

Muslim Cosmology: Mystic Participation and Spiritual-Psychic Energy

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Bio:

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Abstract:

This is an anthropological study of the hierarchically ordered Muslim cosmology with its seen and unseen spheres. Cosmology and mystic participation in Islam are manifested, for instance, in Sufism (*tṣawwuf*). This paper proposes that the connection between the visible and invisible spheres of the Muslim cosmology is embodied in the Sufis' bodily rituals, mystic participations and esoteric beliefs resulting in spiritual-psychic energy. Muslim cosmologies are ethnographically addressed within the views and values of Muslims living in Egypt. Muslim cosmology is infused with deeply significant mystic dimensions according to which there exists, beyond the cosmos' material reality, another imperceptible cosmos that is viewed as more real and more authentic. Muslim cosmology is contingent on

models of spirituality, sanctification, illumination, unification and creation without nullifying mundane activities.

Keywords: cosmology, Islam, mysticism, participation, liturgy, religion, psychic energy, Egypt.

Introduction

Scholars from a variety of disciplines have shown sustained interest in comprehending Islam and Muslim cultures in various locations around the world. However, ethnographic and cross-cultural studies of contemporary Muslim cosmologies, real or imaginative, are woefully scant. Except for researches that deal with the cosmologies of certain Muslim intellectuals, such as Ibn ‘Arabi, or classical texts from the medieval ages (Corbin 1969; Chittick 2007; Heinen 1982, Izutsu 1964, Nasr 1964; Netton 1989), there are few contemporary studies in publication addressing the Muslim cosmologies from anthropological perspectives. And little attention has been given to the relationship between Muslim cosmology, mystic participation, rituals, and spiritual-psychic energy. This article tackles a timely topic encompassing such interrelated themes as Muslim cosmology, mystic participation, spiritual-psychic energy, and emic interpretation of sacred tradition. Put differently, this study is critical to recognizing the place Muslims now occupy on the globe and presents fresh grounds for ethnographic and cross-cultural inquiries of Muslim cosmologies. It endeavors to bring to attention the impact of sanctified and non-sanctified cosmologies on the construction of identities and aspirations of Muslim communities in various locations.

It is worth noting that the Arabic word “*kawn*,” the cosmos or universe, is derived from the root k-w-n, which means *to be, to exist, to take place, or to happen* within temporal and spatial dimensions. It also indicates the dynamic process of being and becoming (*kaynūna*) as opposed to notions of the world (‘*ālam*), as being settled or fixed. Although the term cosmology denotes a scientific discipline and is generally concerned with astronomy or the origin and evolution of the universe, it emerges as an encompassing and useful tool for the anthropological study of

people's views of the cosmos (el-Aswad 1994, 2003; Herzfeld 2001). Generally, cosmology refers to assumptions concerning the structure of the cosmos or universe whether or not those assumptions are religiously founded. It includes human and nonhuman beings and forces, both perceptible and imperceptible, that constitute the integrated parts of the cosmos (el-Aswad 2002).

What distinguishes this article from contemporary studies on Islam is its subject matter and strategy. It concerns the ethnography of the hierarchically ordered Muslim cosmology with its seen and unseen spheres within and about which there is mystic participation and symbolic implication. It is noteworthy that cosmology and mystic participation in Islam are manifested, for example, in Sunni Sufism (*ṭṣawwuf*). In this study, Muslim cosmologies are ethnographically addressed within the views and values of Muslims in Egypt to create better ethnographic understanding of Muslim communities. The strategy employed presumes that discursive and non-discursive actions, participation in rituals, prayers, and lifestyles are core means for examining and grasping Muslim cosmology.

The vitality of religion in a materialistically oriented and globally dominant and changing world has been a nexus of current debates in anthropological circles. Advocates of secularism claim that Sufism and religion more globally are vanishing from the modern world, but they are not disappearing. Contrarily, people and younger generations of postindustrial societies of the West today are showing renewed interest in religious and spiritual matters (Berger 1999).

