretation of texts. He argues that fixed meanings are not attributed to linguistic symbols.⁵¹ Each text is believed to contain an infinite number

of esoteric meanings that are continuously revealed through interpretation. Commenting on the works of Ibn ‘Arabī, Almond argues that the notion that a limited form can reveal the infinite (God) is expressed in several ways in the Great Shaykh’s writings, particularly in his description of the Qur’ān and the perfect human, both of which represent the microcosmic image of God, the sum of the Divine Names.⁵² Thus, the Qur’ān, as well as other Sufi texts, are believed to be an ‘intermediary’ through which the infinite meanings of the divine essence are revealed. The notion that there is no end to the meanings derived from a written text resembles Sufi narratives that depict the ascent as a spiritual journey without end. Each time a ‘veil’ is lifted, the traveller reaches yet another image of God. Likewise, Sufi poems and narratives do not have a single literal meaning, the infinite esoteric meanings hidden in the text are gradually revealed each time it is read, recited, or performed.

Commenting on Medieval Islamic aesthetics more generally, Jale Nejdert Erzen argues that the constant fluctuation of the meanings of symbols reflects the Islamic belief that the world experiences constant transformation.⁵³ Furthermore, the multiplicity of meanings expressed in a single poetic image embodies the tension between transcendence and immanence, which endlessly brings new forms/meanings into existence. Therefore, instead of attributing a fixed meaning to a symbol, Sufi poetics express the process that brings created entities into existence, mirroring God’s self-disclosure in the cosmos.⁵⁴ Instead of expressing a particular idea, the poetic symbol represents the spiritual process that leads the seeker to knowledge.

According to Munṣif ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq, Sufi poems and stories differ from fictional narratives in that they alter the listener/reader’s perception and experience of reality. He asserts that Sufi narratives are a form of spiritual witnessing through their description of extraordinary or supernatural events in an accessible language that reveals the presence of the sacred in everyday life.⁵⁵ Thus, the narration or performance of Sufi narratives and poetry is not only about recounting a miraculous occurrence; it is a form of interpretation (*tā’wīl*), because it is an instance in which the Absolute is expressed within the limitations of space-time.⁵⁶

This idea, which has been adopted by several Sufi communities, creates the opportunity for cultural symbols and myths to acquire new meanings, each representing a particular manifestation of the Absolute.⁵⁷ The purpose of narrating/performing these myths, which describe a human-divine encounter, is not to teach adepts a moral lesson, but to cause the seeker to embody a particular way of being shaped by a constant awareness of the divine’s endless revelation in the cosmos.⁵⁸ Performance in such a situation is a spiritual event.

According to Ibn ‘Arabī, each encounter with the Real is expressed in different images/manifestations. Likewise, the journey to God is particular to each traveller, who has her/his own unique experience of the Beloved. In a Sufi manual titled *Risālat al-Anwār fī Asrār al-Khalwa* (*The Treatise of Illumination on the Secrets of Spiritual Retreat*) Ibn ‘Arabī explains that there are several paths to God:

The paths [to God] are many, and the path of the Real is one. The spiritual travellers in their journey towards the Real are individual and of different kinds, even though the path of the Real is one. Its [the divine essence] faces differ with the sates of the traveller.⁵⁹

Thus, each person's journey to God is different depending on her/his essence, the particular image of the Real made manifest in her/him. Even the ways in which Ibn 'Arabī described his own ascent experiences differ from each other, each representing a unique manifestation of God.⁶⁰

One of the most frequently recurring images that appear in Ibn 'Arabī's ascent narratives is the lote tree (*sidrat al-muntahā*), described in *Ascent to the Station of the Night Travellers* as 'the abode of spirits.'⁶¹ In another work titled *Shajarat al-Kawn (the Universal Tree)*, Ibn 'Arabī writes that the origins/roots of this tree is light that emerged from the seed of the divine command Be! (*Kun*) that grew 'branches,' the manifest forms of the Divine Names. He then asserts that the lote tree is one of the branches of the universal tree, which receives the guarded tablet. It is on this tablet that the entirety of creation is written.⁶² According to Ibn 'Arabī, the cosmos is brought into existence in the image (*ṣūra*) of this seed. The use of the term '*ṣūra*' is significant here as it is often used in Ibn 'Arabī's writings to explain the relationship between the Real and the cosmos/human subject that is believed to have been created in His image. Thus, the tree represents the exoteric form (*ẓāhir*) of the seed (the esoteric, *bāṭin*), the intermediary through which the images of the Absolute are revealed.

Ibn 'Arabī utilizes the image of the tree to express a wide range of metaphysical concepts. It may represent an encounter with the Beloved, the ascent to the cosmic station

of Muhammad, the perfect human, the intermediary *barzakh*, the Divine Names, or emanation of the divine light.⁶³ The image of the tree also appears in several ‘Īssāwiya poems. In the following example from the *Safīna* manuscript, it symbolizes the adept’s encounter with the Muhammadan light:

Rise oh [full] moon of moons
pour the eternal drink
in the midst of the loftiest tree
that blossoms while smiling
enjoy sensing the birds
that speak the wisest words⁶⁴

The rise of the full moon in this context represents an encounter with the Prophet Muhammad the ‘full moon of moons.’⁶⁵ It refers to the practice of intoxication, the method through which the seeker ascends to the lote tree, the spiritual station of the perfect human. Much like other ‘Īssāwiya texts, the poem emphasizes the importance of language in the acquisition of spiritual knowledge. After hearing the divine words, the traveller/singer states ‘my colour transforms from the depths of my longing for Him (God).’⁶⁶

The adept’s longing for God eventually leads her/him into a state of bewilderment, described in an ‘Īssāwiya song in the image of seas and valleys that appear to the traveller in the ascent:

In the Name of the One who is veiled
our Lord is the Knower of secrets
my heart is bewildered
the tears descend
I enter the seas
I cross the valleys⁶⁷

This is certainly not the first time that the metaphor of a valley was used to describe the journey to the Beloved. One of the most well known Sufi ascent narratives, *The Conference of the Birds*, composed by Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār (d.1230) describes the journey of thirty birds through seven valleys. At the end of the journey the birds realize that God, represented in the image of a mythical bird named the Sīmurgh in the poem, is hidden within them.⁶⁸ According to ‘Āṭif Jawdat Nasir, many Sufi narratives explore the relationship between the human subject and nature, its most perfect manifestation being the perfect human, the mirror image of the cosmos.⁶⁹ In other words, the Sufi’s journey through different landscapes (seas, valleys, mountains, deserts) is no more than a journey within the self, the microcosm created in God’s image. Journeying is the means through which the innermost realities of the self are realized, through endless encounters with the Real in His ever-changing forms. Many of the landscapes portrayed in these Sufi narratives and poems appear in *The Sacred Triangle of Silence, Paths to the Infinite Forest*, and *The Eternal Seed*, which explore the metaphysical principles described in Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings and performed in the rituals of the ‘Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya communities.

The sea is another frequently recurring image in Sufi ascent narratives. And although images of the sea often appear in Arabic poetry, it acquires specific religious meanings in Sufi litanies, poems, and prayer manuals where it is often associated with the experience of *fanā’* (annihilation in God).⁷⁰ For example, the Shādhiliya’s ‘Litany of the Sea’ (*Hizb al-Baḥr*), discussed in the previous chapter, refers to the different ‘seas of existence,’ requesting protection for the seeker who ascends to the different spheres of the cosmos.⁷¹

In this context, the sea symbolizes the realms the adept encounters during her/his ascent. The litany also references the Qur'ānic verse on the *barzakh* between the two seas, implying that each of the 'seas' in existence is an intermediary that leads to yet another realm.⁷² This may have been inspired by folk narratives that describe Muhammad's encounter with various kinds of seas (black, yellow, green, ones made of light) during his ascent.⁷³

Several 'Īssāwiya songs describe the acquisition of knowledge through the metaphor of drinking from the sea, for example:

Prayer on you is sweet
oh you who are uniquely beautiful
whoever is thirsty drinks
from the sea of perfection
in praising you our Prophet
our beloved Muhammad
my heart is inflamed in you⁷⁴

The image of an adept drinking from the sea alludes to intoxication and *dhawq*, literally translated as 'taste', which represent knowledge that is acquired through direct experience. This knowledge is revealed through the traveller's love for the Prophet, which causes her/him to ascend through the 'seas of existence.' Both intoxication and *dhawq* reinforce the idea that knowledge is revealed through the intermingling of the divine and the cosmic in the limited form of the human body. The metaphor of the sea also captures the tension in the human subject's encounter with the infinite, for one can only ingest limited amounts of seawater without drowning.

The image of the sea often appears in local Tunisian myths. With the exception of the narratives about Bin-‘Īssa and his followers, these myths are not performed in Sufi rituals. Nonetheless, they form a significant part of the religious life of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya communities who often refer to these narratives when explaining the different stages of the Sufi path. For example, one of the myths about Sīdī ‘Alī Ḥaṭṭāb, who is venerated by both the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya communities, describes a spiritual vision in which he drank from the ‘sea of al-Shādhilī, who drank from the sea of the Prophet Muhammad.’⁷⁵ Here, the metaphor of drinking from the sea represents the relationship of inheritance between prophets and saints (Muhammad and al-Shādhilī), as well as the chain of spiritual genealogy (*silsila*) through which metaphysical knowledge is passed down from the saint (al-Shādhilī) to his followers. The acquisition of knowledge through the ingestion of seawater relates to the Tunisian tradition of eating and drinking during the visit to a Sufi shrine, since the food and water consumed in the sacred space is believed to have healing properties. This can clearly be observed in the Shādhiliya *dhikr* ritual where Sufi shaykhs insist that each person take a sip of water and a piece of bread before leaving the ritual to ensure that everyone benefits from the saint’s blessing.

Images of nature – caves, rivers, mountains, and deserts – occur frequently in Sufi ascent narratives. Journeying, both geographic and spiritual, is the means through which the adept experiences the Real through witnessing His self-disclosure in finite entities, often represented in the image of different landscapes in Tunisian Sufi myths. As explained in Chapter Three, one of the most popular myths in the ‘Īssāwiya community, which is performed during the *ḥaḍra* ritual, is about Bin-‘Īssa and his followers who got lost in the

desert. Bin-‘Īssa, requested help from God, who instructed him and his followers to eat whatever they could find in the desert (glass, scorpions, nails, cactus). Bin-‘Īssa’s followers were protected from harm through the revelation of the divine attributes within them, made possible by the intercession of the saint. Thus, the narrative reinforces the idea that the body is the vessel for the self-disclosure of God.

The desert also represents the state of annihilation because it is the space in which adepts have an encounter with the divine. The desert in the poems of many Sufis, including al-Shushtarī and Ibn ‘Arabī, is also the metaphysical space in which the seeker reunites with her/his Beloved.⁷⁶ The myth about Bin-‘Īssa and his followers cannot be traced back to a particular source, especially because it has been preserved within the ‘Īssāwiya community through oral tradition. However, the narrative makes use of the same images and poetic landscapes as the aforementioned twelfth-century Sufi writers to express similar mystical experiences.

Other ‘Īssāwiya poems describe the ascent as a journey to the top of a mountain, the intermediary that joins the heavens and the earth:

[there are] those of us whose secret is manifest and revealed
and there are those of us whose night is long
[others are] resurrected and living in the day
and there are those of us who have completed [the path] with love
not in excessive prayer or purity
and there are those of us who cry in sadness
and find no comfort and are filled with fear
and there are those of us whose secret is hidden within us
hidden it does not perish and is not affected
and there are those of us who travel to the peak of a mountain
and those who remain at the bottom of the cave⁷⁷

The poem asserts that the divine is ever-present within the human subject in an esoteric form. Each person's relationship to her/his divine origins is different. There are those who make manifest the Divine Names hidden in their hearts, becoming a mediator between the esoteric and exoteric images of the Real. Others remain 'at the bottom of the cave,' concealing the divine attributes. However, the cave should not be viewed in a negative light as it represents the Divine Names in their esoteric form. Engaging with both the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of the Real is necessary in the Sufi journey, because the infinite can only be made manifest through the presence of an intermediary who joins these two opposing states. It is precisely this ability to act as a *barzakh*, between the manifest and the non-manifest images of the Real (light and darkness, the cave and the mountain), which gives the human subject the ability to become the perfect mirror image of God.

The hagiography of Sīdī 'Alī Ḥaṭṭāb also includes a narrative about the saint's ascent up a mountain, which is a metaphor for his journey along the Sufi path. Sīdī 'Alī began his journey with cups that were empty, indicating that he had not yet acquired spiritual knowledge. After he began his ascent, Sīdī 'Alī said: 'the Real is not veiled but you are veiled from seeing Him.'⁷⁸ This statement is very similar to a verse from Ibn 'Arabī's *The Meccan Revelations* that states 'the Real does not show you His wisdom in every moment, even if none of His moments is empty of wisdom.'⁷⁹ It is not possible for created beings to be separate from God because they are ontologically dependent on Him. However, the seeker does not always have the ability to perceive the divine's presence in the cosmos. Much like the ascent up a mountain, the Sufi journey endows the traveller

with vision. The further s/he ascends, the greater her/his capacity to witness the Real, the One who encompasses every entity in existence. Al-Shushtarī, speaking in God's voice, writes in his poem *Hidden in Plain Sight*:

There is nothing like me,
I am one.
And the very notion of place, in truth,
is trouble.
When you let go of "whereness,"
you will find us⁸⁰

The journey towards the infinite has no end. One must not limit God to a particular form because the Real transcends the limitations imposed by time and space. He is both beyond and within created beings. This is why, as advised by al-Shushtarī in the aforementioned poem, the adept must let go of the idea that the Real can be found in a particular place because God is never absent from the cosmos. Thus, the purpose of the ascent is not to reach a particular realm or spiritual station, but to realize the divine presence within oneself and the cosmos until every moment is experienced as an encounter with the Real.

Writing and the Sufi Ascent

Language forms a fundamental part of Ibn 'Arabī's cosmological system because of the ontological meanings he attributes to the letters and Divine Names that bring the cosmos into existence.⁸¹ In *The Meccan Revelations*, Ibn 'Arabī describes the process of emanation in a variety of different ways. This includes the revelation of the Muhammadan light that brings the cosmic spheres into being, utterances of divine speech

which make manifest the Divine Names, and God's 'writing' the cosmos into existence.⁸² As is explained in detail the following pages, writing for Ibn 'Arabī is a performance of the loss of self that allows the writer to embody the ontological principles that bring the cosmos into existence. Poetic composition for members of the Shādhiliya and 'Issāwiya has similar metaphysical connotations since it corresponds to the state of annihilation that allows adepts to embody particular divine attributes. The idea that writing is a human-divine encounter had a fundamental influence on my writing process, as explained in detail in the preface to my three plays. The following pages examine the ontological significance of writing for Ibn 'Arabī forming the framework through which I experimented with my own playwriting practice.

There is a *ḥadīth* that states 'the first thing that God created was light.'⁸³ According to Ibn 'Arabī, this is the Muhammadan light that he also refers to as 'the first intellect,' or the 'supreme pen' (*al-qalam al-'alā*).⁸⁴ This pen makes manifest God's knowledge through the revelation of the cosmic realms, each of which is associated with one of twenty-eight letters of the Arabic language.⁸⁵ This occurs through the pen's 'writing' on the preserved tablet (*al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*), a process that corresponds to the revelation of divine utterances in the intermediary of the cloud.⁸⁶ As explained in Chapter Two, the Muhammadan light, or the supreme pen, is the highest *barzakh* in the cosmos that makes possible the revelation of the meanings of the Divine Names. Ibn 'Arabī explains the ontological significance of the pen in Chapter 369 of *The Meccan Revelations*:

It [the Pen] wrote the *wujūd* (existence) of enraptured spirits, what enraptures them, their states, and what they are busy with- all of that so that it might know it. It wrote the displaying traces by His names with these spirits. It wrote itself, its *wujūd* (existence), the

form of its *wujūd*, and the knowledges that it encloses; and it wrote the Tablet. When it finished with all this, the Real dictated to it what would come to be from Him until the day of resurrection, for the entrance of the infinite into *wujūd* is impossible, so it cannot be written. Writing, after all, is an affair of *wujūd*, so it cannot escape being finite.⁸⁷

Therefore, the pen is the intermediary between the Real and the cosmos that brings the created world into existence. The creation of the Muhammadan light/ supreme pen occurs through God's revelation to Himself (God's knowledge of Himself) that makes manifest the form of the pen, which brings other entities into existence through its listening to divine speech. The revealed knowledge is then inscribed onto the preserved tablet, which encompasses all possible existents.⁸⁸

God's words (the Divine Names) are infinite, yet their meanings are revealed through their manifestation in finite forms.⁸⁹ Thus, there is no end to the revelation of the divine words that constantly bring the cosmos into existence through this encounter between the Absolute and the limited. Ibn 'Arabī describes the infinite nature of the Divine Names in the following poem from Chapter 524 of *The Meccan Revelations*:

Were the oceans Our ink
and the trees of the earth Our pens,
busy scratching the Tablet
while We made you listen to that,
The words of my Lord would not run out
for it
and the depths would be equal to the
heights in splendour.⁹⁰

This poem is followed by a passage that references a Qur'ānic verse that states 'If all the trees on earth were pens and all the seas, with seven more seas besides, [were ink,] still

God's Words would not run out: God is almighty and wise.'⁹¹ Ibn 'Arabī then explains that God's words 'do not run out' because the Divine Names are infinite. These are the ontological entities that endlessly bring the cosmos into existence through their revelation in manifest forms. The pen's 'scratching the Tablet' refers to the divine act of writing, which, as noted earlier, is related to the acquisition of knowledge.

