

Dia Barghouti

Tunisian Performances of the Sufi Ascent: the 'Issawiya Hadra Ritual

Focusing on the *hadra* ritual of the 'Issawiya Sufi community, in this article Dia Barghouti explores how the narrative of the Prophet Muhammad's 'night journey' is performed within the Tunisian socio-cultural context. Drawing on the philosophical writings of the twelfth-century Sufi saint Muhyidin Ibn 'Arabi, the author examines how re-enacting narratives of transcendence, and particularly of myths associated with the patron saint of the order, Sidi Ben-'Issa, allows members of the 'Issawiya community to explore the ontological principles of Sufi cosmology by experiencing them directly in the body. Dia Barghouti is a playwright and PhD candidate in the Department of Theatre and Performance at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her plays have been performed at Ashtar Theatre and the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center in Ramallah in Palestine.

Key terms: myth, the Night Journey, Sidi Bou Sa'id, cosmology, embodied experience.

IN RECENT YEARS, there has been a growing interest in North African theatre and performance traditions that had previously been neglected due to the assumption that Islam rejects representation of the human form, including in the performing arts.¹ Underlying this assumption is the false notion that theatre was introduced to Arab and Islamic cultures in the nineteenth century, without regard to pre-existing indigenous performance traditions that were primarily oral and so did not fit Western ideas of performance.² Since then, several scholars have written about different performance traditions within North Africa, including ritual.³ However, there are several Tunisian traditions, particularly those relating to Sufism, that have not yet been explored.

Examining the ritual traditions of Tunisia is significant not only in order to document indigenous modes of performance, but also because these performances raise important questions for theatre practitioners, particularly those working in a North African context. Embedded within these performances are particular aesthetic and corporeal techniques that are shaped by the Sufi understanding of the body. Analyzing these techniques, particularly from a Sufi perspective, should help readers understand how these

communities perceive and experience their rituals. It will also create an opportunity for theatre makers to incorporate these performance traditions into their own practice in a more nuanced manner, committed to a cross-cultural dialogue as opposed to performing Sufi ritual music within a decontextualized commercial context or reducing the ritual to a set of gestures to be mimicked in a theatre production.⁴

The *hadra* ritual of the 'Issawiya community of Sidi Bou Sa'id is a religious Islamic ritual. In the following article I offer an analysis of the ritual from a Sufi Muslim perspective in order to explore the philosophical and mythological origins of the traditions surrounding the *hadra*, and how these have influenced its performance. Examining how members of the 'Issawiya perform the story of the Prophet Muhammad's ascent (the 'night journey') provides insights into the symbolic meanings of the actions performed in the *hadra*. It also provides an example of how a narrative (the ascent) can be articulated in embodied performances without a text, which is vital for theatre practitioners who wish to experiment with Sufi modes of performance.

The *isra' wa al-mi'raj* (night journey) was one of the most significant events in the life

of the Prophet Muhammad. This miraculous journey took place in two stages. *Isra'* refers to the Prophet's journey to the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem on a *buraq*, a heavenly creature that resembles a horse and has wings. After reaching Jerusalem, the Prophet began his ascent (*mi'raj*) to the higher realms, accompanied by the Angel Gabriel. There he met all 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 and given the commandment to perform the five daily prayers. The Prophet then descended back to earth and returned from Jerusalem to Mecca on the *buraq*.

The Sufi Ascent

Despite the theological significance of the night journey, which is considered one of the miracles that attests to the elevated status of the Prophet Muhammad, there are very few verses in the Qur'an that discuss the event directly. The first is the chapter of al-Isra', which describes the Prophet's journey from Mecca to Jerusalem.⁵ The second verse is from the chapter of al-Najim.⁶ Al-Najim does not refer directly to Muhammad's ascent; however, it does mention the Lote tree, believed to exist at the highest boundary of the created universe, and the Prophet's witnessing of the divine presence: 'He saw the greatest signs of his Lord.'⁷ Certain Sufi communities have interpreted this verse as Muhammad's encounter with the divine presence at the final stages of his ascent.⁸

Over the centuries, the story of the ascent developed in various ways in relation to the differing socio-cultural contexts in which it was narrated, incorporating different elements or cultural symbols from popular folklore.⁹ Since Islam spread to many places, each with its own unique history and cultural traditions, in consequence multiple ascent narratives were formed. According to Nadhir Azmah, the Sufis view the rise of the different narratives as an opportunity for the revelation of the infinite esoteric meanings of the ascent narrative.¹⁰

Within Sufi communities, the ascent of the Prophet Muhammad became the model for

the ascent of his followers,¹¹ representing the path towards God and the different spiritual stations through which a Sufi must pass to attain the state of mystical union in *fana'* – the annihilation of the seeker in God.¹² Through their symbolic interpretation of the Prophet's miraculous ascent, the Sufis transformed this narrative from a historic event into a framework for the seeker's own spiritual journey.¹³ However, this does not equate the ascent of Muhammad with that of his followers. The ascent of the Prophet was in the spirit and body, stressing his elevated status among created beings, whereas the ascent of his followers is in spirit only.¹⁴