Muslims construct and alter cosmologies; likewise, cosmologies shape and impact Muslims' patterns of thought and behavior. Cosmologies deal with such issues as the structure of the universe, the place of humans in the world, seen and unseen beings and forces, and other issues related to notions of visibility and invisibility in both the cosmos and the human being. Generally, what is invisible here designates any unseen being or force, benevolent or malevolent, such as the soul, spirit, psyche, angel, ghost, phantasm, double, devil, *jinn*, and any other imperceptible animate or inanimate object, impacting humans (el-Aswad 2023). This, my point of departure, is fundamentally cosmological insofar as cosmology

encompasses a totality of the universe in its perceptible and imperceptible dimensions.

I propose that the Muslim cosmology is contingent on models of spirituality, sanctification, illumination, unification and creation without nullifying mundane domains (el-Aswad 2005a, 2005b). This cosmology is influenced by various interrelated factors. The first factor is the exegeses of the religious scholars, *'ulama*. These exegeses, however, are not divine, sacred or unchanging. Rather, they are limited by the time, context and culture in which they appear. The second factor is the tradition of Sufi orders and related beliefs and rituals. The third factor pertains to folk or popular tradition of local communities with regard to their views of, and relationships with, Sufi orders. These factors, inseparable in the context of sociocultural reality, are expounded in this study for theoretical purposes.

Cosmology and Ideology

For the purpose of theorizing Muslim cosmological beliefs, this study develops a distinction between cosmology and ideology. Cosmology is a cluster of ideas, beliefs, shared meanings, understandings and practices that render life meaningful and habitable. While ideology implies certain economic and political orientations related particularly to power, cosmology indicates belief systems and related symbolic practices. Cosmological belief system is an interpretative and integrative paradigm encompassing assumptions concerning the cosmos or the world in which people live and with which they interact. Cosmology is comparable to “meaning system,” “cultural imaginary,” “patterns of thought,” and “perceptual framework,” with focus on the way people imagine their world, not expressed in theoretical terms, but manifested in images, stories and participations (el-Aswad 2012). Cosmology, shared by large groups of people, is generated by people’s aspiration to reach a unified comprehension of the world, drawing together facts, principles, assumptions, generalizations and answers to ultimate questions. On the contrary, ideology is linked to the process of sustaining authoritative and asymmetrical relations of power aiming at maintaining domination (Geertz 1973; Thompson 1984).

Sociological inquiries of Islam and Muslim communities have paid less attention to issues of reconstruction of cosmologies, cultural diversity, and spiritual transformation than to issues related to economic and ideological domains or radical Islamist politics (el-Aswad 2013, el-Aswad 2016a, el-Aswad 2016b; el-Aswad et al. 2020). Muslim cosmologies are viewed here not as an ideological system but as a system of meanings generated and enacted in different courses of public and private scenarios dealing with visible and invisible domains. Cosmology is treated here as a holistic model concerning cosmological beliefs that are closely associated with religious representations. As Durkheim (1965, 21) observed, “there is no religion that is not a cosmology at the same time that it is a speculation upon divine things.” This study proposes that religious concepts and beliefs are not just parts of the cosmologies, but also contribute in making up certain core elements of these cosmologies. Though latent, shared cosmological beliefs have played a significant role in the social history of Muslim communities and have manifested themselves powerfully in critical historical moments. It is a matter of cosmology and religious orientation that give social, economic and political domains themselves a subordinate position within the larger whole.

Method and Theoretical Framework

Along with library research, archives, government documents, oral history, and textual traditions, I used in-depth interviews, participant observations and long-term observations to collect data. In Egypt, ethnographic data were drawn from the city of Tanta and village of al-Ragdiyya (6 kilometers north of Tanta). Tanta, the capital city of the al-Gharbiyya province (95 kilometers north of Cairo), is the largest and most active commercial center located in the middle Delta. It is also known as a center for religious festivals related to the revered Sufi Sidi Ahmad al-Badawi. The ethnographic material was obtained in the communities during three fieldwork studies of varying intervals conducted in 2006, 2012 and 2020. These short and long intervals helped me to observe and assimilate differences and similarities between these communities regarding religious and cosmological beliefs and practices.