Ibn 'Arabī introduces Chapter 316 of *The Meccan Revelations* titled 'On knowing the stations of the manifest attributes inscribed by the divine pen on the human preserved tablet in the all-encompassing realms of Moses and Muhammad that are the highest of realms' with a poem about a spiritual traveller who encounters the pen and the tablet during the journey of ascent.⁹² The poem states:

the secret of the inkwell and the pen
is knowledge of becoming and pre-existence
and this is particular to who
has been called upon to worship Me [God] and came forward
to the realm of his essence
in which he has pre-existence
[there] it was revealed to him
he was familiar with it [the realm of knowledge]
and he came seeking and riding
and walking on his feet
and He [God] has intermingled with them [created entities]
the intermingling of flesh and blood.⁹³

What is significant about this poem, and constantly reaffirmed in Ibn 'Arabī's writings more generally, is the association of language with existence. The poem asserts that the ascent reveals to the traveller the pen that 'writes' her/his essence into existence. The term 'pre-existent' in the poem is referring to the esoteric realities that are hidden in each human being, an idea reiterated in the final two verses that remind the reader that the

Real is present in every created entity. In the same chapter, Ibn ‘Arabī explains that every person is capable of experiencing this kind of vision (*rū’ya*) following the example of the Prophet Muhammad who ascended through the heavens until he reached the realm where he heard the writing of the pen and witnessed the ‘signs’ of his Lord.⁹⁴

The pen and the tablet appear in several ascent narratives and poems. In ‘Īssāwiya songs the tablet is associated with the perfect human who embodies the divine attributes that are made manifest through the writing of the pen. Take, for example, the following poem that is performed in the ‘Īssāwiya *ḥadra* ritual:

Knowledge and light
quench the thirst [the desire to witness God]
Bin-‘Īssa preserves the tablet
oh shaykh (Bin-‘Īssa)
[you are] the revealed secret
who protects his followers⁹⁵

In the ‘Īssāwiya community it is believed that the patron saint of the order, Bin-‘Īssa, was the most spiritually elevated saint of his time (the pole), who, like Ibn ‘Arabī’s ‘perfect/complete’ human, has the ability to embody all of the divine attributes. This means that all of the divine attributes were realized in him, as noted in the verse that state ‘you are the revealed secret.’ Bin-‘Īssa protects his followers in the ascent because he is the intermediary through which the ‘Īssāwiya adepts embody the Divine Names, thus allowing them to eat dangerous objects, expose themselves to fire, and break heavy metal chains without harm.

The notion that the Sufi seeker can embody the metaphysical principles that bring the cosmos into existence also appears in the writings of al-Shushtarī. In a poem titled *I Sang to the Moon*, al-Shushtarī writes:

My wine is a fine wine,
it intoxicated me long ago.
So good, I shatter open the cache
but its breaking is not in vain.
My story is all marvels
I am the tablet and the pen.⁹⁶

Much like the previously cited 'Īssāwiya song, intoxication in al-Shushtarī's poem is associated with making manifest the divine attributes in the human subject. Al-Shushtarī's proximity to God causes him to announce that he is the pen and the tablet, the ontological entities that exist in the higher cosmic spheres, thus making him the *barzakh* through which God reveals the meanings of the Divine Names.

Ibn 'Arabī refers to the pen and the tablet in *al-'Isrā' ila Maqām al-'Asra (Ascent to the Station of the Night Travellers)*, an ascent narrative composed in Fes in 1199. His encounter with the Prophet Adam in the first heaven reveals the ontological significance of the pen. Here, Adam recounts a conversation he had with God in which the Real said to him: 'when I [God] wrote with the pen on the tablet, and brought into existence what is written from the inspired light, and the intermingling occurred, it occurred because I brought this shadow into existence for you.'⁹⁷ The revelation of the divine essence requires the presence of the Real in the forms of both light (being, *wujūd*) and darkness (non-being, *'adam*), which makes possible limited existence. The 'intermingling' of these

two opposing states forms the ‘intermediary’ that allows for the manifestation of the Divine Names in the finite forms of the cosmos.

Ibn ‘Arabī then continues his ascent through the seven heavens meeting several prophets (Jesus, Yūnis, Abraham, Moses, Harūn, Joseph, Idrīs), each of whom reveals a particular wisdom to the traveller. Ibn ‘Arabī continues his ascent until he reaches the lote tree, which is surrounded by light. After passing the lote tree he ascends through three hundred realms during which he hears the sound of the pen on his right writing on the tablet of the chests of the ‘inheritors’ (the saints). Ibn ‘Arabī then continues his ascent and meets the Prophet Muhammad and witnesses the spiritual stations of ‘the people favoured by God’ that are written in the tablet. He then continues his ascent and encounters the ‘God of belief.’⁹⁸

Throughout the journey the traveller realizes both the immanence and transcendence of God. In Chapter 367 of the *Meccan Revelations*, Ibn ‘Arabī writes:

Throughout this journey the servant remains God and not-God. And since he remains God and not-God, He makes (the servant) travel-with respect to Him, not with respect to (what is) not-Him-in Him, in a subtle spiritual (*ma ‘nawī*) journey...So when the servant has become aware of what we have just explained, so that he knows that he is not (created) according to the form of the world, but only according to the form of God (*al-Ḥaqq*), then God makes him journey through His Names, in order to cause him to see His Signs (17:1) within him.⁹⁹

The purpose of journeying is not to reach a particular destination; it is impossible to reach God because He is infinite. Yet it is also impossible to be separate from God since created entities are ontologically dependent on Him. Instead, as is explained in the

previously cited quotation, the purpose of the ascent is to allow the seeker to witness God's signs. The traveller journeys in God, through the images of the Divine Names revealed in the human subject. The further one ascends the more capable s/he becomes of God, acquiring the capacity to accept the images of the Real that are revealed throughout the journey. The end of the Sufi journey is the realization that there is no end to God's self-disclosure. The infinite can only be known through its gradual revelation in the cosmos and the human subject, its perfect mirror image.

Writing as Performance

As explained in the preceding section, the human subject has the ability to embody all of the divine attributes that bring the created world into existence, including God's 'writing' of the cosmos. Writing, for Ibn 'Arabī, not only represents the ontological process that brings the cosmos into being, but is also a means for the revelation of divine knowledge through the intermediary of the human subject who makes manifest God's words.¹⁰⁰

In several works Ibn 'Arabī asserts that his writings contain ontological truths that were revealed to him through spiritual experience.¹⁰¹ This includes *The Bezels of Wisdom*, which he claims was revealed to him in a divinely inspired vision of the Prophet Muhammad. Ibn 'Arabī describes the incident as follows:

I implemented the Messenger's [Muhammad's] wish with sincere intention and pure aim and aspiration and made this book manifest as God's Messenger determined without increase or decrease...I also asked Him that in all that which my fingers may write, in all that which my tongue may utter, and in all that which my heart may contain, to bestow only upon my mind glorified revelation and spiritual blowing (*nafṭh rūḥī*) through His protective support. (I asked this for the purpose) of my being a transmitter (*mutarjim*) and

not one who writes according to his own thoughts.¹⁰²

This quotation from *The Bezels of Wisdom* is significant because it exemplifies how Ibn ‘Arabī conceptualizes the process of writing. Ibn ‘Arabī asserts that he is no more than a ‘transmitter’ of divinely inspired speech that was revealed in the form of a book that the Prophet Muhammad gave to him. The notion that metaphysical knowledge is revealed through a direct encounter with the Real forms a fundamental part of Ibn ‘Arabī’s epistemology.¹⁰³ Writing is one form of such an encounter, which represents a particular instance of God’s self-disclosure.

The idea that God speaks through the human subject is one that predates Ibn ‘Arabī. Two of the most notable Sufis, who were famous for their divine utterances, were al-Ḥallāj, believed to have said ‘I am the Real (*Ḥaqq*),’ and al-Bisṭāmī who said ‘Glory be to me!’¹⁰⁴ ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq argues that much like utterances of divinely inspired speech, writing is an act of violence inflicted upon the self because of the seeker’s longing to return to a state of union with the Beloved.¹⁰⁵ Thus, writing represents a certain kind of death (annihilation, *fanā’*) which leads to God’s self-disclosure in the Sufi subject (subsistence, *baqā’*) in the form of divinely inspired language.

According to Khālīd Bil-Qāsim writing, for Ibn ‘Arabī, is a form of ‘journeying (*safar*)’ because, like the Sufi ascent, it is one of the methods through which the limited human subject comes to know and experience the Real.¹⁰⁶ The Sufi writes what s/he witnesses in spiritual visions that are revealed through the seeker’s encounters with God. In other words, the Sufi is the ‘vessel’ or *barzakh* who makes manifest the infinite meanings of

the Divine Names.¹⁰⁷ This refers not only to the spiritual meanings revealed in the text, but also the state of the writer who embodies the ontological processes (speech, writing) that bring the cosmos into existence.

Much like the realms that appear to the traveller in the ascent, divinely inspired language is revealed through cycles of annihilation and subsistence, which correspond to silence and utterances of divine speech in Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology. In Chapter 96 of *The Meccan Revelations*, Ibn ‘Arabī explains the significance of silence in the process creation, he writes:

God speaks with the tongue of His servants
silence in the cosmos is a necessary attribute
there is none other than [the One] who speaks to Himself
He is [the One] who hears His words and the world
and He is existence there is nothing but His essence
this is the Real the revealed [the One who] governs¹⁰⁸

Silence is a ‘necessary attribute’ because it is the state in which created entities receive existence through listening to the divine command Be! (*Kun*).¹⁰⁹ Silence represents the state of non-existence (*‘adam*) that makes possible the revelation the infinite meanings of the Divine Names through the annihilation of the revealed images of God. Because the human subject is the ‘microcosm’ of the cosmos s/he experiences these same states during her/his ascent towards the higher realms, which are continuously revealed with every experience of annihilation. Each realm is the revealed image of one of the Divine Names that is made manifest through utterances of divine speech. ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq argues that divinely inspired Sufi texts are a form of ‘writing silence’ because the writer is no more than an intermediary who listens to divine speech.¹¹⁰ The idea that silence

represents an encounter with God had an important influence not only on the content of my plays, which contain frequent silences in the stage directions, but also my writing process that explored this tension between the finite and the Absolute, as explained in the preface to my plays.

Ibn ‘Arabī also explains the ontological significance of divine speech in *The Meccan Revelations*, writing:

Speech is [composed] of expressions and utterances
that may be substituted by signs and gestures
if it were not for speech we would today be in non-existence
and there would not be decrees and revealed knowledge
the essence of the breath of the all-Merciful is
the revealed intellect and in legislation is revealed knowledge
in it the images of people were revealed
in [spiritual] meaning and in sensation and that revelation is creation
gaze and you will see the most exalted wisdom
in it to the eye/essence of the one with the wise heart [revealed in] things¹¹¹

The poem makes two significant statements with regards to the Real’s relationship to the created world. First, it asserts that speech is the intermediary through which God bestows existence upon the cosmos. This occurs through the breath of the all-Merciful that makes manifest God’s knowledge through its revelation in embodied forms. Second, the poem instructs the reader to look at the manifest forms, the revealed images of the Real that constitute ‘signs’ through which He can be known.

In the previously cited poem on silence, Ibn ‘Arabī asserts ‘there is none other than [the One] who speaks to Himself.’ This verse stresses that speech and silence are both divine

attributes that are made manifest in the seeker. This is because the Real is the *barzakh* who encompasses all states, including non-existence. Thus, it is none other than God who both utters and listens to the divine command, the One who brings every form of the cosmos into existence. When the Sufi ‘writes silence’ s/he embodies the ontological processes that sustain the existence of the created world: the writing of the divine pen, the revelation of divine utterances, and the cosmos’s listening to the divine command. Thus, when the Sufi subject engages in this form of divinely inspired writing, s/he is both the listener and the speaker. For, s/he is the microcosm who makes manifest these two attributes of the Real through their revelation in finite existence.

Bil-Qāsim maintains that, for Ibn ‘Arabī, reading also represents an encounter with the divine.¹¹² If every form in the cosmos is a manifestation of the Real, then every entity in existence is also a sign that reflects one of the divine attributes. Since all created entities are ontologically dependent on God, each has an esoteric meaning, the manifest form of one of the Divine Names in the higher realms. Therefore, ‘reading’ reveals metaphysical knowledge to the seeker in the sense that it allows her/him to realize the essence of the witnessed image.¹¹³ Even though this kind of ‘reading’ of the cosmos makes it possible for the Sufi to witness the Real, it should be stressed that lifting the ‘veil’ that separates the adept from God reveals yet another veil ad infinitum, because the divine essence transcends that which can be known. Furthermore, the seeker cannot attribute fixed meanings to the images of the Real s/he encounters in the cosmos because there is no end to God’s self-disclosure, even within the same form.

There are many written ascent narratives that circulate within Sufi communities. Al-Ḥaqq asserts that Sufi saints allowed these texts to be read because adepts were expected to inflict the same violence against themselves, for death is the only means of reaching a state of union with the Beloved.¹¹⁴ The purpose of these stories was to guide adepts to God by allowing them to ‘see the signs’ not only within the text, but also in the ‘written’ forms of the cosmos through this experience of the loss of self (annihilation, *fanā*). The revelation of the esoteric meanings of the manifest forms (existent entities, written words) alters how the reader perceives and experiences the sensible world.

Michael Sells uses the term ‘meaning event’ to refer to the shift in perspective that Ibn ‘Arabī’s readers experience because of his use of a dialectical language that does not make clear distinctions between human and divine referents.¹¹⁵ This ambiguity represents one of the most fundamental aspects of Ibn ‘Arabī ontology, namely, the tension between the transcendent and immanent attributes of the Real.¹¹⁶ Much like the perfect human, who reflects God’s endless self-disclosure in the cosmos, there is no end to the meanings that can be derived from Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings which embody this encounter between the limited and the Absolute.

Chapter Five

Situating and Annotating *The Sacred Triangle of Silence, Paths to the Infinite Forest, and the Eternal Seed*

My three plays are steeped in Ibn ‘Arabī’s philosophy and my ethnographical research, both interdependent. They belong, then, to the framework of Arab indigenous theatre referred to in my first chapter, and it suffices here to situate them more fully. These are certainly not the first to draw on Sufi rituals, characters, and motifs. Salient examples are ‘Izz al-Dīn al-Madanī and, in European theatre, Peter Brook, who incorporated elements of indigenous Islamic performance traditions in their plays.¹ I do not aim for intercultural theatre in the manner of Brook, nor to address the complex question of the relationship between Arab theatre and indigenous forms.² Such ambitions are beyond the scope of this thesis.

Since the 1960s, Tunisian Sufi rituals have been staged both in public spaces and private theatres, driven by various political and cultural agendas from the promotion of tourism to more recent claims by music festival organizers that Sufi music is a means of fighting ‘Islamic extremism.’³ The ‘Īssāwiya community of Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd has participated in several non-religious events, including at the 2017 Rouḥāniyāt festival of sacred music, organized by Tunisian actor Hishām Rūstom. Rūstom claims that Sufism represents the ‘tolerant version’ of Islam, the alternative to Salafī extremism that had caused much unrest in Tunisia during and after the 2011 revolution.