The story of the Prophet Muhammad's ascent forms a significant part of the religious life of the Tunisian Sufi community, particularly for communities such as the 'Issawiya, whose members embody the ascent in the *hadra* ritual. *Hadra* means 'presence' in Arabic, and, within the Sufi ritual context, it refers to the presence of the spirits of deceased saints in the sacred space of the Sufi shrine during the performance of the ritual. These performances not only reference the ascent of the Prophet Muhammad but also myths about the Moroccan saint Muhammad Ben-'Issa, the patron saint of the 'Issawiya order, who was known for his extraordinary powers and miracles such as healing the blind and walking on water.¹⁵

Most Sufi shrines contain the tomb of a saint whose spirit endows the space with blessings, and each *tariqa* (Sufi path) is affiliated with a particular saint.¹⁶ In Sufism, the *tariqa* represents the spiritual methods attributed to the patron saint of the order, who guides the seeker in her/his journey towards God.¹⁷ It is believed that the spirits of saints have the ability to return to the corporeal realm after their physical death and act as a *barzakh* – that is, an entity that acts as an intermediary between two opposing modes of existence. In the *hadra* ritual, the *barzakh* represents both the intermediate realm between the spiritual and corporeal worlds and the spirit of the saint whose proximity to the divine allows her/him to transmit divine blessings to whoever visits her/his shrine.

Sidi Ben-'Issa is believed to be the descendant of the Prophet Muhammad and is buried in Meknas, where there is a shrine named after him.¹⁸ The 'Issawiya order was introduced to Tunisia by Sidi al-Hari, whose shrine is located in Suq al-Qalalin in the medina of Tunis. It then spread to many different areas, establishing multiple shrines across Tunisia, including the shrines of Sidi 'Amar in Ariyana, Sidi 'Abd al-'Aziz in La Marsa, and the shrines of Sidi Bou-Sa'id and Sidi 'Azizi in the village of Sidi Bou-Sa'id, one of the suburbs of Tunis. The village was named after the saint Abu Sa'id al-Baji, who would travel there for spiritual retreats when it was then an isolated uninhabited mountain called al-Manar.¹⁹

It is not clear how Sidi Bou-Sa'id came to be affiliated with the 'Issawiya, particularly since Abu Sa'id al-Baji died in 1235, several centuries before Sidi Ben-'Issa.²⁰ Nonetheless, the shrine of Sidi Bou-Sa'id is the sacred space in which members of the 'Issawiya congregate and invoke the presence of several spirits, including Muhammad Ben-'Issa.

The Hadra Ritual

The *hadra* ritual may be performed at the shrine or in a private home. In both cases, the purpose of the ritual is to cause intoxication (*takhmir*), a spiritual state that is embodied by the *fuqara'*, a group of advanced Sufi male adepts who ascend to the higher cosmic realms. The term *takhmir* is derived from the Arabic word *khamra* (alcohol), which, for the 'Issawiya, is a metaphor for the soul's remembrance of God. The seeker's intoxication in the love of God causes her/him to ascend from one cosmic realm to the next.²¹ This is referenced in one of the songs performed by the 'Issawiya:

O tapster fill the cups
and let us drink from the cup of alcohol
the drink has a cup
that is not tasted by the ignorant
except for those who know [the spiritual
meanings]
and have attained proximity [through] love
my beloved has called on me
to sing in serenity
in the presence of the guide the Prophet