I participated in numerous religious and social gatherings and other acts of devotion in the mosques and other places including those of Sufi orders (*tarīqa*). For all Muslims, Sufi *shaikhs* are identified and followed based on their eminent spiritual or mystic teaching, and competence in religious knowledge whether achieved through formal education (*al-Azhar*), for instance, or through self-education. However, Sufi *shaikhs* share with the folk or the majority of ordinary people common cosmological concepts and values, though they might reject or elaborate on some of them.

Theoretically, in dealing with Muslim cosmology this study applies Louis Dumont's hierarchical or asymmetric opposition, which is distinguished from the binary symmetric opposition of Lévi-Strauss (1963) according to which two opposites have equal status. Dumont (1986, 8) argues, "hierarchy is implicit in various aspects of people's cosmology and social life." Hierarchical opposition necessitates the attachment of a value to one of two opposites. That is, a highly developed belief or idea, to which a value is attached, contradicts and encompasses a lower idea. Opposition here contains a double relation of identity and contrariety and can be used to analyze contradictory aspects belonging to different levels. On the one hand, there is a distinction within an identity; on the other, "there is an encompassment of the contrary" (Dumont 1986, 227). Through the application of Dumont's notion of hierarchy, the one part or principle that stands for the whole (the cosmos) can be made evident. The hierarchical structuralist approach can reveal significant aspects of the Muslim cosmology hitherto unrealized.

In order to explicate the relationship between "rituals" and "beliefs" pertaining to the Muslim cosmology, this study utilizes the concept of participation. Stanley Tambiah, in his reformulation of Lévy-Bruhl's notion of participation, stated, "participation can be represented as occurring when persons, groups, animals, places, and natural phenomena are in a relation of contiguity, and translate that relation into one of existential immediacy and contact and shared affinities" (Tambiah 1990, 107). Ruth Bunzel (1985, xviii), quoted Lévy-Bruhl in her introduction to his book, *How Natives Think*: "To exist is to participate. . . Without

participation one has no existence... without involvement with others and with nature, one has no identity.”

Tambiah (1973) has viewed “participation” as one of the foundations of religious experiences. Participation, a holistic and presentational way of thinking, implies a sort of association between persons and things in traditional thought to the point of identity and consubstantiality. It is interesting to observe that L'evy-Bruhl repudiated the criticism that he, by applying his concept of mystical participation, portrayed traditional people as irrational or prelogical. He stated that in traditional society participation was used to refer to a continuum of forces and agencies found in natural and non-natural objects. It is also worthy to note that Lévy-Bruhl’s principle of ‘mystical participation’ (1985), according to which all things in traditional societies are thought to have a mystical participation with each other, is in concordance with the idea of Muslim cosmology in that most of the animate and inanimate entities of the universe participate in the cosmic energy.

Cosmology and Mystic Participation of the Sufis

The section deals with Egyptian Sufi Orders (*turuq*, sing. *ṭarīqa*) with special focus on the Shinnawiyya Sufi Order that stemmed from the Sufi Order of the Ahmadiyy (known also as *Badawiyya* and/or *Sutūhiyya*) founded in Tanta by the Sufi leader Sidi al-Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi in the 13th century (‘Ashur 1998; Mahmud 1993; el-Aswad 2012; Mayeur-Jaouen 2004). Sufism highlights the spirituality and deep religiosity of Muslims and is treated here as an integral part of Muslim cosmology (el-Aswad 2004, 2006; al-Sha‘rani 2004; Trimmingham 1972).