Rouḥāniyāt was modeled on the Fez festival of sacred music that not only includes local Sufi groups but a wide range of international artists.⁴ The festival aims to counter negative images of Islam by giving tourists the opportunity to experience ‘authentic’ Moroccan culture, not least Sufi music. Deborah Kapchan’s *Traveling Spirit Masters* addresses issues surrounding the commodification of Moroccan ritual traditions on the global market, showing that it is difficult for those not familiar with the tradition to understand the diverse cultural meanings attached to these performances.⁵

Other examples of staged performances of Sufi ritual include the work of Tunisian director Fāḍil al-Jazīrī, who, in 1992, created a performance called ‘*al-Ḥaḍra*’ composed of songs derived from various Sufi orders, including the ‘Īssāwiya.⁶ Richard Jankowsky stresses that these performances are not attempts at enacting rituals in secular contexts. Rather, certain elements are extracted from the ritual – music, dress, and the use of particular gestures, which may or may not be mixed with other traditions reaching as far as jazz, thus giving audiences little insight into what adepts actually experience in *ḥaḍra* rituals.⁷

Jankowsky argues that staged performances, composed of amalgamations of different songs and techniques derived from various orders like al-Jazīrī’s *al-Ḥaḍra*, contributed to the creation of ‘generic understandings of Sufism,’ which do not take into account contexts and cultural nuances.⁸ He asserts that two major events in Tunisian history contributed to the creation of these generic performances: the ban on Sufi rituals after Tunisia’s independence in 1956, making it much more difficult for Sufi communities to

preserve their tradition; the Tunisian government's financing of staged performances of Sufi rituals in an effort to encourage tourism through the promotion of Tunisian folklore.⁹ Thus, these staged performances were the few occasions when members of the Sufi orders could publicly perform their music.

My aim is not to critique these staged performances, but to focus precisely on what is lost when particular elements of Sufi ritual are staged without giving attention to their culturally specific religious meanings. The vital importance of Ibn 'Arabī's writings for this thesis is that they make accessible the metaphysical experiences of Sufi adepts, which, as detailed in previous chapters, are fundamental to Sufi ritual. Ibn 'Arabī's writings, then, provide an Islamic theoretical framework and vocabulary that makes it possible to articulate how metaphysics is performed in Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya rituals and is also comprehensible to those who have not grown up with these traditions.

Thus, instead of merely extracting music, poems, and gestures from these rituals, theatre-makers have the opportunity to experiment with *the underlying philosophical principles* that shape them. My trilogy constitutes one such theatrical experiment, attempting to capture the specific metaphysical ideas and meanings embodied in *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals. These plays were created through a dialogue with the Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya rituals, focusing on their approach to language and the process of poetic composition. Nonetheless, they share certain features of European avant-garde theatre, which requires further discussion.

Avant-Garde Theatre

Christopher Innes argues that a defining feature of the European avant-garde theatre is an interest in the ‘primitive,’ which led to an exploration of myths and rituals from different cultures.¹⁰ The avant-garde movement placed great value on the irrational and the creative energies of actors hidden in the unconscious, changing artistic processes and the relationship between audiences and performers. Spectators were now encouraged to become more involved in the performance.¹¹

Even though avant-garde theatre drew on various myths and rituals, it distanced itself from organized religion. Members of the avant-garde were quite critical of Christianity, for instance, which they considered complicit in maintaining oppressive power structures.¹² The return to the ‘primitive,’ then, was a critique of western values that had allegedly become overly rational and materialistic.¹³ One of the aims of avant-garde theatre was to challenge and transform society through ‘quasi-religious’ performances in which spiritual change was conflated with political transformation. Thus, even though this movement was greatly concerned with spiritualism, it was simultaneously deeply political.¹⁴

This already reveals that there are significant differences between western avant-garde theatre and the plays included in this thesis. My plays do not draw on ritual traditions in order to critique religion or society. They focus on the culturally specific aspects of the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals so as to examine what constitutes performance from a Sufi religious perspective. Furthermore, they are not overtly political, even though choosing to

explore indigenous North African traditions could be considered 'political' in the sense that it gives attention to subjugated forms of knowledge. Yet the purpose of these plays is not to bring about political transformation, but to examine how Sufi modes of performance can be explored in the theatre without reducing this exchange to the mimicry of ritual songs and gestures.

Parallels with avant-garde performances based on ritual can be drawn. Focus in the present discussion is on Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski, because their work provides examples that illustrate the features of western avant-garde theatre most relevant here. Brook was interested in a wide range of cultural traditions, including Sufism. He placed great value on intercultural exchange as a conduit to universal truths that transcend social and cultural differences.¹⁵ His approach was reflected in his company, composed of actors from Japan, Iran, and the United States, among other countries, who experimented with a wide range of traditions, including Greek and Zoroastrian myths, Hindu and Sufi epic poems, and religious chants derived from African rituals.¹⁶ The debate, so well known that it does not require repetition here, about the legitimacy of this intercultural approach in respect of orientalism and cultural appropriation, is far from a simple matter in an increasingly globalized world where theatre-makers constantly adapt material from other cultures in relation to their own cultural context.¹⁷

Brook began to develop the Sufi-inspired play *Conference of the Birds* during a three-month long journey in Africa (Algeria, Niger, Benin, Nigeria, and Mali), where his actors improvised for diverse audiences, many of whom were not familiar with western theatre

forms.¹⁸ The play was based on Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār’s poem of this name. As explained in Chapter Four, it describes the birds’ search for the Simurgh (God), who appears at the end of the poem in the journeying birds’ reflections.¹⁹ The poem thus summarizes two important Sufi ideas: God is present in every human being; God appears to each person in a unique form.

Brook explained that he went to Africa to develop a theatre that could transcend cultural differences:

Our work is based on the fact that some of the deepest aspects of human experience can reveal themselves through the sounds and movements of the human body in a way that strikes an identical chord in any observer, whatever his cultural and racial conditioning.²⁰

This attempt to go beyond social and cultural contexts so as to reach a place of ‘human’ accord posed many challenges to Brook and his actors of how to make signs and gestures communicable, including during their trip to Africa.²¹ In some of the villages they visited, they were unable to communicate that they were performing make-believe stories, because the local cultural understanding of performance was too radically different.²² Brook’s solution was to make performances as simple as possible, allowing them gradually to develop through interaction with the audience.

In the end, the material developed in Africa had a limited influence on *Conference of the Birds*, which continued with improvisation sessions in the United States in 1973.²³ Eventually, in 1979, Jean Claude Carrière wrote an adaptation of the twelfth-century poem in collaboration with Brook.²⁴ The emphasis was now on the collective experience

of the birds, in contrast to the poem that focused more on their individual spiritual struggles.²⁵ The actors alternated between performing the roles of the birds, other characters, and appearing as themselves.²⁶ Brook used Balinese and Chinese masks and puppets in the production in accordance with his intercultural approach, in addition to techniques derived from the shadow theatre of South East Asia. He also incorporated African story-telling techniques with actors speaking directly to the audience.²⁷ The first performance of the adaptation took place at the Avignon Festival in 1979, followed by performances in Berlin, Paris, Rome, and New York.²⁸

Yet, although *Conference of the Birds* and my trilogy draw on Sufi narratives and myths, they represent two very different approaches to artistic experimentation. In a certain sense, my plays are the exact opposite of Brook's adaptation. Brook is concerned with exploring the 'universal' aspects of theatre, drawing on a wide range of traditions to create an intercultural theatre predominantly for western audiences. My interest, by contrast, is to retain the culturally specific meanings that emerge from the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals through the use of an Islamic intellectual framework. A specific approach of this kind allows me to explore these ideas and their dramaturgy within a theatrical context, without alienating them from the theological and philosophical traditions – and therefore, the context – in which they are grounded.

Because my three plays are based on the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra*, they contain elements that are widespread among other ritual traditions, particularly those known to induce states of ecstasy. The difference between my plays and the works of avant-garde theatre-makers is

that my plays explore these intense physical and spiritual experiences in culturally specific terms, religion being integral to culture. It is therefore important to stress that the most important influence on my work was the rituals of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya communities. Any similarities with the works of western avant-garde artists arise from a shared interest in exploring ritual as a performance event, rather than from an explicit interest in a European avant-garde theatre tradition. Many techniques such as repetition are shared among various religious traditions, including those that were an important inspiration for avant-garde theatre-makers.

Grotowski, too, was interested in a wide range of performance traditions, including Haitian Voodoo rituals, yoga practices from Bengal, Nigerian Yoruba rites, and the practices of the indigenous Huichol community in Mexico.²⁹ The purpose of his experiments in this ‘theatre of sources’ was not to incorporate indigenous performance techniques into theatrical practice but to come into contact with ‘pre-cultural’ origins in order to develop new forms of creative expression.³⁰ Their aim was to acquire a deeper understanding of the self. Grotowski explains:

It is not a synthesis of techniques of sources that we are after. We search for sourcing techniques, those points that precede differences...everything else developed afterwards, and differentiated itself according to social, cultural, or religious contexts. But the primary thing should be something given to the human being...If your preferences are religious, you can say it’s the seed of light received from God. If, on the other hand, your preferences are secular, you can say it’s printed on one’s genetic code.³¹

Not unlike many of the mystical traditions, Grotowski’s interest in creative practice in these ‘source’ experiments was contingent upon an encounter with nature, spirit, God, or

any other entity capable of being within and beyond the individual self.³² Grotowski's work was characterized by his focus on process, in which the actor was expected to engage constantly in different forms of self-discovery. Emphasis on the personal development of the performer transformed acting into a semi-spiritual process.³³ Brook introduced the term 'art as vehicle' to stress the centrality of this constant inward search to Grotowski's work, in which performance became a means to better the self.³⁴

Practices that encourage similar explorations are an important part of many religious traditions. Grotowski was familiar with several indigenous Islamic traditions, notably the Shi'ite Ta'ziya and the dances of the whirling dervishes of Iran.³⁵ Most Grotowski scholars do not consider Sufism a major influence on him.³⁶ Even so, he worked on developing a performance based on the *samā'* ritual of the Mevlevi Sufi community during his work with Iranian director Massoud Saidpour – part of his objective drama research at the University of California in 1989.³⁷

Saidpour learned the whirling dance of the *samā'* ritual from the Sufi Jalal al-Din Lora and Grotowski made several insightful observations on how theatre-makers should approach indigenous Islamic traditions, insisting that the purpose of this cultural exchange was not to perform Sufi dances on the stage. He was adamant that actors should not appropriate the techniques derived from rituals to perform elements from different cultures.³⁸ He maintained that it was impossible for theatre practitioners to create a new ritual tradition, since the latter could only be developed over a long period of time within a particular cultural context. The objective was to allow practitioners to experience the

effects (italics in the original) of ritual through moments of transcendence that aided their development as both artists and human beings.³⁹

Grotowski encouraged Saidpour to focus on the internal states he experienced as a performer rather than use the Mevlevi dance as a ‘stage effect.’⁴⁰ Saidpour observed that the purpose of Iranian Sufi poetry, dance, and music was to aid the spiritual development of the Sufi adept, which he likened to Grotowski’s ‘art as vehicle.’⁴¹ It is precisely this aspect of Grotowski’s work that has a ritual aspect in the sense that performance becomes the means through which the artist experiences a kind of spiritual transformation.

Grotowski is not my reference for my plays, but he touches on important questions that arose during my research on Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya rituals. Like Grotowski, my aim was not to appropriate the music, dance, or gestures used in these rituals. It was to understand what constitutes performance in a Tunisian Sufi context, and how the heightened emotional states experienced in ritual can alter the process of playwriting. Grotowski’s work highlights the challenges that emerge when attempts are made to explore the relevance of a culturally specific tradition to the theatre. Unlike Grotowski, I did not experiment with an array of cultural traditions, nor was I concerned with developing a new method of acting.

Grotowski’s focus was on what was shared among performance practices (the sources) in different cultural contexts and the corporeal techniques that induced strong emotional responses. My focus, in contrast, is on the cultural and religious specificity of the

philosophical ideas embodied in ritual. Any similarities arise from a shared interest in exploring ritual as a performance event that has the potential to alter theatre practice. Grotowski's creative practice involves an encounter with the 'other' that makes it possible for the actor/writer to go beyond the self.⁴² Furthermore, Grotowski's notion of 'verticality,' which he considered fundamental for establishing this kind of 'higher connection' is quite similar to the Sufi ascent, the means through which the adept makes concrete what Grotowski would refer to as 'subtle energies,' otherwise known as 'spiritual meanings' within the Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya communities.⁴³ It is also worth noting that the idea of acting as an intermediary corresponds to Ibn 'Arabī's notion of the *barzakh* through which the seeker makes manifest a hidden spiritual world.

The fundamental difference is that the three plays included in this thesis experiment with this idea within an Islamic framework, that is, within Ibn 'Arabī's ontology, in order to explore how a performance of the loss of self can be articulated in culturally specific terms. Such an approach not only highlights the value of the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals as indigenous performance traditions, but also allows theatre-makers to take into account a Sufi worldview. Furthermore, it stresses the relevance of Islamic intellectual history to contemporary ritual practice, which is particularly valuable to practitioners like myself who are interested in creating plays that are explicitly Islamic in character, not only in terms of content but also with regards to the framework through which a performance event is explored – whether through the intoxication of Sufi adepts in ritual, or making concrete 'spiritual meanings' through writing.

Sufism and Islam in Arab Theatre

Several Arab theatre practitioners have incorporated Sufi themes and Qur'ānic narratives in their work, including Egyptian playwright Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (1899–1987).⁴⁴ Ḥakīm is author of over eighty plays, including *The Sleepers of the Cave (Ahl al-Kahf)*, inspired by a Qur'ānic story about three men who hide in a cave to escape anti-Christian persecution, but end up sleeping there three hundred years.⁴⁵ Published in 1933, *The Sleepers of the Cave* aided the development of the Arab theatre tradition by drawing on local histories and contexts, instead of adapting European works.⁴⁶ Paul Starkey asserts that the play was a milestone for Arab theatre not only because Ḥakīm was one of the first playwrights to draw on indigenous sources like the Qur'ān, but also because its philosophical content was unprecedented.⁴⁷

The three main characters of this play (Yamlīkha, Marnūsh, Mishlīnyā) respond to the situation in different ways. Yamlīkha is the first to return to the cave hoping either to fall asleep again or die, and is later joined by Marnūsh after he discovers his son and wife are dead. Mishlīnyā is the only character who attempts to adapt to the new context because of his love for Prīscā, the daughter of the king of the same name as Mishlīnyā's lover who died centuries ago. He eventually returns to the cave, unable to convince Prīscā that the three hundred-year gap would not affect their relationship.⁴⁸

One of the play's main themes is the struggle against time that alienates the sleepers of the cave, making it impossible for them to integrate. The play stresses, then, that it is impossible to escape time, even if one is capable of travelling to the future. Ḥakīm

returns to the same theme in later works, including his 1957 *Riḥla ila al-Ghad (Journey to the Future)*. The latter is about two prisoners who are sent to another planet as punishment. When they return from space, they discover that there has been a major time lapse, which leaves them feeling confused and alienated.⁴⁹ According to Nawāl Zayn al-Dīn, both plays are about the inability to escape death. She asserts that, paradoxically, the only way to become immortal is through accepting annihilation (*fanā'*) – the means of coming into contact with eternal time (God), an idea that has clear Sufi undertones.⁵⁰

Other plays by Ḥakīm, also based on Qur'ānic narratives, include his 1943 *Sulaymān al-Ḥakīm (Solomon the Wise)*.⁵¹ Ḥakīm explores the dangers of having too much power through a story about King Solomon's unrequited love for the Queen of Sheba.⁵² Although many of Solomon's characteristics – his ability to speak to animals and the jinn – are derived from the Qur'ān, Ḥakīm also incorporates narratives from other sources, including Middle Eastern folk tales from *Arabian Nights*.⁵³

Apart from his interest in Islamic themes, Ḥakīm experimented with a range of traditions, European and Egyptian, never limited to a particular subject. In addition to his more philosophical plays, he wrote social and political commentaries about life in contemporary Egypt.⁵⁴ He thus made a major contribution to the Arab theatre, particularly through his attention to local context and the use of indigenous sources, which became much more common in the 1960s.⁵⁵

Ṣalāḥ ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr (1931-81) is another Egyptian playwright and poet who was interested in indigenous traditions, not least Sufism.⁵⁶ There were also important European influences on his writing, notably T.S Eliot. Khalil Semaan asserts that ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr adopted Eliot’s practice of writing dialogue in a mixture of free verse and prose from *Murder in the Cathedral*, concerning the death of Archbishop Thomas Beckett.⁵⁷ He was one of the first Arab playwrights to compose a play in verse, which, according to Muhammad Badawi, was one of his most important contributions to Arab theatre through his experimentation with the genre Badawi calls ‘poetic drama.’⁵⁸ Despite this influence, the content and issues covered in ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr’s plays were fundamentally different from Eliot’s because of their distinctly Islamic character and focus on the Egyptian social context.⁵⁹

Take, too, ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr’s Sufi-inspired *Ma’sāt al-Ḥallāj (The Tragedy of al-Ḥallāj)*, published in 1965.⁶⁰ The play is based on the martyrdom of the tenth-century Sufi saint al-Ḥallāj who was accused of heresy.⁶¹ Even though ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr incorporates Sufi ideas, *The Tragedy of al-Ḥallāj* also makes social and political commentaries about inequality.⁶² Ḥallāj is not only a mystic but also a revolutionary who wants to bring about social change, refusing to live an isolated life of contemplation. Ḥallāj’s desire for death is not only about the return to God, but is a form of self-sacrifice that reveals his commitment to social reform. Badawi asserts that focus on social and political injustice was a prominent feature of many of the Egyptian plays of the 1960s.⁶³ Among them was ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr’s *The Night Traveller*, an absurdist play about a cruel ticket collector who terrorizes and eventually murders an innocent passenger.⁶⁴