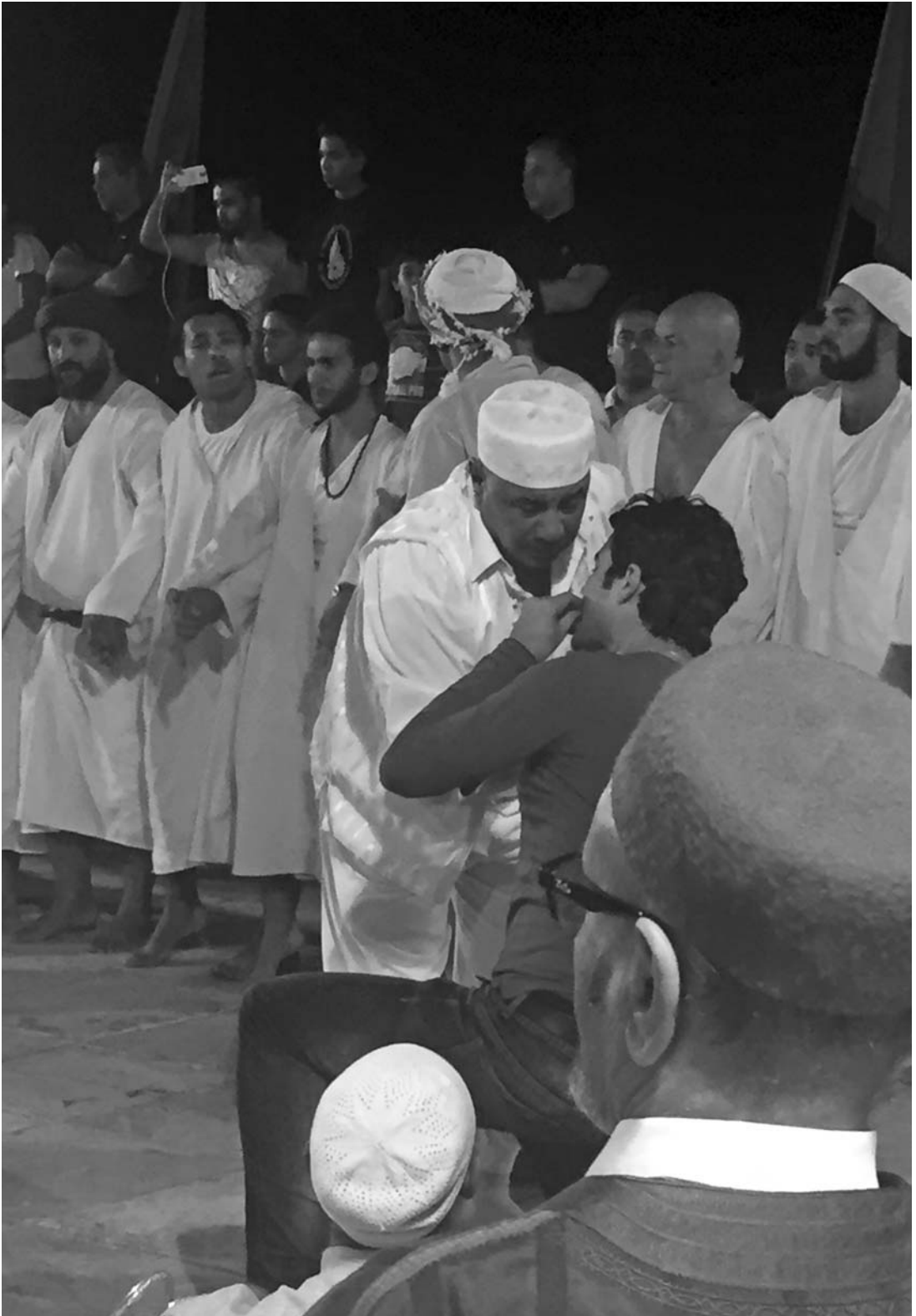
Muhammad who lives in the medina
rejoice [my] soul in his soul
the lights have descended on us.²²

One of the members of the 'Issawiya explains the esoteric meaning of the poem as follows: 'The cup is the heart of the seeker and the alcohol is the remembrance of God, which intoxicates the spirit. The more your heart is present [with God] the more you will ascend.'²³ The purpose of the *hadra* is to open up the body of the Sufi adept gradually to the higher realms through particular musical and corporeal techniques that eventually allow him to transcend the limitations of the physical body in performances of the ascent.

Every *hadra* is preceded by a *dhikr* (remembrance of God) ritual, in which the shaykhs and the *fuqara'* recite verses from the Qur'an and a litany titled 'Glory to the Eternal', sing religious hymns that praise the Prophet Muhammad and the saints, and perform the rhythmic repetition of the Divine Names *Huwa* (He), *Allah* (God), and *Allah Da'im Hay* (God the Eternal the Living).²⁴ The *dhikr* ritual takes place either at the shrine of Sidi Bou Sa'id or at the nearby shrine of Sidi 'Azizi.

It is of the utmost importance that all the props that are to be used in the *hadra* – glass, cactus, hay, metal chains, meat, nails – are present at the *dhikr* ritual, as the recitation of the verses of the Qur'an, the litany, and the repetition of the Divine Names, as well as the sacred space of the shrine, endows these objects with divine blessings that protect members of the 'Issawiya during the ritual. Furthermore, the *dhikr* ritual prepares the seeker for the ascent by emptying his heart of everything other than God.²⁵

During the season for conducting rituals, several 'Issawiya *hadras* are performed across different Sufi shrines in Tunisia, including the shrine of Bou-Sa'id. The *hadra* takes place in the courtyard of the shrine, which is located at the top of a hill overlooking the Mediterranean. The shaykhs prepare for the ritual by burning incense in large clay bowls that they later use to stretch out the leather of their instruments. The instruments used in the *hadra* include the *tar*



A member of the 'Issawiya eating glass during the *hadra* ritual.

(tambourine), *naqarat* (kettle drums), and the *bandir* (frame drum), which is considered a sacred instrument.

The Performance of the Ritual

Large crowds, from different parts of Tunis, gather in the courtyard of the shrine of Sidi Bou Sa'id and on nearby rooftops to watch the ritual. The shaykhs and *fuqara'* distinguish themselves from the crowd by wearing a white *jibba*, a traditional Tunisian garment made of silk or wool, with the exception of 'Akasha, the most powerful member of the 'Issawiya, who wears a striped Moroccan garment (*jalaba*).

The ritual begins with the recitation of the Fatiha, the first chapter of the Qur'an.²⁶ It is followed by *ward al-qudum*, vocal performances that are not accompanied by musical instruments. The first song performed is a prayer for the Prophet Muhammad, followed by songs about Sidi Ben-'Issa, Sidi Bou-Sa'id, and other saints associated with the 'Issawiya community. The *fuqara'* stand in a line holding each other's hands as they move backwards and forwards with gestures that resemble *riku'* (bowing down in a standing position).²⁷

As the members of the 'Issawiya responsible for singing and performing ritual music transition from one song to the next, the rhythm of the songs accelerates, and the *fuqara'* increase the pace of their movements. The *mjarriid* is introduced once the tempo of the songs of *ward al-qudum* cannot accelerate any further. The *mjarriid* includes the performance of religious hymns that are accompanied by handclapping and without the use of musical instruments.²⁸

When the rhythm of the *mjarriid* accelerates, the *fuqara'*, under the guidance of the shaykhs, begin to take long and loud exhalations that are then transformed into a *dhikr*, a rhythmic repetition of the Divine Names *Allah*, *Huwa* (He), and *Allah Da'im Hay* (God the Eternal the Living). The sounds of the *dhikr* recited by the *fuqara'* and the songs of the 'Issawiya singers overlap and both gradually accelerate until the tempo can increase no more.