The martyrdom of al-Ḥallāj has been the subject of several other Arab and non-Arab plays. Herbert Mason's dramatic narrative *The Death of al-Hallaj*, first performed in the United States as a 'concert reading' at Harvard University in 1974, focuses on the events of the last ten days prior to Ḥallāj's execution.⁶⁵ Based on Louis Massignon's influential study of al-Ḥallāj, it is much more concerned with who Ḥallāj was as a character than how his martyrdom relates to the contemporary political context.⁶⁶ Another important North African play about al-Ḥallāj is Tunisian playwright 'Izz al-Dīn al-Madanī's *Riḥlat Ḥallāj (The Journey of Ḥallāj)*.⁶⁷ Here, there are three characters, all named Ḥallāj – 'Ḥallāj of freedom,' 'Ḥallāj of secrets,' and 'Ḥallāj of the people.' Each represents a particular aspect of the saint's personality (the intellectual, the mystical, and the political). Each Ḥallāj character protests against injustice differently. The intellectual writes a book, the mystic abandons isolated spiritual life to help people, and the political one fights for the rights of the oppressed. All three are sentenced to death.⁶⁸ Although the play was set in tenth-century Iraq, it was clearly a critique of the political ruling class, and was not tolerated by Tunisian government officials that censored it in the 1960s and 1970s.⁶⁹

Al-Madanī's turn to Sufism was an attempt to create plays that were distinctly Arab, rather than draw on European traditions.⁷⁰ He wrote a play about the Zanj revolution (869-883), a monumental event in Islamic history during which Muslim slaves from East Africa fought against the oppressive Abbasid Caliphate that had forced them to work in salt mines.⁷¹ He also wrote *Ghufrān (Forgiveness)*, based on the eleventh-century work of Abū 'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (953-1057), a poet and philosopher of the Abbasid era.⁷²

Another drama that drew on Sufi sources is renowned Moroccan playwright and director Tayyib Ṣaddiqī's (1938-2016) *Sīdī 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Majdhūb*, based on the poetry of a sixteenth-century Sufi with the same name, which was preserved in Moroccan society through oral tradition.⁷³ For playwrights like myself interested in Sufi ritual, these works are important points of reference, providing examples of how one can experiment with indigenous sources and traditions, while being aware of the new meanings these narratives and performance practices acquire in contemporary contexts.

The Arab Avant-Garde

Marvin Carlson has stressed that, even though European theatre was an important reference for the modernist Arab theatre movement, known for its adaptations of European plays, it would be incorrect to assume that Arab playwrights and directors did not contribute to the creation of a new form of theatre.⁷⁴ Even works based on European plays were altered in relation to the Arab social and cultural context. The more the Arab theatre movement developed, the greater was the attention given to indigenous traditions, which created new avenues for experimentation. Khalid Amine, as noted in Chapter Two, asserts that this led to the creation of a 'hybrid theatre' that mixes indigenous traditions and European forms, which should not be reduced to imitations of western theatre.⁷⁵

After over a hundred and fifty years of this kind of experimentation, it can hardly be said that theatre is uniquely a western form, especially given the fact that indigenous traditions like the shadow theatre already existed in various parts of the Arab world, Tunisia included.⁷⁶ This is not to deny that Arab playwrights were familiar with, and even

influenced by, certain European avant-garde artists: take ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr, who explicitly cites Ionesco as an influence on his *The Night Traveller*.⁷⁷ Yet Arab dramatists did not merely borrow from European theatre, but also drew on indigenous forms to create a distinctly Arab avant-garde theatre tradition that was shaped by local contexts.

Theatre-makers were very much aware of the differences between the Arab and European political and cultural contexts, particularly after the 1960s. Commenting on the direction in which the Tunisian theatre should develop, al-Madanī asserts: ‘the Tunisian avant-garde has no wish to be connected with the Western avant-garde. It has a historical, social, and cultural consciousness which drives it to open up intellectual paths different from the paths of Europe.’⁷⁸ As was the case with many other theatre practitioners, al-Madanī went to ‘popular traditions’ that were of much more immediate relevance to the Tunisian cultural context.⁷⁹

Thus, when examining the work of Arab avant-garde theatre-makers, one should not assume that their experimental aspects are derived from European models. Carlson asserts that many elements that have become distinctive features of western avant-garde theatre such as mingling performers and audiences were already part of many indigenous traditions.⁸⁰ Peter Chelkowski argues similarly with regards to the Ta‘ziya in Iran, asserting that this religious drama shares many of the features of western avant-garde theatre.⁸¹ No distinction is made between audience members and actors; people become very emotionally involved in the performance, and the script is constantly altered depending on the mood of the audience and the actors.⁸² Chelkowski points out that such

ideals of western theatre directors as Grotowski can be found in Ta‘ziya performances, evolved through centuries of practice;⁸³ further, he argues that the Ta‘ziya is more successful because it is part of popular Iranian culture and so engages large numbers of spectators – this influencing Grotowski’s view of the close relationship between the performer and audience.⁸⁴

Citing Ḥakīm and Ṣaddiqī’s drama as well as their own writings and commentaries on the subject of Arab theatre, Carlson stresses the importance of local traditions such as the shadow plays of Ibn Dāniyal and the *maqāmāt* (classical narratives composed in rhymed prose) for the development of an Arab avant-garde theatre. Interest in indigenous traditions is one of the defining features of the Arab avant-garde movement that should not be undermined by parallels with the works of European artists.⁸⁵ Carlson writes: ‘theatrical activities very similar to those claimed as their own by the European avant-garde in fact can be found in many theatrical cultures, where they were generated and developed with no thought of European artistic concerns.’⁸⁶ Thus, when examining Arab plays, particularly those theatre-makers who assert that their plays are based on indigenous traditions, one should remain open to the idea that their work is not necessarily derived from, or substantially influenced by, European models.⁸⁷ My own plays are much more closely aligned with the works of these Arab theatre-makers than the European avant-garde.

It is crucial to study the cultural contexts in which theatre is created, and familiarity with the indigenous traditions of a region allows theatre scholars to discern which elements are

derived from local performance practices, whether they are ritual or other forms, and which aspects, if any, are in dialogue with a European theatrical tradition. As Carlson notes, the existence of certain parallels *does not necessarily* mean that Arab theatre-makers are drawing on western traditions.⁸⁸ My own view, based on my practice-as-research and scholarly reading, is that Carlson's point cannot be stressed enough.

This is particularly true for plays based on ritual, since many of the techniques used in these performances are found in a wide range of cultures. It is therefore essential to remain open to different possibilities before determining whether a work has or has not been influenced by certain European models. This also applies when multiple works by the same author are examined, since the author's approach in each play, as regards any European source, may be significantly different in each case – evident in the work of 'Abd al-Ṣabūr.⁸⁹ When examining such Arab works, it is important to address these complexities, which Amine considers an inherent part of the postcolonial condition, instead of assuming that Arab plays are automatically influenced by European forms.⁹⁰

As explained in the preceding pages, the most important influence on my plays were the rituals of the Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya communities that I explored within the framework of Ibn 'Arabī's metaphysics in order to examine what constitutes performance from an indigenous Sufi perspective. This culturally specific Islamic understanding of embodiment had a profound influence on the content and characters in my plays, as well as my writing process, as detailed in the preface to my trilogy. My plays differ from the works of Arab avant-garde theatre-makers who were interested in indigenous

performance traditions in that they include an in-depth exploration of Tunisian Sufi ritual and its relationship to Islamic metaphysics. In this regard, al-Madanī's *The Journey of Ḥallāj* provides an interesting example of a work that hints at the connection between Sufism as a source of historical narratives and as contemporary ritual practice through the inclusion of an extract from *Ḥizb al-Tawassul (The Litany of Supplication)*, attributed to al-Shādhilī. The litany appears in his preface and is presented as a staged dialogue with seven different characters named after each of their respective numbers (actor one, actor two, etc.)⁹¹ Although interesting, al-Madanī's play does not explore the Shādhiliya *dhikr* as a performance event, nor is the litany considered to be a central part of the script. Another difference is that my plays do not aim to appropriate material from the ritual. In fact, I explicitly avoid staging Sufi songs and litanies that lose their culturally specific meanings when performed in non-ritual contexts.

Pointing out the shortcomings of performing Sufi litanies outside the *dhikr* is not a critique of al-Madanī's play, which was part of his immense contribution to the Tunisian theatre tradition. Rather, I am attempting to continue on the path set by al-Madanī and other Arab artists by experimenting with an indigenous tradition (the *dhikr* and *ḥadra*) that has not yet been sufficiently explored within a theatrical context. This is not the first work to explore Sufi ritual as a performance event, Saidpour's work being a relatively recent example. But it fundamentally differs from the work of avant-garde artists in Europe and the United States in that it stresses the importance of understanding such performative acts within an Islamic framework. The intention is not to create a model that should be followed by Arab artists, nor to determine how western theatre practitioners

should engage with these traditions. These three plays represent an alternative to staged performances of Sufi ritual such as al-Jazīrī's *ḥaḍra*, while taking into account the culturally specific meanings of these Tunisian ritual traditions.

The following pages provide a commentary that illustrates how my plays explore the metaphysical ideas described in Ibn 'Arabī's writings and performed in *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals, particularly the notion that the body is the vessel for the self-disclosure of God. My plays depict the Sufi's struggle to make manifest the divine attributes hidden in the body through a narrative about the ascent of three saints – E1, E2, and K – under the guidance of the prophets Elijah, Ezra, and Khālid. It would not be an exaggeration to state that each line of my three plays references at least one aspect of Ibn 'Arabī's ontology or the ritual practices of the Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya communities. Due to the limitation of space, it will not be possible to give a detailed account of how each scene embodies and reimagines the metaphysical concepts introduced in the preceding chapters. Instead, the following pages outline the main themes explored in my plays using particular scenes as examples.

Embodying the Word of God

The ontological properties Ibn 'Arabī attributes to the perfect human and the Qur'ān, the microcosm that encompasses all of the Divine Names, are fundamental to my plays, which examine how language acts as the intermediary (*barzakh*) through which the human subject explores her/his relationship to the Absolute.⁹² In my trilogy, the 'seed-capsules' represent the Divine Names/the Qur'ān that guide E1, E2, and K's ascent. In

accordance with Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings on embodiment, the ‘seed-capsules’ emerge from the earth, which, in my three plays, is a metaphor for the body. The image of the seed-capsules is also used to refer to the idea that the Qur’ān is the written microcosm of the cosmos. Take, for example, scene three of *The Sacred Triangle of Silence* in which the ‘small seed’ is a metaphor for the Qur’ān that contains God’s infinite words, revealed in the tree which represents the perfect human (the Qur’ān’s manifest image).⁹³

The scene takes place in a barren desert where the prophets Khālīd, Ezra, and Elijah marvel at the disappearance of the sea. It then becomes apparent that the landscape was transformed because of a saint’s disappointment with his followers. The ‘quest for fertile earth’ in the stage directions at the end of this scene refers to Khālīd, Ezra, and Elijah’s desire to make manifest God’s words through the intermediaries of E1, E2, and K who are instructed to plant the seed-capsules, the ritual that reveals the meanings of the Divine Names hidden in the capsules. Much like in Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics, these meanings are revealed through journeying, which makes manifest esoteric knowledge hidden in the body.⁹⁴

E1, E2, and K travel through different landscapes to plant the capsules that eventually grow into a forest that has no end. However, this does not mean that the Divine Names (or capsules) were absent from the earth prior to E1 and E2’s planting of the capsules in *The Sacred Triangle of Silence*. The performance of planting rituals does not alter the various landscapes through which E1, E2, and K journey. Instead, it gives them the ability to see the ‘signs,’ the images of God made manifest within each traveller. This

idea is explicitly mentioned in a dialogue between E1, E2, and K in *The Sacred Triangle of Silence*:

K. there is a god
E2. that lingers in each of us
E1. patiently waiting
K. to be resurrected⁹⁵

The planting of the capsules represents one such form of ‘resurrection’ that reveals the meanings of the Divine Names hidden in the body. Indeed, the fault of Soldier I and Soldier II in *The Sacred Triangle of Silence* is that they fail to understand the Real’s relationship to the cosmos. In addition to trying to prevent E1, E2, and K from planting the seed-capsules, they further alienate themselves from the image of God hidden within them by attempting to burn the seed-capsules, causing them to spend eternity in the grave. Soldier I and Soldier II do not represent particular individuals; instead, they embody the challenges adepts encounter in the path towards knowledge.

Members of the ‘Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya constantly stress that the only way to know God is through engaging in pious acts which bring the seeker closer to the Beloved. Performing these rituals reveals the divine attributes hidden in the seeker’s heart. ‘Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya adepts continue to attend the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals because there is no limit to what can be experienced of God. My plays, particularly *Paths to the Infinite Forest*, stress that the purpose of journeying is not to reach a particular destination, but to acquire the ability to perceive and experience the Real within the limited form of the body.

God's Vast Earth

Although my plays are significantly influenced by Ibn 'Arabī, they are not merely representations of the metaphysical ideas discussed in his works. As noted earlier, the rituals of the Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya were also fundamental to the development of my plays. Placing the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals in dialogue with Ibn 'Arabī's writing allowed me to explore how playwriting can be part of an embodied practice, as detailed in my trilogy's preface. And although I incorporated the performance techniques central to the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* into my creative process, my plays fundamentally differ from the poetic material generated in these rituals in that their purpose is to examine how Sufi modes of performance and writing can be integrated into a theatrical practice.

My exploration of playwriting as a performance event was inspired by the culturally specific understanding of embodiment shared by Ibn 'Arabī and members of the Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya, in which the body constitutes the space for the revelation of the divine attributes. According to Ibn 'Arabī, the human body is the 'all embracing earth' that can encompass God, because it is the microcosm that contains all the Divine Names. He asserts that the first body to be brought into existence was that of the Prophet Adam, who was created from clay. From the remnants of Adam's clay, God removed a very small fragment (*al-samsama*) that He then transformed into a 'vast earth' in which He created multiple realms, the totality of which form a world created in the human subject's image.⁹⁶ In other words, because the human subject is the microcosm in whom all of the divine attributes are hidden, knowledge of the self is also knowledge of God, whose

attributes are made manifest in the human being through the performance of supererogatory acts.⁹⁷

The idea that the divine attributes are made manifest through the performance of ritual acts is fundamental to the Shādhiliya and ʿĪssāwiya, particularly the notion that performances of sacred language, like the poems and litanies in the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra*, reveal truths hidden in the body in states of intoxication. The relationship between language and embodiment is one of the main themes explored in my trilogy. The sacred tree that E1, E2, and K search for appears at the end of *Paths to the Infinite Forest* through the performance of various rituals, including the planting of seed-capsules, which make manifest the different landscapes hidden in the traveller's body. The characters also discuss the ontological significance of language with references to the *dhikr* ritual, which represents a particular method of journeying, as is illustrated in the following dialogue from *Paths to the Infinite Forest*:

ELIJAH. yes it was here
EZRA. that they would recite
KHALID. ancient words
ELIJAH. they would recite
EZRA. and recite
KHALID. and recite
ELIJAH. until it appeared
EZRA. revealing
KHALID. earth's infinite depths⁹⁸

The recitations make manifest the Divine Names hidden in the seed-capsules. These recitations, mentioned frequently in the dialogue, are enacted through repetition. This includes the repetition of certain verses such as 'clay is only earth and water,' which

constitute the ritual through which the different landscapes are revealed to E1, E2, and K. Reciting these sacred words creates a rhythm, through the repetition of short verses, which is meant to alter the listener's experience of language. I derive this technique from the tradition of intoxication, which utilizes various forms of repetition to help members of the 'Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya ascend. This includes the repetition of songs, rhythms, gestures, Qur'ānic verses, the Divine Names, and so on. It is precisely the use of this kind of rhythmic language that allows adepts to have an experience of God, which is also fundamental to my three plays that experiment with this Sufi approach to language not only through the use of similar techniques, but by also giving attention to the metaphysical ideas associated with these performance practices.

Recitation also has ontological significance in Ibn 'Arabī's writings, as explained in the preceding chapter. My plays embody Ibn 'Arabī's idea that the divine attributes are made manifest through utterances of divine speech that bring created forms into existence.⁹⁹ When the characters engage in performances of sacred language, mediated by the seed-capsules, they reveal the meanings of the Divine Names, which appear in the form of various landscapes that represent encounters with God. E1, E2, and K come to understand their relationship to the Absolute not only through the various images they witness, but also by performing the ontological processes (utterances of divine speech, writing) that bring these forms into existence through the intermediary of the earth/body.