A new song is then introduced and the rhythmic repetition of the Divine Names continues into the next *mjarriid* cycle. The *fuqara'* change their movements in this part of the *hadra*: they let go of each other's hands, and one half of the line steps forward with raised index fingers as they recite one of the Divine Names. When they return to their original position, the other half of the line steps forward performing the same gestures, thereby completing the recitation. The rhythm of the *mjarriid* continues to accelerate as the singers/musicians transition from one song to the next. Once the *mjarriid* reaches the height of rhythmic acceleration, it abruptly ends with the introduction of musical instruments.

The next part of the *hadra* is known as the *birawil*. The *fuqara'* once again form a line holding hands as they move backwards and forwards. After the opening songs that praise Sidi Ben-'Issa and other saints, the songs of 'Akasha are performed and he is taken to the room containing the tomb of Sidi Bou-Sa'id, which is part of the shrine complex, only to return to the courtyard near the end of the ritual. The singers/musicians continue to perform songs that describe the process of intoxication, stories about 'Issawiya saints, and the healing powers of Sidi Ben-'Issa.

As the rhythm of the music gradually accelerates, two of the *fuqara'* begin to experience intoxication. They leave the line and move forwards and backwards on their own with the same gesture of bowing down in a standing position. When their movements become rapid, one of the shaykhs places a pile of thorny cacti on the ground. The two *fuqara'* who have become intoxicated take off their shirts and jump on to the cacti, of which one of them takes a large bite. The surrounding crowd cheers them on, but they do not respond to the surroundings. They jump on the cacti several times, until most of their bodies are filled with thorns. As soon as they raise their index fingers the shaykh rushes to catch them, moments before they lose consciousness.

In order to make the *fuqara'* return from the state of intoxication, the shaykh whispers

the Qur'anic verse of al-Kursi into their ears, and they slowly begin to regain consciousness.²⁹ After all of the *fuqara'* have performed intoxication, 'Akasha returns to the courtyard, tied in heavy metal chains. The instrumental song cycles continue as 'Akasha strikes the chains against the ground of the shrine. The third time he strikes the chains they break and the sounds of celebratory ululations fill the courtyard.

There are seven different ways in which members of the 'Issawiya may perform intoxication. The *faqir* named the *jmal* (camel) eats and jumps on thorn cacti that pierce his skin and lips. The *sba'* (hyena) eats glass; the *katus* or *nimir* (cat/tiger) eats raw meat; the *na'ama* (ostrich) eats nails. The *asid* (the lion) is the *faqir* who 'dies' and stops breathing for several minutes, becoming a corpse protected from the dangers of the wild animals, as it is believed within the 'Issawiya community that lions do not eat dead prey and will therefore not approach a person who is breathless and appears dead.³⁰ The sixth kind of intoxication is with a *halfa* (a burning stack of hay), which the *faqir* places on different parts of his body. The seventh form is particular to 'Akasha, who performs intoxication by breaking heavy metal chains.

The music of the *hadra* is improvised in the sense that the songs, musical modes, and rhythmic acceleration are altered by the shaykhs and singers/musicians in accordance with the spiritual state of the seeker and how close he is to experiencing intoxication. Each of the *fuqara'* responds to a particular song/musical mode, so that several song cycles must be performed to ensure that each of the *fuqara'* has an opportunity to perform intoxication.

Ward al-qudum, *mjarriid*, *dhikr*, and *birawil* prepare the seeker for the different stages of the ascent – the reason why intoxication is usually performed near the end of a ritual, after the seeker's body has become 'warmer'. One of the 'Issawiya shaykhs explains the importance of each step of the ritual in preparing the seeker for the journey of ascent as follows: 'In the *mjarriid* you start to move and [the spirit] becomes warm in you [and continues] until you become intoxicated. [The

hadra] is like a painting – each part completes the other.'³¹

The metaphor of heat/fire symbolizes the seeker's longing for the Beloved, described in a 'Issawiya song as an esoteric state: 'My longing grew and the fire in my depths, and the body [remained] cold.'³² The element of fire is also associated with subtle spiritual bodies that inhabit the higher realms.³³ Thus, the growth of a fire represents the ascent to non-corporeal realms. Even though all the ritual actions prepare the seeker for the ascent, the songs that are accompanied by musical instruments in particular perform the spiritual work that allows the *fuqara'* to transcend their corporeal bodies, thus allowing them to expose themselves to dangerous objects – glass, cacti, fire – without harm. The *dhikr* and Qur'anic verses recited on the props, prior to the *hadra* ritual, transform these objects into special receptacles of God's grace, which is transmitted to the *fuqara'* when they come into contact with them within the sacred space of the shrine.

Performing Narratives of Transcendence

Intoxication with a fire references a narrative that describes how one of the followers of Sidi Ben-'Issa, named Abu Rawa'in, realized Sidi Ben-'Issa's elevated status among the Sufis. Before meeting Sidi Ben-'Issa, Abu Rawa'in accompanied several saints, and he would test the spiritual abilities of these saints by asking them to accept him and his axe as their disciple. As the saints accepted, Abu Rawa'in insisted that they touch the initiated axe.

After accompanying the saint for three days, Abu Rawa'in would take the axe to a blacksmith and ask him to place it in an oven. When the heat caused the axe to turn red, Abu Rawa'in would become sad and bewildered, losing all faith in the saint. This happened several times with all the saints Abu Rawa'in met, until he became the disciple of Sidi Ben-'Issa. When, after Ben-'Issa touched Abu Rawa'in's axe, he took it to the blacksmith and asked him to place it in the oven, the axe remained cold, unaffected by the heat of the fire. Eventually, the black-

smith ran out of coal, and the temperature of the axe remained unchanged. Abu Rawa'in paid the blacksmith what he owed and told him he would go to heaven. He then ran into the streets shouting 'I am the disciple of Sidi Ben-'Issa.'³⁴

The story of Abu Rawa'in is significant because it provides a symbolic representation of the Sufi understanding of sainthood and attitudes towards the body. Kevin Schilbrack asserts that a metaphysical understanding of reality is articulated in myths. Embedded within religious narratives is a cosmology – that is, the archetypal models that are believed to have brought the universe into existence. People may understand the structures of the cosmos through the narratives and metaphoric images encompassed by myths, since myths provide a sociocultural and religious framework for the interpretation of reality.³⁵

According to Mircea Eliade, myths portray a sacred history that took place in 'primordial time', which is re-enacted in religious rites that provide those who perform them with a means for understanding reality. The performance of these narratives enables ritual participants to return to the 'primordial time' in which these mythical events took place, allowing them to transcend temporal limitations by returning to the time of 'origin', the first act of creation.³⁶

Members of the Tunisian 'Issawiya community come to understand the ontological attributes of the cosmos through the performance of myths associated with the 'Issawiya tradition. Metaphysics is not frequently discussed by members of the community, but many of the ontological principles of Sufi cosmology are explored in the *hadra* through embodied performances rather than intellectual inquiry, particularly through the re-enactment of narratives of transcendence.

All of the ritual actions, particularly those performed in spiritual intoxication, are re-enactments of myths about Sidi Ben-'Issa, each providing the seeker with a method or framework for understanding Sufi metaphysics. The story of Abu Rawa'in illustrates that there are different degrees of sainthood, emphasizing Sidi Ben 'Issa's elevated status

among the saints. The fact that the axe he touches did not turn red in the fire proves that he possessed the blessings of the most spiritually elevated saint, and so was the most effective transmitter of divine grace through her/his proximity to both the spiritual and earthly realms. In touching the axe, Ben-'Issa blessed it and thus protected it from the fire. Abu Rawa'in announced to the blacksmith that he will go to heaven because the blessing of Ben-'Issa was transferred to him when he touched the axe, causing him to acquire divine protection through contact with a sacred object.

The Power of Intercession

In the same manner that the intercession of Ben-'Issa protected the axe from the fire of the oven, it also protects his followers from the fire of hell on the day of judgement. In this way the myth illustrates the power of the saint to intercede on behalf of his followers on the day of resurrection. The belief in intercession and 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 the veneration of the saints.³⁷ In the *hadra* ritual, the ascent to the higher realms occurs through the spiritual methods introduced by Ben-'Issa to his disciples, which were later developed by his followers, and through the presence and intercession of the saint's spirit, which guides and protects the seeker.

Each ritual action symbolizes a miraculous act performed by Sidi Ben-'Issa. The supernatural abilities of 'Akasha that allow him to break metal chains references another myth about the 'Issawiya's patron saint. A woman once asked Sidi Ben-'Issa to make a supplication for her imprisoned son to be set free. After his release, the prisoner's mother asked him who had set him free and he described a man who resembled Muhammad Ben-'Issa. The woman and her son then went to see Ben-'Issa to thank him for his help, to which he responded, 'It was not I who broke the chains but God.'³⁸

This narrative stresses that the miraculous acts performed in the *hadra* occur through



A Sufi performing intoxication with fire.

the grace of God; the saint is no more than an intermediary, a 'polished mirror', who helps his followers come into contact with the divine light. The breaking of the chains is a symbolic act that signifies that the 'Akasha has become free from the limitations of the corporeal body through the ascent.