My plays explore the *barzakh*-like qualities of the body through the story of Khālid Ibn Sinān. As detailed in Chapter Two, Khālid is a pre-Islamic prophet who entered a cave to

extinguish a fire and protect his people. He told his followers to remove his body from the grave after he died so that he could reveal the secrets of the *barzakh*, but his sons prevented them from doing so for fear of being known as ‘the sons of the one who was removed from the grave.’¹⁰⁰ In his commentary on the Qur’ānic chapter of The Cave, Ibn ‘Arabī asserts that the cave represents the esoteric dimensions of the human body (*bāṭin al-badan*) whose surface is inscribed with the Divine Names.¹⁰¹ If we examine the story of Khālid Ibn Sinān in light of Ibn ‘Arabī’s interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the cave, then the narrative represents some of the most fundamental aspects of the Sufi experience, namely, that knowledge is acquired through direct embodied experience. According to ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Nābulī, Khālid already knew the states of the *barzakh* prior to his death. The purpose of Khālid’s resurrection was to make it manifest in a sensible corporeal form through *dhawq* (taste, direct experience).¹⁰²

My plays often refer to the story of the Prophet Khālid in disjointed fragments that explore the relationship between the human subject and the cosmos, the microcosm and macrocosm. Here, Khālid represents the esoteric knowledge ingrained in each human being and the challenges that prevent the adept from ‘resurrecting’ it. In *The Sacred Triangle of Silence*, the capsules appear in a cave, which represents the esoteric dimensions of the body that are made manifest through the ascent of the three travellers – E1, E2, and K. However, the idea that the body is the intermediary for the revelation of the divine attributes is perhaps most clearly represented in my second play (*Paths to the Infinite Forest*) in the image of a forest that grows from the body of a deceased saint.¹⁰³ My trilogy ends with the return to the cave in the last play (*The Eternal Seed*), because

the human potential for the acquisition of knowledge is infinite, for, as soon as an image of the Real is made manifest, it creates the opportunity for the revelation of yet another ad infinitum. Thus, there is no end to the knowledge that can be revealed through these encounters with Absolute.

My three plays do not contain any full stops to preserve this sense of continuity that forms a fundamental part of Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of the Sufi journey that has no end.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, maintaining this sense of continuity is essential for stressing the connection between my plays, since each depicts a certain aspect of the ascent experience. This also contributes to the formation of the plays’ circular structure, particularly because the last play, *The Eternal Seed*, ends in a cave, the place in which the travellers began their ascent.

Ingesting God’s Light: Revealing the Esoteric Dimensions of Sufi Bodies

Ibn ‘Arabī asserts that, whenever the Prophet drank milk or ate food, he would say ‘my Lord bless us with it and give us more of it,’ and interprets this phrase as a reference to the endless knowledge revealed to the traveller through encounters with the Real.¹⁰⁵ He derives this idea from the story of the Prophet’s Night Journey, during which the Angels offered him wine and milk. When he chose the milk, the Angel Gabriel said to him: ‘you have been guided to instinctual knowledge.’¹⁰⁶

In Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology, the metaphor of ingestion also represents God’s sustenance of the cosmos.¹⁰⁷ In Chapter 558 of *The Meccan Revelations*, he explains the metaphysical

significance of the Divine Name *al-Muqīt* (the One who nourishes, the Food Giver).¹⁰⁸ Here, Ibn ‘Arabī likens food to the divine command (Be!) that sustains the existence of created entities. For just as food is revealed within the earth that sustains the creatures inhabiting it, so does the divine command govern God’s endless self-disclosure in the cosmos.¹⁰⁹

The Sacred Triangle of Silence and *Paths to the Infinite Forest* explore this human-divine intimacy through the metaphor of ingestion that is derived from Ibn ‘Arabī’s description of the various forms of ‘nourishment’ that bring the cosmos into being. In these two plays, eating and drinking represent the intermingling of the finite and the Absolute – the ontological process that brings the limited form of the body into existence. The act of ingesting sacred objects also references the practice of *ziyārā*, visiting the tombs of Sufi saints. Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya adepts are expected to eat and drink at Sufi shrines in order to benefit from the saint’s blessing. The significance of this practice for the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya communities is explained in Chapter Three. However, it is important to mention it here because food and water in this context are a *barzakh* (intermediary) for the reception of divine grace. This includes the dangerous objects that ‘Īssāwiya adepts eat without harm during the *ḥaḍra* because the *dhikr* performed prior to it endows these objects with blessings.

In *The Sacred Triangle of Silence* and *Paths to the Infinite Forest*, E1, E2, and K ingest different substances, including water, salt, and seed-capsules, that gradually reveal the meanings of the Divine Names hidden in their bodies. This first occurs in the scene titled

‘Salt and Water,’ where K drinks a salt-water mixture, prior to his return to the desert, where he is ‘annihilated’ in God.¹¹⁰ E2 extracts this mixture from the soil where the Divine Names (seed-capsules) are hidden within the earth/body. It should be stressed that the metaphor of ingestion does not represent the introduction of foreign entities into the body, but the revelation of the attributes that already exist within it. The salt-water mixture is also the microcosmic image of the sea that represents the revealed image of the Real in my plays. Therefore, the act of ingesting salt-water signifies a return to the esoteric dimensions of the body (the Divine Names) that the traveller makes manifest through her/his annihilation in God.

The notion that the body is the vessel for the revelation of the divine attributes is fundamental to my trilogy. The most obvious example of this is the deceased saint, frequently referred to in *Paths to the Infinite Forest*, who is the perfect human, the *barzakh* from whom the seed-capsules grow. As explained in Chapter Three, the rituals of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya are performed at the tombs of saints who continue to intercede on behalf of their followers after they have died. Thus, the saint’s tomb in *Paths to the Infinite Forest* also refers to the practice of saint veneration in which deceased saints mediate between the spiritual and corporeal worlds.

It is from the saint’s body that various landscapes appear, including a sea and a valley, as described in scene seven of *Paths to the Infinite Forest* by the prophets Elijah, Ezra, and Khālid, who explain how the sea, which represents the divine, emerges from the finite earth (the body of the saint). In other words, the scene illustrates how the divine attributes

are made manifest in the human subject through divinely inspired listening that allows the seed (Divine Names) to become manifest in the earth/body.¹¹¹

The idea that the sea represents an encounter with God is derived from Tunisian Sufi myths, 'Īssāwiya songs, and Shādhiliya litanies, discussed in Chapter Four, which associate the sea with the experience of annihilation. This human-divine encounter occurs in prayer, alluded to in the aforementioned scene with the verse 'clay and dust fell to the ground,' referring to the act of prostration. This reveals the divine attributes that emerge from the deceased saint's fingertips, the bodily organ (index finger) through which Muslims bear witness to God's unity in the daily prayers. Much like the 'Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya communities, the scene emphasizes the importance of embodied practice in the Sufi journey, the means through which the 'one seed' (God) is made manifest as a multiplicity (millions of dust particles), all of which are hidden in the finite form of the body.

Death and Resurrection

As explained in the previous chapters, the traveller's encounter with God, in both Ibn 'Arabī's writing and the rituals of the Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya, occurs through a certain kind of death (annihilation, *fanā'*) that causes the revelation of the divine attributes.¹¹² My plays explore this Sufi notion of 'dying before death,' which represents the method through which adepts acquire proximity to the Beloved. In *Paths to the Infinite Forest*, the three travellers discover the body of a deceased saint who represents the perfect human. The sainthood of E1, E2, and K symbolizes transcendence, immanence, and the

barzakh – the attributes that make the perfect human capable of accepting the self-disclosure of God in every form. E1, E2, and K are embodied images of the deceased saint's spiritual faculties, thus the person whom they bury in the desert is actually none other than themselves.¹¹³

In the scene titled 'The Saint's Tomb,' Ezra, Khālid, and Elijah allude to E1, E2, and K's relation to the deceased saint. They describe the death of three travellers who wander into the desert and sacrifice themselves to the sun.¹¹⁴ Elijah asserts that the deceased saint was covered in 'last remnants of fertile earth,' which refers to the human capacity to make manifest God's words (the seed-capsules) through death/annihilation. Each time a character dies in *The Sacred Triangle of Silence* and *Paths to the Infinite Forest* Elijah, Ezra, and Khālid cast his body into a sea or river and then bury it in the earth.¹¹⁵ The performance of these funeral rites exemplifies Sufi understandings of the relationship between the human subject and God. Death is the necessary precondition for the revelation of the divine attributes – represented here in the image of the sea – within the limited form of the body.

The different landscapes that appear in my plays reveal the different stages of the ascent, which is composed of endless cycles of annihilation and subsistence. E2, in *The Sacred Triangle of Silence*, reads a monologue from a seed-capsule that contains a summary of the metaphysical states experienced in the ascent and the ontological processes that make them manifest. It states:

three people wandered into the desert the body of the deceased was found reflecting light

earth will diminish at the centre of the great mountain salt and water a great sacrifice was made they found the body of the deceased reflecting light hidden in their palms salt and water¹¹⁶

Here, the desert represents the metaphysical space in which the travellers have an encounter with God, inspired by the poems of Ibn ‘Arabī, al-Shushtarī, and ‘Īssāwiya myths, discussed in the previous chapter, which describe the state of annihilation through poems and narratives about the desert. Annihilation reveals salt and water (the microcosm of the sea) that reflects the divine light in the bodies of the deceased (E1, E2, and K) who have surrendered to the sun, a symbol of God. Other scenes from *The Sacred Triangle of Silence* also associate the landscape of the desert with annihilation in God. For example, in the scene titled ‘The Return,’ E2 associates going to the desert with the ‘ritual’ of dying before death (annihilation).¹¹⁷

However, it is perhaps the scene titled ‘River III’ in *Paths to the Infinite Forest* that best articulates the experience of annihilation, when the three prophets resurrect E1, E2, and K after they drown in a river.¹¹⁸ This gives E1, E2, and K the ability to witness the endless self-disclosure of God in the image of an infinite forest. Annihilation gives the traveller endless opportunities to experience the divine. This is the reason why every death in *The Sacred Triangle of Silence* and *Paths to the Infinite Forest* is followed by the revelation of new landscapes, the manifest images of the Absolute.

The ascent to each of these landscapes causes the revelation of the Names within the seeker who is ‘coloured’ with each realm’s specific attributes. This first occurs in the scene titled ‘Clay Desert,’ where E2 presses his body against the ground causing it

gradually to turn red.¹¹⁹ It occurs a second time at the end of the play when E1, E2, and K follow the growing seed capsules deep into the forest, causing them gradually to take on the soil's red colour. The further E1, E2, and K journey the more they embody the divine attributes revealed in the different realms, which eventually leads them to the realization that the self-disclosure of God has no end.¹²⁰

The Secret of Predestination

In my plays, E2 is obsessed with the seed-capsules because he wants to embody the Divine Names hidden within them. E2 is the character most willing to engage with experiences of annihilation because it is the method through which the divine attributes are revealed. In *The Sacred Triangle of Silence*, E2 wants to return to the desert with K where he refers to death as a 'ritual,' which he considers a necessary sacrifice to make manifest God's words.¹²¹ In *Paths to the Infinite Forest*, he is the first to enter the river in which E1, E2, and K drown.¹²² And when he is with E1 and K in the desert, E2 suggests they 'surrender themselves' to the sun, which represents the experience of 'dying' in God.¹²³

E2 'inherits' spiritual knowledge from Ezra, who, in accordance with Ibn 'Arabī's description of the prophet in *The Bezels of Wisdom*, is the character who embodies *dhawq* (taste, direct experience of the divine).¹²⁴ According to Ibn 'Arabī, Ezra wished to know the secret of predestination (*qadar*), which is governed by the divine decree (*qadā'*), so God made him die for a hundred years then resurrected him. This is because knowledge of predestination can only be acquired through 'taste' (direct experience). In the same

chapter, Ibn ‘Arabī cites a Qur’ānic verse that states ‘how will God revive this (town) after its destruction?’¹²⁵ Ronald Nettler asserts that there is nothing in the Qur’ān that indicates who asked this question. However, Ibn ‘Arabī interprets it as a reference to the Prophet Ezra.¹²⁶

Ezra’s status as a prophet meant that his request for this kind of knowledge was inappropriate. This is because the nature of the knowledge revealed to a prophet is determined by the needs of her/his community. This is the reason God threatened to remove Ezra’s name from the register of the prophets.¹²⁷ If Ezra was to continue inquiring about predestination, he would cease to be a prophet but remain a saint, because sainthood is ‘all encompassing’ in the sense that it can reveal every possible form of knowledge.¹²⁸ According to Abū ‘Alā’ al-‘Afīfī, Ezra did not ask the question on resurrection because he doubted God’s ability to revive the dead, but because he wished to know how God brings created entities into existence, and this is the secret of predestination, which Ezra wished to know through direct experience.¹²⁹

In my plays, the relationship of spiritual inheritance between Ezra and E2 is exemplified in E2’s obsession with making the seed-capsules manifest. The growth of the seed-capsules represents the determination of the divine decree within the space of the body. E2 is the character most concerned with these experiences of God’s immanence, which reveal His similarity to the cosmos. When E2 makes statements such as ‘I would become sun,’ he is referring to his desire to embody the divine attributes.¹³⁰ However, E2’s limitation is that he struggles to comprehend the Real’s transcendence, as is illustrated in

the dialogue between E2 and E1 in the scene titled ‘The Return’ in *The Sacred Triangle of Silence*, where E1 stresses the impossibility of reaching God.¹³¹ As explained in previous chapters, awareness of this transcendent dimension of the Real is fundamental to Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology and Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya adepts who embody the divine attributes without asserting that they are identical to the Absolute.

Journeying towards the Infinite

In *The Bezels of Wisdom*, Ibn ‘Arabī explains the metaphysical significance of the story of Moses who was saved by his mother when she put him into a casket and cast him into the river. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, the casket in this narrative is a symbol of the human body that was cast into a ‘sea’ of knowledge.¹³² Water in this chapter, whether in the form of a river, sea, or rain, represents the esoteric reality (*bāṭin*) that governs the manifest image witnessed through its revelation in a human form.¹³³ Thus, the body is the vessel for the reception of existence, the spirit, and knowledge, all of which are represented by the image of water.

The Sacred Triangle of Silence and *Paths to the Infinite Forest* draw on Ibn ‘Arabī’s interpretation of the symbolic meanings of water to explore the relationship between God and the human subject. The characters in my plays encounter various bodies of water including the ocean, the sea, the river, and rain. However, it is perhaps scene sixteen of *The Sacred Triangle of Silence*, titled ‘Water,’ that most clearly articulates the human beings’ relationship to the Real.¹³⁴ This scene explores one of the most significant concepts in Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology – namely, the tension between God’s immanence and

transcendence.¹³⁵ Here, the three prophets describe the journey of a seeker who wishes to witness the ocean, which, in this context, represents the Real. The traveller is unable to find the ocean because it transcends that which can be known by the human subject. Even though the ocean as a totality cannot be known, the forms that emanate from this ocean (the sea, the river, rain, a drop of water) can be experienced because they are the limited manifest images of God.

However, before E1, E2, and K can witness God in the form of seas, rivers, streams, or rain, they must first realize that the Sufi journey begins in the body. In the previously cited scene from *The Sacred Triangle of Silence*, the three prophets explain how ‘water,’ here a metaphor for God, is already hidden within the human subject, represented in the scene by the drop of water that appears in the seeker’s palm. However, the traveller is only able to perceive the divine presence after journeying to the top of a great mountain because it is the means through which the innermost depths of the self are realized.

The metaphor of water is also used to reinforce the notion that the human subject is the microcosm of the cosmos. The ‘drop of water’ the traveller discovers in his palm at the end of this scene represents the esoteric image of the landscapes that are made manifest in the cosmos. This idea appears a second time, at the end of *Paths to the Infinite Forest* in the scene titled ‘The Sacred Mountain III,’ where E1, E2, and K witness God ‘in the horizons,’ the different landscapes that represent the revealed images of the Real.¹³⁶ The importance of finding a balance between transcendence and immanence is one of the most fundamental aspects of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology. In *The Bezels of Wisdom*, Ibn ‘Arabī

associates the prophet Elijah with the attribute of transcendence because he once witnessed the splitting of a mountain from which emerged a horse made of fire. When Elijah rode this horse he lost all desire and became ‘an intellect without passion.’¹³⁷ Ibn ‘Arabī describes the consequences of this incident as follows:

In him [Elijah] the Real was transcendent, and hence he knew half the knowledge of God, for when the intellect learns the sciences governed only by speculation, it knows God only as transcendent, not as immanent.¹³⁸

Ibn ‘Arabī then explains that the most important faculty that the human being possesses is the imagination because it is the *barzakh* that allows the human subject to comprehend both the transcendent and immanent attributes of the Real.¹³⁹ The problem of having only ‘intellect without passion’ is that it prevents the seeker from witnessing God in created forms, including the human body.¹⁴⁰

In my plays, E1 inherits spiritual knowledge from the prophet Elijah who guides him through his ascent. Elijah and E1 are the characters who remind E2 and K of the impossibility of reaching God no matter how far the seeker journeys, as noted in *Paths to the Infinite Forest* where Elijah describes the ascent as ‘a proximity that cannot overcome distance.’¹⁴¹ The appearance of the saint’s tomb in various landscapes in *Paths to the Infinite Forest* both perplexes and disturbs E1, whose sainthood emphasizes the transcendent attributes of the Real. He therefore struggles to comprehend God’s presence in the created world.