The Human Microcosm

The tradition of spiritual intoxication is similarly attributed to a myth about the Sidi Ben-'Issa. A member of the 'Issawiya here explains the origin of the tradition:

[The performance of] intoxication began with Sidi Ben-'Issa. He was once on his way to the hajj with his followers when they were lost in the desert and no longer had food or water.³⁹ In this state of desperation, Ben-'Issa, who was a saint, made a supplication for help and God Almighty said to him: 'Tell your followers that whatever they find in the desert let them recite *bism allah* [in the Name of God] on it and eat it.' Whoever found cactus ate it, whoever found glass ate it, each [of Ben-'Issa's followers] found something different in the desert.⁴⁰

This myth about Sidi Ben-'Issa and his followers not only represents a particular way of interpreting reality, but also provides a method – namely, intoxication – for attaining esoteric knowledge. The followers of Sidi Ben-'Issa, who were lost in the desert, acquired the miraculous ability to eat dangerous objects – cacti, glass, nails, raw meat – without harm through the intercession of the saint, who helped them ascend beyond the corporeal realm. This myth is itself a re-enactment of the Prophet Muhammad's ascent (the night journey), during which he reached the highest station in the universe.

What is performed and embodied in the *hadra* ritual is not the particular characteristics of each of Ben-Issa's followers, but their ability to transcend corporeal time/space through their proximity to God and the blessings of the saint. It is important to note that, even though the *fuqara'* take on the attributes of particular animals in the ritual (camel, lion, tiger, ostrich), they do not become these animals. As one member of the 'Issawiya explains: "The *faqir* is called the camel, not because he becomes a camel but

because he takes the attribute that allows the camel to eat cactus without being harmed."⁴¹

According to the cosmological framework of Muhyidin Ibn 'Arabi, one of the most renowned Sufi saints and philosophers of the twelfth century, whose writings summarize some of the most significant concepts of Sufi metaphysics, all beings come into existence through the manifestation of the Divine Names.⁴² The movement from an esoteric to an exoteric state occurs with the reflection of the Muhammadan light through multiple realms, each revealing a particular divine attribute (one of the meanings of the Divine Names), ending in the manifestation of corporeal forms in the sensible human world, the lowest of the cosmic realms.⁴³

The human subject is believed to be the microcosm of the universe, who encompasses all the attributes of the cosmos, which are hidden in her/his heart in an esoteric form.⁴⁴ Thus, the ascent is the way in which members of the 'Issawiya allow the esoteric attributes hidden within them to assume exoteric forms through the performance of intoxication, which not only protects them from dangerous objects, but also allows them to embody divine attributes.

Ascent to the Realms of Luminous Bodies

In Ibn 'Arabi's cosmology, there are three kinds of bodies: angelic luminous bodies, the bodies of 'intermediate realities' made of fire, and non-luminous earthly bodies made of clay.⁴⁵ The luminous bodies in the higher realities are manifestations of the Divine Names. There are twenty-eight realms in the cosmos, each revealing one of the infinite meanings of the Divine Names.⁴⁶ The existence of the corporeal body is dependent on luminous bodies which reflect the divine light to the sensible human world. Within the writings of Ibn 'Arabi, the body is considered a sacred entity because as a sign it reveals one of the meanings of the Divine Names.⁴⁷

The attributes of the Real (God) can only be witnessed in manifest forms either as elemental earthly bodies, or luminous subtle bodies.⁴⁸ Each of these bodies which inhabit the different realms, contains particular cos-

mological properties that reveal one of the infinite attributes of the Real. The seeker witnesses the subtle luminous/fiery bodies during her/his ascent with the same sensations (sight, smell, taste, sound, vision) as the corporeal body, even though the bodies experienced in these realms are not physical entities. The ability to perceive these esoteric truths is acquired through the dialectic of love between the Sufi adept and the Beloved, as is described in the 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.⁴⁹

Intoxication, which gives members of the 'Issawiya the ability to perceive God in subtle spiritual bodies, occurs through the seeker's intimacy with God. The passage above describes the state of *fana'* – the annihilation of a distinction between the human subject and God – which allows the seeker to perceive hidden realities with esoteric vision. According to Ibn 'Arabi, the sensory faculties of the corporeal body are the vicegerents of God on earth because they represent different divine attributes that are made manifest in elemental earthly bodies.⁵⁰ In other words, corporeal sensory facilities are reflections of the spiritual faculties in the higher realms, which are manifestations of the Divine Names, the all-Perceiving (al-Basir), and the all-Hearing (al-Sami').⁵¹

God created the Prophet Adam in His own image,⁵² then 'cast him down to the lowest of the low'.⁵³ The Angels protested upon the creation of Adam,

And your Lord said to the Angels 'I will make a vicegerent on earth.' They said, 'Do you place upon it those who will corrupt it and cause bloodshed and we praise and sanctify you.' He said, 'I know what you do not know.'⁵⁴

Adam was distinguished from other created beings, including the Angels, because God

taught him all of the Divine Names, thereby giving the Prophet the ability to sanctify the Real in all of His forms.⁵⁵

Transcendence and Immanence

Because the human subject exists in the lowest of the realms, s/he has the ability to reflect all of the images of the Divine Names in the realms that preceded it, and thus embody all of the divine attributes. Within the 'Issawiya community, 'it is believed that God created the universe because He wished to be known'. This is supported by prophetic saying that states: 'I was a hidden treasure that desired to be known, then I created the universe so that I might be known.'⁵⁶ The human subject is the locus for the revelation of the spirit, and the mirror through which the Real witnesses Himself in manifest forms.⁵⁷ Not all human beings have an equal capacity to reflect the divine attributes. This spiritual ability is acquired by individuals who 'polish the mirror of their being' by struggling against the self, which allows them to better reflect the divine attributes.