E1 and E2 embody these two contradictory approaches (transcendence and immanence) towards knowing God. E2 is certain that the Real will appear to him in the form of a tree. In contrast, E1 insists on the impossibility of witnessing the Absolute. This is the reason E1 constantly makes statements such as ‘you will not find it’ or ‘it is not as you imagine it’ in reference to the divine essence.¹⁴² The last phrase in particular invokes a well-known saying within the Shādhiliya community that states ‘however you imagine God, He does not resemble it.’ The significance of the notion of transcendence in performances of *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals is discussed in detail in Chapter Three, but it is important to refer to it here to show how my plays derive this understanding of the concept from both Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology and the rituals of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya communities. The importance of the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* to my plays is that they embody this tension between immanence and transcendence, which guides adepts to endless encounters with God.

Several scenes in *Paths to the Infinite Forest* explore the idea that the One God is revealed in the form of the many, which is fundamental to both Ibn ‘Arabī and Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya rituals. This includes the scene titled ‘Clay Desert,’ where E1 and E2 fight for a single seed-capsule (the One God who encompasses everything in existence) from which three thousand seed-capsules emerge, creating mountain-like structures made of seed-capsules that eventually dissolve into the desert soil.¹⁴³ The dissolved seed-capsules are then transformed into the seeds from which the valley grows. This is because the annihilation of an image of God is always followed by the revelation of the Real in a new form without end. The notion that there is no end to the Sufi journey is central to both Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings on the ascent and the ritual practices of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya.¹⁴⁴

This allows the seeker to experience God in the revealed forms of the cosmos without limiting Him to a particular image. This idea has significantly influenced how my three plays depict the ascent experience, for there is no end to the growth of the seed-capsules, no end to the infinite forest, and no end to the revelation of the Real within the microcosm of the body.

As noted earlier, E1, E2, and K represent the attributes of the perfect human that lead the traveller to endless knowledge. As they journey through the different landscapes, E1, E2, and K come to accept the revelation of the Real in every form. Yet the further the three travellers venture into the forest, the more they realize the impossibility of reaching God. Every time an image of the Real appears to them, it is annihilated in the river, revealing yet another form. It is only upon reaching the infinite forest where the seed-capsules continue to grow that E1, E2, and K realize that there is no end to the self-disclosure of God. Even when God appears to E1, E2, and K at the end of *Paths to the Infinite Forest* in the form of a tree, which, as explained in Chapter Four, is a frequently recurring image in Sufi ascent narratives, it quickly disappears into the mountain. Thus, my plays embody the idea that the revealed images of the Real are ephemeral, for as soon as a particular form is brought into existence, it is annihilated, revealing yet another image of the Real ad infinitum.

Paths to the Infinite Forest embodies the constant transformation of the cosmos through an increase in the pace of the growth of the seed-capsules. The further E1, E2, and K travel up the mountain the faster the seed-capsules grow, symbolizing the constant

transmutation of the heart of the perfect human, who is capable of accepting God in every form. This idea is derived from the ritual practices of the ‘Īssāwiya and Shādhiliya communities in which members of the order gradually accelerate the rhythm of the recitations and music as the traveller ascends, which is fundamental to inducing states of intoxication. As explained in greater detail in the preface to my plays, my trilogy incorporates the use of rhythmic repetitive language and changes in rhythm (pace of the growth of the seed-capsules) to depict the ascent experience. Both techniques are derived from Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya rituals and represent the same metaphysical processes explored in the *dhikr* and *ḥadra*.

My plays also include several landscapes that appear in Tunisian myths to describe similar spiritual experiences. For example, the notion that the Sufi journey resembles an ascent up a mountain that gives the traveller the ability to see God is derived from a myth about Sīdī ‘Ali-Ḥattab, discussed in detail in the previous chapter. Much like Ibn ‘Arabī’s description of the perfect human, the mountain shares the attribute of being an elevated space that joins the heavens and the earth (*barzakh*), endowing those who inhabit it with broader vision.¹⁴⁵ When E1, E2, and K reach a mountain at the end of *Paths to the Infinite Forest*, they encounter the infinite ‘in the horizon,’ in the different landscapes that have appeared to them throughout the journey. This includes a desert that emerges from a sea, a valley that grows from seed-capsules, a river that constantly annihilates and resurrects a forest, and the tomb of the saint who is the esoteric form of all of these landscapes.

It is only upon reaching the mountain that E1, E2, and K realize that what they witness in the manifest forms of the cosmos in the ‘horizons’ is the revealed image of the esoteric realities hidden in the body. It is also here that God reveals a poem to E1, E2, and K who inscribe it in a capsule that they plant in the mountain. This act of divinely inspired writing not only relates to the ritual practices of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya, which include pomes composed in states of intoxication, but also to the ontological meanings Ibn ‘Arabī ascribes to writing, explained in detail in Chapter Four. Writing allows E1, E2, and K to embody the metaphysical process believed to bring the cosmos into existence through the dialectic of speech (divinely inspired utterances) and silence (listening) that make manifest God’s words.

The Eternal Seed

The Eternal Seed, the last play in the trilogy, ends with the descent of E1, E2, and K into a cave that represents the return to the esoteric dimensions of the body, which contains the ‘eternal seed,’ the Divine Names hidden in the traveller’s chest. I derived the notion that the divine attributes are hidden in the heart from Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings and Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya adepts, who consider the heart the spiritual organ through which one acquires knowledge of God, as already noted in Chapter Three.¹⁴⁶ This idea is directly referenced in *Paths to the Infinite Forest*, in the scene titled ‘The Resurrection,’ where E2 and K read a seed-capsules that states that the earth’s words (Divine Names) were hidden in the prophet’s chest, who sacrificed himself so that others may witness ‘the resurrection of flesh and bone.’¹⁴⁷

The purpose of these endless cycles of annihilation and subsistence that recur in my plays

is to reveal that which already exists within the body – the microcosm that contains all of the created world’s attributes. These attributes are revealed through *dhawq*, a direct experience of the divine, alluded to in the aforementioned scene with the verse that states that the prophet ‘tasted’ the earth’s soil. Silence is one such form of *dhawq* that makes manifest these hidden attributes through listening to divine speech, described in the same scene with the verse that states that the prophet ‘listened’ to earth’s words.

In *The Meccan Revelations*, Ibn ‘Arabī asserts that the divine attributes are revealed through audition (*samā’*), the manifest form of the Divine Name the all-Hearing (*al-Samī’*). Audition implies that the person or entity listening is silent. Such was the state of the cosmos prior to its coming into existence through listening to the divine command.¹⁴⁸ As explained in Chapter Four, silence corresponds to non-existence or the annihilation of a manifest image of God, which is followed by utterances of divine speech that bring new forms into existence.¹⁴⁹ When the seeker embodies the state of annihilation/silence, God speaks with the tongue of the Sufi who reveals divinely inspired words.¹⁵⁰ Thus, silence represents one of the greatest degrees of proximity to the Real, in the sense that it is the state that precedes the revelation of the divine attributes. Although creating distinctions between existence and non-existence is illusory in the sense that God encompasses both states, annihilation does represent a greater degree of proximity, in the sense that it is an ascent towards the more subtle forms of the Real. In higher spiritual stations the only faculty the traveller retains is hearing, which allows her/him to accept the images of the Real revealed in utterances of the divine command.¹⁵¹

Thus, the encounter with the Beloved occurs in silence, which reveals God's words in divine utterances, embodied states, music, or poetry. As explained in the preceding chapter, Sufi poetry is a form of 'writing silence,' because it is a performance of the loss of self in which the writer composes poetry through listening to the divine, who speaks through her/him.¹⁵² It is also important to note that silence is performed in the *ḥaḍra* ritual when the adept loses the ability to speak during states of deep listening, otherwise known as intoxication. The notion that the human-divine encounter occurs in silence had a profound influence on my playwriting process, through which I was able to experiment with Sufi modes of writing derived from Shādhiliya and 'Īssāwiya rituals, which rely on the performance of various meditative practices that make it possible to achieve an inner silence that reveals the innermost depths of the self, as explained in my trilogy's preface.

The Eternal Seed, the last play in the trilogy, depicts these final stages of the ascent, the greatest possible degrees of proximity that can be attained within the limited form of the body (the finite earth). This is the reason why the play is composed only of stage directions that describe a moment of silence. The ascent narrative ends with E1, E2, and K's descent into a cave where they encounter the 'eternal seed,' the spiritual essence of the body that represents the infinite human potential for the acquisition of knowledge. In contrast, *The Sacred Triangle of Silence* and *Paths to the Infinite Forest* depict the ontological processes that make this knowledge manifest. This includes annihilation and subsistence, silence and sound, transcendence and immanence, which reveal the God hidden in the Sufi subject, the mirror image of the Absolute.

Time and Space

Although Ibn ‘Arabī’s understanding of time is not always directly discussed in the dialogue between the characters, it is extremely significant for the structure of my plays because it provides a framework for thinking about space that can account for the existence of a particular entity in more than one place at the same time, which is fundamental for understanding the connection between my plays. This is because each of my plays represents one of the twenty-eight realms of the cosmos, *The Sacred Triangle* the corporeal world, *Paths to the Infinite Forest* the higher spheres, and *The Eternal Seed* the esoteric dimensions of the body that joins all of these different dimensions of time and space. To explain how my plays have integrated these ideas from Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology his writings on time and space must first be introduced.

Time in Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology, like every other created entity, has no existence in itself. It is an imagined attribute of the Real that makes it possible for the human subject to witness the self-disclosure of God.¹⁵³ Time is circular, composed of the images of God as the infinite without beginning (*azal*) and the infinite without end (*abad*). The time experienced in the cosmos is the *barzakh* between the infinite past and the infinite future, otherwise known as *ḥāl* (the state), a particular instance of God’s self-disclosure in the infinite circle that is known as ‘age’ (*al-dahr*).¹⁵⁴ The *barzakh* of the ‘age’ joining these two absolutes (infinite past, infinite future) makes possible partial time, revealed in the form of the ‘day.’¹⁵⁵

The day is the smallest possible unit of time composed of both daytime and night corresponding to the states of subsistence and annihilation, respectively. The light of the daytime represents God's bringing the possibilities into existence from the darkness of non-being. The day is constantly recreated through the endless revelation and annihilation of images of the Divine Names, the sum of which form the eternal day.¹⁵⁶ The motion of each realm determines the length of the 'day' that is different in each sphere of the cosmos. For example, one day in the first sphere (*falak awal*) corresponds to fifty-four thousand earthly years.¹⁵⁷ Furthermore, each day of the week is associated with a certain Divine Name; all of these days are revealed in the 'eternal day,' which is Saturday. For example, Sunday, which is considered the first day of the week, corresponds to the Divine Name the all-Hearing, because, as noted earlier, the cosmos is brought into existence through listening to the divine command.¹⁵⁸

Each day of the week is also connected to a particular planet and prophet, who represent the manifest images of the Divine Names that govern each realm.¹⁵⁹ All of the realms were joined on Friday, and made manifest on Saturday the 'eternal day' in which the forms of the cosmos experience constant transformation through God's endless self-disclosure in time, never in the same form twice.¹⁶⁰ Therefore, Saturday joins multiple dimensions of space in the sense that it encompasses all of the manifest forms of the Real in the realms that precede it. One should not think of this process as occurring in time. Rather, the totality of the images of the Real made manifest in each realm represent a multiplicity of space that is joined by a single instance of time – the *barzakh* that makes possible the revelation of the infinite in limited forms.¹⁶¹

‘The time of a thing is its presence,’ or, in other words, time is the ‘state’ of each created entity.¹⁶² Time (*waqt*), in the corporeal realm and its microcosm (the human subject), encompasses all of the images of the Divine Names in the realms that precede it, which represent the manifestation of the One God within the multiplicity of time and space.¹⁶³ Time corresponds to the experience of *dhawq* in as much as it is the partial realization of the Absolute. According to Muḥammad Yūnis Masrūḥīn, the Sufī ascent is an attempt at moving from corporeal/material time to eternal all-encompassing time, which is impossible, except as it pertains to each individual’s particular time.¹⁶⁴ In other words, even though the traveller cannot experience the Absolute, s/he may witness the images of the Real made manifest within her/himself in particular instances of the all-encompassing time. It is precisely through this movement towards Absolute time that the meanings of the Divine Names are realized in partial time.¹⁶⁵

In the ascent, particular instances of time/created forms are annihilated in all-encompassing time.¹⁶⁶ This causes the traveller to feel that time has stopped because her/his awareness is centred on witnessing God in higher realms in which the ‘day’ is experienced as a longer moment in relation to our shorter earthly days because of the difference in the motion of the spheres. The further one ascends, the slower time becomes as the images of God are annihilated from the seeker and the more one descends, the faster time is experienced as the Real is revealed in a multiplicity of forms.¹⁶⁷ Paradoxically, the only way the Sufī can experience eternal time is by becoming capable of partial time, which is a manifestation of all-encompassing time. Ibn ‘Arabī refers to the

perfect human as the ‘master of time’ (*ṣāhib al-waqt*)’ because every moment of this individual’s existence reflects the revelation of the divine attributes in partial time.¹⁶⁸

The Sacred Triangle of Silence explores this understanding of time in a scene titled ‘The Cave’:

E1. all memories fade
E2. unless you resurrect them
E1. they are burned away by the sun
E2. we live in a cave
E1. enough of this nonsense
E2. it is the days that are burned away
E1. not the sun
E2. precisely
E1. we disagree¹⁶⁹

The ‘days that are burned away’ are the manifest images of God that are annihilated in the Real (the sun). The ascent is an act of remembrance in the sense that the present moment, within the corporeal realm, is the sum of all of the images the traveller encounters throughout the journey. E2 reminds E1 that they live in a ‘cave,’ the microcosm that encompasses all of the Divine Names. However, E1 is unable to accept this because his sainthood emphasizes God’s transcendent attributes.

Both characters agree that the encounter with God leads to annihilation. But their understanding of the experience of annihilation is completely different. For E2, annihilation in the sun represents proximity to the Beloved. Thus, he interprets it as *dhawq* (taste), an opportunity to realize God within the body. In contrast, annihilation for E1 represents the impossibility of knowing the infinite. No form in the cosmos can

encompass the Absolute within a single instance of time/manifestation, and any attempt at having such an encounter would necessarily result in the annihilation of that form.

More significant than the discussions about time in the dialogue is the influence of Ibn ‘Arabī’s writing on time/space on the structure of my plays. As noted earlier, the ‘eternal day’ experienced on earth is the sum of the days of the week that represent the different dimensions of space that exist within a single instance of time. Even though the traveller can never transcend the limitations imposed by time, s/he can experience a different form of temporal existence through the ascent. The further the traveller journeys, the more her/his body is opened up to the multiple dimensions of space joined by a particular instance of God’s self-disclosure. *The Sacred Triangle of Silence* begins in the corporeal realm that contains the sum of the landscapes, the images of the Real, which appear in *Paths to the Infinite Forest* and *The Eternal Seed*.

The scenes that include the prophets Elijah, Ezra, and Khālid in *The Sacred Triangle of Silence* represent the subtle images of the manifest corporeal forms in the higher realms that are revealed to the three travellers through the ascent. This includes the landscapes of the desert, the forest, the river, the sea, the cave, the valley, and the mountain. I also tried to allude, in *Paths to the Infinite Forest*, to the idea that different dimensions of space can exist within a single moment of time through the image of the mountain that appears in multiple realms in different forms. This includes the salt-mountains, the mountains made of seed-capsules, and the mountain E1, E2, and K reach at the end of the journey.¹⁷⁰ These different dimensions of space, hidden in the ‘eternal seed,’ are made manifest

through the recitation of sacred words that reveal the meanings of the Divine Names hidden in the body.