The ascent is the spiritual process that allows for the revelation of the meanings of the Divine Names in the corporeal body because it causes the seeker to take on the attributes of each realm s/he ascends to. Luminous bodies are not subjected to the same rules of generation and corruption experienced by earthly elemental bodies, so the ascent to the realms of non-corporeal bodies protects the bodies of the 'Issawiya adepts from physical harm during the *hadra* ritual by allowing them to embody the attributes of the higher realms. One of the 'Issawiya shaykhs explains: 'The spirit ascends on a particular path that brings it 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 ascent.'⁵⁸

Presence in a higher realm occurs through the annihilation in God's unity, which causes the seeker's spiritual nature to overtake her/his earthly nature.⁵⁹ This is made possible by the intermediary realm (*barzakh*),

which allows spiritual meanings to take form as they become manifest in perceivable bodies, and permits corporeal bodies to take on the spiritual attributes of the higher realms.⁶⁰ The movement of the divine attributes from an esoteric to an exoteric state occurs through the recitation of the Divine Names, described in 'Issawiya songs as 'keys to the higher realities'; thus:

Praise be to God I began [my journey / the ascent]
the Name of God is my key
in the house of friends [the saints]
we speak [to you] my friend [Sidi Ben-'Issa]
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 [the Prophet Muhammad]
the light of the Real (God) the Guide.⁶¹

This poem is sung during the segment of the *hadra* that includes the performance of songs accompanied by musical instruments, which is when most Sufi adepts experience spiritual intoxication. The song describes how God, the infinite, becomes manifest in the limited forms of the cosmos. This includes earthly elemental bodies, fiery intermediate bodies, and angelic luminous bodies, which are all considered to be manifestations of the Real. The 'seed' represents the esoteric realities that become manifest in space, revealing the meanings of the Divine Names.

The self-disclosure of the Real in the cosmos is an infinite process. Therefore, there is no limit to the knowledge that the seeker can acquire of God since He constantly reveals Himself through the perpetual act of manifestation. The different ways of witnessing God have been described in the Qur'an: 'We shall show them our signs upon the horizons and in themselves, until it is clear to them that He is the Real.'⁶² According to William Chittick, this verse describes how the seeker witnesses the divine, in both esoteric and exoteric forms.⁶³ Members of the 'Issawiya witness the 'signs in themselves' by witnessing the Real in luminous bodies through the ascent to their 'inner realities' in the *hadra*, and witness God 'in the horizons' by realiz-

ing the esoteric dimensions of the manifest corporeal forms that they come into contact with upon returning to the collective space of the ritual.

According to Ibn 'Arabi, the seeker can only witness the meanings of the Divine Names when they are revealed in embodied forms (luminous or corporeal). The human subject does not have the ability to know God as infinite. The seeker can only comprehend intellectually what s/he cannot comprehend.⁶⁴ Thus, knowledge of the Real requires that He become manifest in a limited form that can be experienced by human beings.

Ibn 'Arabi describes the cosmos as both He/not-He, a term he derives from the Divine Name *Huwa* (He).⁶⁵ The cosmos is He (the Real) in the sense that all created beings are the manifest forms of the Divine Names, from which they derive existence. They are not He because God is infinite and transcends all forms. Perfect knowledge requires finding a balance between experiencing the Divine as immanent (He), and realizing God's transcendence (not He).⁶⁶ Through the spiritual method of intoxication members of the 'Issawiya have the opportunity to experience the divine in embodied forms (luminous and corporeal). However, it is of the utmost importance they must remain conscious of the fact that God transcends all created beings. This is the wisdom of the Divine Name *Huwa* (He) that is embodied in the *hadra* ritual.

Notes and References

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2. John Bell, 'Islamic Performance and the Problem of Drama', *The MIT Press*, XLIX, No. 4 (1988), p. 5–9.

3. Amine and Carlson, *The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia*, p. 16–44. See also Deborah Kapchan, *Traveling Spirit Masters* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007); and Richard C. Jankowsky, *Stambeli: Music, Trance, and Alterity in Tunisia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