As explained earlier in this chapter, *Paths to the Infinite Forest* and *The Sacred Triangle of Silence* examine how sacred language can make manifest the divine attributes that are hidden in the seeker's heart, which also represent multiple dimensions of time/space. This includes the recitation of sacred words, as is illustrated in the following passage from *Paths to the Infinite Forest*:

K. there [the saint's tomb] they would gather
E2. and recite
K. and recite
E1. and recite
E2. until it appeared in their palms
K. as salt and water
E2. it was then that they realized
K. that what they encountered
E2. was not a river
K. but a vast ocean
E1. that cannot be known
E2. except by those
K. who drown into eternity¹⁷¹

The saint's tomb contains the body of the deceased saint, who is the *barzakh* between the dense corporeal forms and the subtle spiritual realities that appear through the recitation. The esoteric dimensions of space are revealed through the experience of annihilation, described in this scene as 'drowning into eternity.' It is followed by the subsistence of the Real which reveals yet another dimension of time-space (salt and water) in the body. Thus, the further one 'drowns into eternity,' the more capable s/he becomes of realizing God, including the ability to witness Him within the multiplicity of time-space.

Perhaps it is best to end here by quoting a dialogue between E2 and K from *Paths to the Infinite Forest*, which summarizes the ascent experience as it pertains to time:

E2. time passes
K. leaving us in an everlasting journey
E2. we were told
K. there is no return
E2. but we persist
K. in our endless search
E2. for fertile earth¹⁷²

And persist, the three travellers did, until they reached an endless forest, ‘the fertile earth’ that makes possible the revelation of the infinite.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have examined the rituals of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya communities of Tunis through the framework of Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology in an attempt to understand what constitutes performance from a Sufi Islamic perspective. In both Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology and Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya rituals, embodiment represents a human-divine encounter that is mediated by language, the *barzakh* through which adepts ascend towards the divine. Embodiment also has epistemological significance because embodying and performing the divine attributes are the means through which adepts come to know God.¹ Performance, then, is experience and knowledge of the divine.

My experimentation with the performance principles and techniques used in the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* and exploration of their relation to Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics provide an example of how this culturally specific understanding of performance can be integrated into theatrical practice, namely, playwriting. The idea that writing constitutes a performance event, which I derived from Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya rituals and the works of Ibn ‘Arabī, had a profound influence on my writing process, which also incorporated embodied practice (participating in the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra*), as detailed in the preface to my three plays.

In both Ibn ‘Arabī’s ontology and *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals, such performances of divinely inspired writing is contingent upon maintaining a delicate balance between the transcendent and immanent attributes of the Real, a balance that makes it possible for the adept to embody the divine attributes without limiting God to a particular image.² Beyond

its influence on my writing process, this paradox of the God who is both within and beyond (immanent and transcendent) is one of the main themes explored in my three plays.

Examining the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* through the lens of Ibn ‘Arabī’s metaphysics creates new opportunities for theatrical experimentation, without reducing cultural exchange to the appropriation of content or the mimicking of gestures. Performing the poems and music that have emerged out of these traditions in a decontextualized manner neglects the true value of the *ḥaḍra* and *dhikr*, which have so much to offer to those interested in experimenting with new theatrical methods and forms. The staging of Sufi music in non-ritual contexts is not a new phenomenon, nor is it specific to Tunisia.³ Such performances have existed since the 1960s, and have been driven by various political and cultural agendas.⁴ My thesis provides an alternative to these staged *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* performances that takes into account their culturally specific meanings. The aim of writing my three plays was to provide an example of how one can learn from and engage with these indigenous traditions within a framework that adheres to their cultural logic, revealing their value as a performance practice.

The *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals discussed in this thesis are limited to the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya communities of Tunis. The question of whether such an approach is relevant to the religious practices of other Sufi orders within and outside of Tunisia is beyond the scope of this study. However, the fact that there are branches of the Shādhiliya and

‘Īssāwiya orders in Algeria, Morocco, Libya, Palestine, and Syria suggests this might be a possibility.⁵ This can only be determined by future research.

This thesis also raises the question of whether there are other Islamic philosophical-theological writings that can be helpful for exploring how metaphysics is embodied in Sufi ritual performances. Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings were of particular relevance for this study because of the Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya’s connection to al-Shushtarī, who made Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas much more accessible to the public. Are there other such figures in the Islamic world who have incorporated Islamic metaphysics into the poems performed in Sufi rituals? Are there other ways in which these ideas have been integrated into the practices of other Sufi orders? These are questions that are certainly worth exploring for those interested in examining the metaphysical, philosophical, and theological origins of these traditions.

My thesis has also emphasized the importance of the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* as indigenous North African performance practices, confirming and, as well, adding to the claims of theatre scholars who stress that theatrical forms existed in the Arab world prior to the introduction of European-style theatre. Marvin Carlson and Khalid Amine have given a concise outline of these different practices.⁶ However, many of these theatrical forms have not yet been explored in detail. It is my hope that this thesis will encourage both scholars and theatre practitioners to give attention to these indigenous performance traditions, which are certainly of value to the theatre and deserve to be studied. This not only includes religious performances like the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra*, but also other forms such

as shadow theatre and *fantasia* (horse racing accompanied by musical performances). The three years I lived in Tunisia have given me the opportunity to become familiar with many of these performance practices which I hope that I and other scholars will continue to research.

Finally, the focus of my thesis is on playwriting. Thus, I have not detailed how actors or directors should engage with my plays, beyond indicating how they might take into account the metaphysical ideas and performance practices from which these plays have emerged. Exploring these Sufi modes of performance need not be limited to my three plays. My intention was also to encourage actors, directors, and other playwrights to experiment in their own way with the culturally specific understanding of performance explored in the theoretical part of this thesis.

I would like to end with an ‘Īssāwiya poem that describes one of the most significant metaphysical concepts discussed in the thesis concerning the tension between the transcendent and immanent attributes of God:

time is a sea of wonders
it is the dialogue [with God]
through which we come to exist
leave your maladies behind
oh you who thought
you could strike it [God’s essence] with an arrow
it cannot be reached⁷

The poem also alludes to the idea that Sufi rituals are spaces of healing. Shādhiliya and ‘Īssāwiya shrines are where Tunisians from all walks of life congregate to request the

help of the saints to alleviate their worldly and spiritual afflictions. Ultimately, what the spiritual traveller learns from the *dhikr* and *ḥaḍra* rituals, the journey of ascent, and Ibn ‘Arabī’s writings is what it truly means to be human, for only the most spiritually elevated of the saints return to guide others to God.

Notes

Introduction

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⁴ Maḥmūd Idrīsī. *Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī wa Falsafatuhu al-Ṣūfiyya (Abū Ḥasan al-Shushtarī and His Sufi Philosophy)*. Casablanca: Dār al-Thaqāfa, 2005; Lourdes Maria Alvarez. *Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī: Songs of Love and Devotion*. New York: Paulist Press, 2009.

⁵ Muḥyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī. *Al-'Isrā' ila Maqām al-'Asra (Ascent to the Station of the Night Travellers)*. Beirut: Dandara, 1988.

⁶ Ibid.

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⁸ In James Clifford and George Marcus (eds). *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986, p.141-165.

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¹⁰ Richard Jankowsky. 'Absence and 'Presence': El-Hadhra and the Cultural Politics of Staging Sufi Music in Tunisia,' *Journal of North African Studies*, 22, no.5 (2017), p.869.

Chapter One

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² Ibid. Estelle Barrett (ed). *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Inquiry*. London: I.B Taurus, 2007; John Freeman, Melissa Tremmingham, and Baz Kershaw. 'Practice as Research,' *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 22, no.3 (2003), p.159-180.

³ Ibid.; *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, p.225.

⁴ Hazel Smith and Roger Dean (eds). *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University press, 2009, p.104-124.

⁵ *Practice as Research*, p.48-62.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, p.63-65.

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⁹ With the exception of a few studies from South Africa, the majority of contributions are from Europe, Australia, and North America. Robin Nelson (ed). *Practice as Research*, p.38-39.

¹⁰ Peter Chelkowski. 'Islam in Modern Drama and Theatre,' *Die Welt des Islams*, 23 (1984), p.45-69. Khalid Amine and Marvin Carlson. *Theatres of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p.1-16. Also see Don Rubin (ed). *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre*, Vol.4, London: Routledge, 1999, p.11-12; Khalid Amine. 'Theatre in the Arab World: A Difficult Birth,' 31, no.2 (2006). *Theatre Research International*, p.145-163.

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- ¹⁵ *Theatres of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia*.
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- ³² Ibid., p.20-27.
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- ⁴⁹ For example see Richard Jankowsky. *Stambeli*.
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- ⁶³ Ibid.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid.
- ⁶⁵ McGregor briefly mentions that advanced adepts may read the work of Ibn ‘Arabī, but does not give a detailed explanation of the relation between metaphysics and ritual practice. Ibid.,p.261-262.
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Chapter Two

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- ¹⁴¹ *The Qur’ān* (21:85), (38:48).
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- ¹⁸⁰ Ibid.
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Chapter Three

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- ⁶¹ Direct communication with a Shādhiliya follower, 2 August 2017.
- ⁶² Ibid., 23 August 2017.
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- ⁶⁸ *The Qur'ān* (112:1-4).
- ⁶⁹ *The Qur'ān* (114:1-6).
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- ¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.31-36.
- ¹¹⁰ ‘The Figure and the Truth of Abraham in Ibn ‘Arabī’s Fusus al-Hikam: A Scriptural Story Told in Metaphysical Form,’ *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi society*, 24 (1998), p.50.
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- ¹¹³ There is a weekly ‘Īssāwiya dhikr at Sīdī al-Ḥārī. However, members of the ‘Īssāwiya of Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd do not attend this ritual.
- ¹¹⁴ *The Qur’an* (1:1-7).
- ¹¹⁵ *The Qur’an* (2:285-6).
- ¹¹⁶ *The Qur’an* (37:180).
- ¹¹⁷ *Safīna*, p.44.
- ¹¹⁸ The Master (God).
- ¹¹⁹ One of the Divine Names.
- ¹²⁰ *Safīna*, p.46.
- ¹²¹ Trans. Juan Eduardo Campo. *Encyclopedia Of Islam*, p.173.
- ¹²² Muhyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī. *The Bezels*, p.128
- ¹²³ *Safīna*, p.46.
- ¹²⁴ Muhyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī. *The Meccan Revelations*, Vol.1, p.84-85.
- ¹²⁵ *Safīna*, p.49.
- ¹²⁶ Attributed to al-Shādhilī. *The Lamp of Protection*, p.64.
- ¹²⁷ Adam (2:30), Noah (25:37), Abraham (4:125), Moses (20:10-13), Jesus (66:12). Muhammad is not directly referred to as the ‘beloved,’ but the Qur’an describes his proximity to God (53:13-18).
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- ¹³² *Safīna*, p.46-48.
- ¹³³ Direct communication with an ‘Īssāwiya shaykh, 5 September 2017.
- ¹³⁴ For example in the Bayyuumiyya order in Egypt. Kamal Salhi (ed). *Music, Culture, and Identity in the Muslim World: Performance, Politics and Piety*. New York: Routledge, 2014, p.44. Also see Michael Sells. *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur’an, Mi’raj, Poetic and Theological Writings*. New York: Paulist Press, 1996, p.69.
- ¹³⁵ Goffredo Plastino. *Mediterranean Mosaic*, p.126.
- ¹³⁶ ‘Arab-Andalusian Music in Tunisia,’ *Early Music*, 24, no.3 (1996), p.423.
- ¹³⁷ Direct communication, 5 September 2017.
- ¹³⁸ Ruth Davis. ‘Arab-Andalusian Music in Tunisia,’ p.425.
- ¹³⁹ Direct communication, 23 August 2017.
- ¹⁴⁰ Direct communication with an ‘Īssāwiya singer, 5 September 2017.
- ¹⁴¹ Ibid., 21 August, 2017.
- ¹⁴² Ibid. Also see Ruth Davis. *Mā’lūf: Reflections on the Arab Andalusian Music of Tunisia*. Lanham, Maryland: The Sacrecrow Press, 2004, p.2-10.
- ¹⁴³ Direct communication with an ‘Īssāwiya shaykh and *munshid*, 5 September 2017.
- ¹⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁴⁵ This includes the ‘Īssāwiya of Ariyāna, La Marsa, and Rawād.
- ¹⁴⁶ *The Qur’an* (1:7).
- ¹⁴⁷ *Mjarriid* means devoid.
- ¹⁴⁸ *The Qur’an* (2:255).
- ¹⁴⁹ Direct communication with an ‘Īssāwiya adept, 6 August 2017.

- ¹⁵⁰ The modes of dance are composed of three beats (*maqām muthalath*), four beats (*maqām muraba*'), five beats (*maqām mukhamas*), and six beats (*maqām musadas*).
- ¹⁵¹ *Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004, p.69-85. Also see Pierre Bourdieu, trans. Richard Nice. *The Logic of Practice*. Oxford: Polity Press, 1990, p.55-66.
- ¹⁵² Ibid.
- ¹⁵³ Ibid.
- ¹⁵⁴ Direct communication with a Shādhiliya follower, 7 August 2017.
- ¹⁵⁵ John Bowen. 'Salat in Indonesia: The Social Meanings of an Islamic Ritual,' *The Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute*, 24, no.4 (1989), p.601.
- ¹⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁵⁷ Heiko Henkel. 'Between Belief and Unbelief Lies the Performance of Salāt,' *The Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute*, 11, no.3 (2005), p.487-507.
- ¹⁵⁸ Direct communication, 5 September 2017.
- ¹⁵⁹ Direct communication with 'Īssāwiya adepts, 27 August 2017.
- ¹⁶⁰ The tribe Muhammad was born into.
- ¹⁶¹ *Safīna*, p.174.
- ¹⁶² *The Qur'ān* (24:35)
- ¹⁶³ Muḥyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī. *The Meccan Revelations*, Vol.1, p.19.
- ¹⁶⁴ Direct communication, 18 August 2017.
- ¹⁶⁵ Traditions derived from the Qur'ān and actions and sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad.
- ¹⁶⁶ Direct communication, 23 August 2017.
- ¹⁶⁷ Direct communication, 2 September 2017.
- ¹⁶⁸ *Safīna*, p.17-19. Also see 'Abd al-Raḥmān Malḥūnī. *Al Hikāya al-Sha'biya al-Ṣūfiya (Popular Sufi Stories)*. Rabat: Bābil, 1997, p.18-25.
- ¹⁶⁹ 'Myth and Metaphysics,' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 48, no.2 (2000), p.65-80.
- ¹⁷⁰ Ibid.
- ¹⁷¹ *The Qur'ān* (21:69), trans. M.A.S Abdel Haleem. *The Qur'an*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, p.206.
- ¹⁷² Direct communication, 13 August 2017.
- ¹⁷³ *Safīna*, p.22-23.
- ¹⁷⁴ Direct communication with an 'Īssāwiya adept, 8 August 2017.
- ¹⁷⁵ Direct communication, 23 August 2017.
- ¹⁷⁶ Muḥyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī. *The Meccan Revelations*, Vol.5, p.276-285.
- ¹⁷⁷ Direct communication, 18 August 2017.
- ¹⁷⁸ *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam (The Bezels of Wisdom)*. Beirut: Dar al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1946, p.57-203.
- ¹⁷⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁸⁰ *Safīna*, p.114.
- ¹⁸¹ William Chittick. *The Self-Disclosure of God*, p.164-290.
- ¹⁸² *The Bezels*, p.21.

Chapter Four

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- ² Muḥyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī. *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya (The Meccan Revelations)*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiya, 1999, Vol. 5, p.89-90.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Some communities believe the term 'Sufī' comes from the word 'ṣūf (wool).' Juan Eduardo Campo. *Encyclopedia of Islam*. New York: Facts On File, 2009, p.66.
- ⁵ Lourdes Maria Alvarez. *Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī: Songs of Love and Devotion*. New York: Paulist Press, 2009, p.35-41.
- ⁶ Abū Ḥasan al-Shushtarī, Muhammad al-'Adlūnī, and Sa'īd Abū Fayūḍ. *Dīwān Abū Ḥasan al-Shushtarī: Amīr al-Shu'arā' fī al-Maghreb wa al-Andalus (The Poetic Works of Abū Ḥasan al-Shushtarī: The Prince of Poets in the Maghreb and Andalusia)*. Casablanca: Dār al-Thaqāfa, 2008, p.11-23.
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- ⁸ *The Poetic Works of Abū Ḥasan al-Shushtarī*, p.23.

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- ²⁴ *Abū Ḥasan al-Shushtarī and His Sufi Philosophy*, p.84-88.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p.85-86.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ *The Meccan Revelations*, Vol.5, p.88-92.
- ²⁹ Lourdes Maria Alvarez. *Abū al-Ḥasan al-Shushtarī*, p.129-135; Muḥyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī. *The Meccan Revelations*, Vol.3, p.272.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ibid.; chapters 2, 209, and 305.
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- ³³ Majid Fakhry. *A History of Islamic Philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p.111-132, 253-262.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
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- ³⁸ Anonymous. *Safīna*. Tunis, p.67.
- ³⁹ Muḥyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī. *The Meccan Revelations*, Vol.5, p.134-168.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., Vol.1, p.84-89.
- ⁴¹ Ibid. Direct communication, 10 August 2017.
- ⁴² One of the Divine Names.
- ⁴³ *Safīna*, p.73.
- ⁴⁴ The *Qur’ān* (36:77-83).
- ⁴⁵ *The Meccan Revelations*, Vol. 4, p.211-217.
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- ⁸² Ibid. See Chapter 97, 316, 300.
- ⁸³ Another version states: ‘the first thing that God created was the Intellect/Pen.’ Angela Jaffray. *The Universal Tree and the Four Birds*, p.90.
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Chapter Five

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- ¹¹² *The Bezels*, p.139; *The Meccan Revelations*, Vol.4, p.465.
- ¹¹³ *Paths to the Infinite Forest*, p.121-123.
- ¹¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁵ See the scenes titled 'The Martyr's Funeral,' 'The Sacred River,' 'Funeral III,' and 'River III' in *The Sacred Triangle of Silence and Paths to the Infinite Forest*.
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- ¹⁷⁰ See scenes two, four, and twelve of *Paths to the Infinite Forest*.
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Conclusion

¹ See Chapters 2, 209, and 316. Muḥyiddīn Ibn ‘Arabī. *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiya (The Meccan Revelations)*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiya, 1999.

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³ For example see Jonathan Shannon. ‘Sultans of Spin: Syrian Sacred Music on the World Stage,’ *American Anthropologist*, 105, 2 (2003), p.266-277. Also see Deborah Kapchan. ‘The Promise of Sonic Translation.’ *American Anthropologist*, 110, no.4 (2008), p.472-480.

⁴ Ibid. The Tunisian Ministry of Culture also sponsors such performances.

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⁷ Anonymous. *Safīna*, Tunis, p.123.

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Appendix

The following table contains the dates in which I attended the *dhikr*, *ḥaḍra*, and other rituals. It was not possible to provide a list of the dates in which I spent time with members of the Shādhiliya and the ‘Īssāwiya because I saw them almost on a daily basis during the three years when I was living in Tunisia. The following table also contains the dates of casual interviews during which I took detailed notes or recorded the sessions. The dates of these meetings were obtained from my recordings of the rituals and interviews (which note the date), field notes, and iPhone calendar. The recording software I used was voicememos, an app used on iPhones that can easily transfer data to computers. I also used the same iPhone6 to take photos during my fieldwork.

Table 1. Dates, location, and equipment used in fieldwork.

Date	Location	Event Type	Equipment
7/7/2016	Café in the Medina	Meeting with Shādhiliya Shaykhs	Notebook
9/7/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
13/7/2016	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
14/7/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook
16/7/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
17/7/2016	Café in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Meeting with ‘Īssāwiya shaykh and adepts	Notebook
20/7/2016	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
21/7/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook
23/7/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual/Meeting at the Café in the shrine of Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Notebook
27/7/2016	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
28/7/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook
30/7/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook

1/8/2016	Café in the Medina	Meeting with Shādhiliya follower	Notebook
3/8/2016	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
4/8/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook
6/8/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
10/8/2016	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
11/8/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook
13/8/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
15/8/2016	Café in the Medina	Meeting with a Stambeli Shaykh	Notebook
17/8/2016	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
17/8/2016	Café in the Medina	Meeting with a Shādhiliya follower	Notebook
18/8/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook
19/8/2016	Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	‘Īssāwiya Kharja	Notebook
20/8/2016	Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	‘Īssāwiya Ḥaḍra	Notebook
21/8/2016	Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	‘Īssāwiya Ḥaḍra	Notebook
24/8/2016	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
25/8/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook
25/8/2016	Café in the Medina	Meeting with the Tījāniya (Shādhiliya singers)	Notebook
28/8/2016	Private home in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook
31/8/2016	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
1/9/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook
3/9/2016	Private home in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	‘Īssāwiya Mānga	Notebook
7/9/2016	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
8/9/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook
10/9/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
14/9/2016	Café Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Meeting with ‘Īssāwiya shaykhs and adepts	Notebook
17/9/2016	Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
18/9/2016	Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	The Shādhiliya dhikr performed at the end of the season	Notebook

7/10/2016	Café in the Medina	Meeting with Shādhiliya follower	Notebook
8/10/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
9/10/2016	Sīdī Bin-‘Arous	Visit to the shrine with a Shādhiliya follower	Notebook
29/10/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
4/11/2016	Café in the Medina	Meeting with Shādhiliya shaykhs and followers	Notebook
7/12/2016	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
11/12/2016	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Celebration of the Mawlid	Notebook
15/12/2016	Sīdī ‘Ali al-Naftī	Visit to the shrine	Notebook
28/12/2016	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
4/1/2017	Sīdī Bou-Makhlouf	Visit to the shrine	Notebook
7/1/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
11/1/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
11/1/2017	Café of Sīdī Miḥriz in the Medina	Interview with Shādhiliya follower	Notebook and iphone6
21/1/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
25/1/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
27/1/2017	Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Visit to the shrine/meeting ‘Issāwiya adepts	Notebook
1/2/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
4/3/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
7/3/2017	Café in the Medina	Interview with Shādhiliya shaykh and followers	Notebook and iphone6
10/3/2017	Sīdī Ibrahim al-Riyāhī	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
11/3/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
15/3/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6

17/3/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Visit to the shrine/interview with adepts	Notebook and iphone6
29/3/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
1/4/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
5/4/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
7/4/2017	Bookshop in the Medina	Interview with Shādhiliya follower	Notebook and iphone6
12/4/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
15/4/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
19/4/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
21/4/2017	Lila Salḥa	Visit to the shrine with 'Issāwiya followers	Notebook
23/4/2017	Sayyida Manūbia	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
29/4/2017	Sīdī 'Alī 'Azūz	Visit to the shrine with Shādhiliya followers	Notebook and iphone6
3/5/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
10/5/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
11/5/2017	Café in the Medina	Meeting with Shādhiliya followers	Notebook and iphone6
14/5/2017	Sīdī Bou-Sa'īd	Visit to the shrine with 'Issāwiya followers	Notebook and iphone6
17/5/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
19/5/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
21/5/2017	Café in the Medina	Meeting with Shādhiliya followers	Notebook
24/5/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
16/6/2017	Sīdī Bou-Sa'īd	Stambeli	Notebook and iphone6
28/6/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
29/6/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
1/7/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6

5/7/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
5/7/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Interview with Shādhiliya follower	Notebook and iphone6
7/7/2017	Sīdī ‘Azīzī	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
8/7/2017	Private home in Sīdī Bou- Sa‘īd	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
9/7/2017	Private home in Sīdī Bou- Sa‘īd	Mānga	Notebook and iphone6
12/7/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
15/7/2017	Sīdī ‘Ali al-Makkī	Visit to the shrine with Shādhiliya followers	Notebook
19/7/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
20/7/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
22/7/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
26/7/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
27/7/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
28/7/2017	Private home in Sīdī Bou- Sa‘īd	Interview with ‘Īssāwiya shaykhs and adepts	Notebook and iphone6
2/8/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
4/8/2017	Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
6/8/2017	Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
7/8/2017	Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
8/8/2017	Café Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Meeting with ‘Īssāwiya shaykhs and adepts	Notebook and iphone6
8/8/2017	Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
9/8/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
10/8/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6

13/8/2017	Café in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Interview with ‘Īssāwiya Shaykh and adept	Notebook and iphone6
16/8/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
17/8/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
18/8/2017	Private home in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
18/8/2017	Café in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Interview with ‘Īssāwiya adept	Notebook and iphone6
19/8/2017	Private home in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Interview with ‘Īssāwiya shaykhs and adepts	Notebook and iphone6
20/8/2017	Private home in the Medina	Interview with Shādhiliya shaykhs and adepts	Notebook and iphone6
21/8/2017	Café in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Interview with ‘Īssāwiya shaykhs and adepts	Notebook and iphone6
22/8/2017	Private home in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Interview with ‘Īssāwiya shaykhs and adepts	Notebook and iphone6
23/8/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
23/8/2017	Café Sīdī Miḥriz	Interview with Shādhiliya follower	Notebook and iphone6
24/8/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
25/8/2017	Café in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Interview with ‘Īssāwiya shaykhs and adepts	Notebook and iphone6
25/8/2017	Enejma Zahra	Mānga	Notebook and iphone6
27/8/2017	Private home in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Interview with ‘Īssāwiya shaykhs and adepts	Notebook and iphone6
31/8/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
1/9/2017	Sīdī al-Ḥarī	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6

2/9/2017	Café in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Interview with ‘Īssāwiya shaykhs and adepts	Notebook and iphone6
3/9/2017	Sīdī ‘Abd al-‘Aziz	Kharja	Notebook and iphone6
5/9/2017	Café in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Interview with ‘Īssāwiya shaykhs and adepts	Notebook and iphone6
6/9/2017	Sīdī Sharīf	Kharja	Notebook and iphone6
6/9/2017	Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Dhikr	Notebook and iphone6
6/9/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
6/9/2017	Café in the Medina	Interview with Stambeli Shaykh	Notebook and iphone6
7/9/2017	Private home in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Mānga	Notebook and iphone6
7/9/2017	Sīdī Sharīf	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
8/9/2017	Sīdī Sharīf	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
8/9/2017	Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
9/9/2017	Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
9/9/2017	Café al-‘Alia Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Mānga	Notebook and iphone6
10/9/2017	Sīdī ‘Abd al-‘Azīz	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
23/9/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
4/10/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
11/10/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
20/10/2017	Sīdī al-Ḥarī	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
25/10/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
4/11/2017	Sīdī ‘Ali ‘Azūz	Visit to the shrine with Shādhiliya followers	Notebook
22/11/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook

26/11/2017	Sīdī ‘Umar Bukhtiwa	Mawlid celebrations	Notebook and iphone6
1/12/2017	Sīdī Miḥriz	Mawlid celebrations	Notebook and iphone6
9/12/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
16/12/2017	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
17/12/2017	Café in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Interview with ‘Īssāwiya shaykhs and followers	Notebook and iphone6
10/1/2018	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
19/1/2018	Sīdī ‘Ali al-Naftī	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook
27/1/2018	Sīdī Saḥbī	Visit with Shādhiliya followers	Notebook and iphone6
7/2/2018	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
17/2/2018	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
24/2/2018	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
3/3/2018	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
9/3/2018	Café in the Medina	Interview with Shādhiliya followers	Notebook and iphone6
19/3/2018	Sīdī ‘Ali al-Naftī	Visit to the shrine	Notebook
31/3/2018	Private home in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Interview with ‘Īssāwiya shaykh	Notebook
11/4/2018	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
15/4/2018	Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Visit to the shrine with ‘Īssāwiya followers	Notebook
18/4/2018	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
19/4/2018	Sīdī Bin-‘Arous	Visit to the shrine with a Shādhiliya follower	Notebook
23/4/2018	Bookshop in the Medina	Interview with Shādhiliya follower	Notebook and iphone6
28/4/2018	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook

29/4/2018	Private home in the Medina	Interview with Shādhiliya follower	Notebook and iphone6
2/5/2018	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
5/5/2018	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
9/5/2018	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
9/5/2018	Café in the Medina	Interview with Shādhiliya follower	Notebook and iphone6
12/5/2018	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
20/6/2018	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
21/6/2018	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
23/6/2018	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr	Notebook
28/6/2018	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
1/7/2018	Private home in the Medina	Interview with the Tījāniya	Notebook and iphone6
11/7/2018	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr	Notebook
12/7/2018	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
14/7/2018	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr	Notebook
19/7/2018	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
21/7/2018	Sīdī ‘Azīzī	Dhikr	Notebook and iphone6
24/7/2018	Private home in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
27/7/2018	Private home in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Mānga	Notebook and iphone6
12/8/2018	Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Kharja	Notebook and iphone6
12/8/2018	Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
13/8/2018	Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
14/8/2018	Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
15/8/2018	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr	Notebook

16/8/2018	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
16/8/2018	Café in the Medina	Interview with Shādhiliya follower	Notebook and iphone6
22/8/2018	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
23/8/2018	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
29/8/2018	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
30/8/2018	Sīdī Bou-Sa'īd	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
2/9/2018	Private home in Sīdī Bou- Sa'īd	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
6/9/2018	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Ḥaḍra ritual	Notebook and iphone6
5/9/2018	Sīdī Bou-Sa'īd	Kharja	Notebook and iphone6
8/9/2018	Private home in Sīdī Bou- Sa'īd	Mānga	Notebook and iphone6
12/9/2018	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
22/9/2018	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
27/10/2018	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
19/12/2018	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
29/12/2018	Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
9/1/2019	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook
23/2/2019	Café in La Marsa	Interview on Mā'lūf with Maryam al- Akhwa	Notebook
25/2/2019	Sīdī Miḥriz	Dhikr ritual	Notebook and iphone6
5/3/2019	Private home in La Marsa	Follow up interview with an 'Issāwiya singer and adept	Notebook and iphone6
23/3/2019	Sīdī Bou-Sa'īd	Visit to the shrine of Sīdī Bou-Sa'īd	Notebook

25/3/2019	Café Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd	Follow up interview an ‘Īssāwiya adept	Notebook
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Photos from Fieldwork

In addition to the table above the following photos provide additional documentary evidence of my visits to Sufi rituals and shrines that took place from 2016-2019. I took all of the photos using an iPhone6.



Figure 1. A photo of instruments at the Shrine of Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan.



Figure 2. A photo of women gathering at Sīdī Bin-Ḥasan's shrine.



Figure 3. Photo of a Stambeli performance in Sīdī Bou-Sa'īd.



Figure 4. A photo of a *ḥaḍra* ritual at Sīdī Bou-Saʿīd.

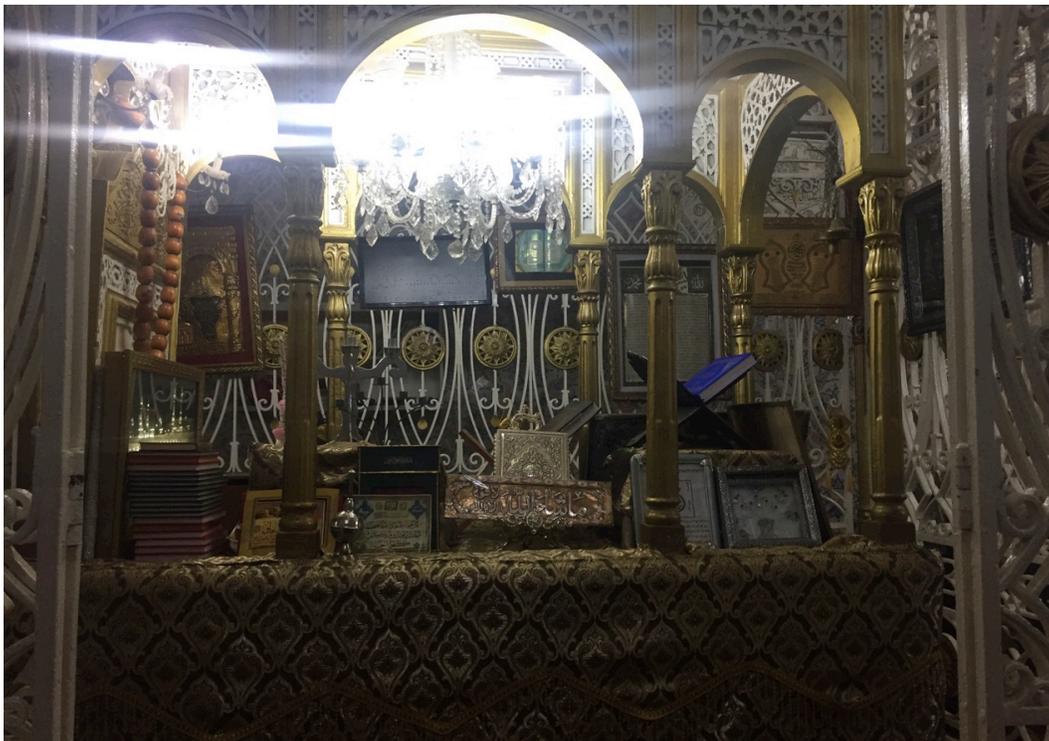


Figure 5. A photo of the tomb of Sīdī Miḥriz.



Figure 6. A photo of a *ḥaḍra* at a private home in Sīdī Bou-Sa‘īd.



Figure 7. A photo of the 'Issawiya performing at the Rouhaniyat music festival.



Figure 8. A photo of Sidi al-Hari's shrine.



Figure 9. A photo of a *kharja* at Sīdī Sharīf.



Figure 10. A photo of the Shādhiliya performing a *dhikr* ritual at Sīdī Sharīf.



Figure 11. A photo of an 'Issāwiya *mānga* performance at Café al-‘Āliya.



Figure 12. A photo of *mawlid* celebrations near the shrine of Sīdī Miḥriz.