4. For examples of the commodification of Tunisian ritual music, see Jankowsky, *Stambeli: Music, Trance, and*

- Alterity*; and 'Absence and "Presence": el-Hadra and the Cultural Politics of Staging Sufi Music in Tunisia', *Journal of North African Studies*, XXII, No. 5 (2017), p. 860–87.
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 6. *The Qur'an* (53: 13–18).
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 8. Nadhir Azmah, *The Mi'raj and Sufi Symbolism*. (Beirut: Dar al-Bahith, 1982), p. 20–35.
 9. See, for example, Christiane Gruber and Frederick Colby, *The Prophet's Ascension: Cross Cultural Encounters with the Islamic Mi'raj Tales* (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010).
 10. Azmah, *The Mi'raj and Sufi Symbolism*, p. 10.
 11. Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayng* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 67.
 12. Azmah, *The Mi'raj and Sufi Symbolism*, p. 13–15.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
 14. This is sometimes referred to as *mi'raj manami* (ascent in sleep or a dream state). Muhyidin Ibn 'Arabi and Mohammad Yunis Masruhin, *Being and Time in the Sufi Discourse of Muhyidin Ibn 'Arabi* (Beirut: Manshurat al-Jamal, 2015), p. 213.
 15. 'Alal al-Issawi, *The Perfect Shaykh Sidi Muhammad Ben-'Issa: His Spiritual Path, Zawiyah, and Legacy* (Rabat: al-Ma'arif al-Jadida, 2004), p. 51.
 16. John Renard, *Friends of God: Islamic Images of Piety, Commitment, and Servanthood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) p.170.
 17. The term *tariqa* may also refer to particular Sufi communities that utilize specific spiritual methods in order to attain proximity to God.
 18. Every *mawlid*, the celebration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, a *hadra* is performed at Sidi Ben-'Issa's *zawiyah* in Morocco. Amnon Shiloah, *Music in the World of Islam: a Sociocultural Study* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), p. 144.
 19. Direct communication with a 'Issawiya shaykh, 23 August 2017.
 20. Sidi Ben 'Issa was born in 1467 and died in 1526. Hisham 'Ibid, *Tunis and its Saints: the Hagiographies of the Saints* (Tunis: Markaz al Nashir al Jami', 2006), p. 255–8.
 21. Direct communication with a 'Issawiya shaykh, 23 August 2017.
 22. Anon., *Safina*, unpublished manuscript, p. 170. The *Safina* is a book about the 'Issawiya *tariqa* which contains a collection of stories and sayings attributed to the patron saint of the *tariqa*, Sidi Ben-'Issa. It also contains a collection of songs that praise Ben-'Issa and other saints, as passed down from one 'Issawiya generation to the next through oral tradition.
 23. Direct communication with a 'Issawiya shaykh, 23 August 2017.
 24. Glory to the Eternal is translated from the Arabic *hizb Subhan al-Da'im*.
 25. Direct communication with a member of the 'Issawiya, 18 August 2017.
 26. *The Qur'an* (1: 1–7).
 27. *Ruku'* is one of the gestures performed in the daily prayers.
 28. The word *mjarriid* means 'to be empty of', here signifying that the performance does not use musical instruments.
 29. *The Qur'an* (2: 255).
 30. Direct communication with a 'Issawiya *faqir*, 6 August 2017.
 31. *Ibid.*, 18 August 2017.
 32. *Safina*, p. 102.
 33. William C. Chittick, *The Self Disclosure of God* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 280.
 34. *Safina*, p. 17–19.
 35. Kevin Schilbrack, 'Myth and Metaphysics', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, XLVIII, No. 2 (October 2000), p. 65–80.
 36. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1963), p. 1–40.
 37. John Renard, *Friends of God*, p. 68–278.
 38. *Safina*, p. 22–3.
 39. The pilgrimage to Mecca.
 40. Direct communication with 'Issawiya *fuqara'*, 23 August 2017. *Fuqara'* is the plural of *faqir* and refers to adepts who are part of the 'Issawiya Sufi order.
 41. Direct communication with a 'Issawiya *faqir*, 23 August 2017.
 42. One of the ninety-nine names of God mentioned in the Qur'an. Muhyidin Ibn 'Arabi and Muhammad Yunis Masruhin, *Being and Time in the Sufi Discourse of Muhyidin Ibn 'Arabi*, p. 152–67.
 43. *Ibid.*, p. 271–80.
 44. Chittick, *The Self Disclosure of God*, p. 288.
 45. *Ibid.*, p. 279–81.
 46. Abd al-Baqi Muftah, *The Key to Ibn 'Arabi's Fusus al-Hikam* (Marrakesh: Dar al-Quba al-Zarqa', 1997), p. 19–24.
 47. Chittick, *The Self Disclosure of God*, p. 164–290.
 48. The Real (al-Haq) is one of the Divine Names.
 49. Muhyidin Ibn 'Arabi, *Divine Sayings: 101 Hadith Qudsi*, trans. Stephen Hirtenstein and Martin Notcutt (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2008), p. 70.
 50. Chittick, *The Self Disclosure of God*, p. 290.
 51. *Ibid.*, p. 290.
 52. This is a prophetic saying. Qaiser Shahzad, 'Ibn Arabi's Metaphysics of the Human Body', *Islamic Studies*, XLVI, No. 4 (2007), p. 509.
 53. *The Qur'an* (95: 5).
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 59. Muhyidin Ibn 'Arabi and Abu 'Ala' Afifi, *Fusus al-Hikam* (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 1948), p. 139–203.
 60. Muhyidin Ibn 'Arabi and Muhammad Yunis Masruhin, *Being and Time in the Sufi Discourse of Muhyidin Ibn 'Arabi*, p. 249–50.
 61. *Safina*, p. 114.
 62. *The Qur'an* (41: 53), as cited in Chittick, *The Self Disclosure of God*, p. 6.
 63. There is also a prophetic saying that 'he who knows himself knows his Lord'. Chittick, *The Self Disclosure of God*, p. 6–9.
 64. Muhyidin Ibn 'Arabi and Muhammad Yunis Masruhin, *Being and Time in the Sufi Discourse of Muhyidin Ibn 'Arabi*, p. 183.
 65. *Ibid.*, p. 131–3.
 66. *Ibid.*, p.146.