Islam has been perceived as encompassing different cosmologies, such as those of Sunni and Shi‘a (el-Aswad 2010a). However, what makes a cosmology sacred or secular is not its subject matter, but rather the sources from which its basic notions and assumptions are deduced. The basic doctrines and practices for all Muslims include: the five pillars of Islam that must be observed by ordinary Muslims regardless of their sect, occupation, education or exegeses of religious scholars (*‘ulama*). These pillars are the testimony of the oneness of Allah and Mohammad as His prophet (*ash-shahādātain*), praying five-times daily (*ṣalāt*), alms giving (*zakāt*), fasting during the month of Ramadan, and participating in the

pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*). Additionally, one of the basic religious doctrines is *al-ghaib*, the unknowable or invisible, upon which the entire Muslim cosmology is built and that has a profound impact on Muslim's daily lives. What makes the invisible, *al-ghaib* a dominant theme is the fact that it is essentially a religiously grounded concept that refers to the belief in Allah, the angels, prophets, and holy books, as well as to such concepts as the hereafter and fate (el-Aswad 2019a, 2019b; Ibn Kathir 1937). The invisible or *al-ghaib* has a highest-order meaning founded upon ultimate sacred postulates which are “beyond empirical verification” and are neither verifiable nor falsifiable but nevertheless taken to be unquestionable (Rappaport 1999, 180).

The invisible encloses what is spiritual, unknowable, imperceptible and existent though absent, while the visible comprises what is material, natural, and objective with historical and geographical components. For further clarification, the concept of invisibility is expressed in what Muslims call “the world of absence” (*‘ālam al-ghaib*) as opposed to “the world of presence” (*‘ālam ash-shahādah*). There are two kinds of *al-ghaib*. The first kind is the absolute or complete *ghaib* that relates, for instance, to such ultimate events as the end of the world, resurrection and the nature of souls or spirits. Second, is the relative or partial *ghaib*, bestowed by God on prophets and *awliyā’* (sing. *walīy*) or friends of God (el-Aswad 2019a; al-Sha‘rāwī 1998). For the Sufis, the Qur’an contains apparent or exoteric and hidden or esoteric meanings (al-Jilani 1993; Mahmud 1993). This, in turn, implies the existence of two interrelated religious ways of knowledge; one is acquired, represented in the *shari‘a*, seeking to worship God; the other is spiritual or internal (*bāṭin*) reflected in the truth (*haqīqa*) aimed at knowing God. The Sufis prefer esoteric interpretations of the Qur’an and the traditions of the Prophet over exoteric interpretations.

In this study of Muslim cosmology, focus is on the way Sufis and ordinary people perceive and imagine their social and transcultural surroundings, not often expressed in doctrinal or theoretical terms, but embodied in rituals, images, symbols, narratives, and mystic participations. Fundamentally, Muslim cosmology is drawn from the Qur’an and the Prophet’s tradition (*Ḥdīth*). However, certain

intellectual Muslims not only criticize Sufi views and rituals as non-Islamic, but also fail to examine Sufism from the emic or inner perspective of its adherents thereby creating critical dichotomy between scriptural or orthodox Islam and Sufism.

In a discussion with Shaikh Hasan, the head of the Shinnawiyya Sufi Order about the meaning of a phrase I heard from a Sufi member indicating that the Prophet Muhammad “is the master of the two worlds” (*Sayyid al-kawnain*), he recounted that the structure of the cosmos or universe (*kawn*) is composed of two different but inseparable cosmoses, one visible (*zāhir*), and the other invisible (*bāṭin, ghaib*). To confirm his view, he mentioned the sacred occurrence of the Nocturnal Journey (*al-Isrā’ wa al-mi’rāj*) according to which the Prophet mounted an astonishing horse (*al-burāq*) and miraculously traveled from the sacred mosque in Mecca (*al-Masjid al-Harām*) to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in al-Quds-Jerusalem. Then, the Prophet, accompanied by the archangel Gabriel (*Jibrīl*), ascended to the highest point of the seventh heaven, passing through all the heavens, before returning to his place in Mecca. Though I already knew about this sacred event, the connection made by the Sufi leader between the Prophet’s Nocturnal Journey and the existence of the concealed or invisible heavens was illuminating. It is worth noting that during this sacred event, only the Prophet was permitted to reach the highest point known as *Sidrat al-Muntaha*, close to the Gardens of the Abode (*Jannat al-Ma’wa*). By passing with his soul and body through the divine and lucid levels of the cosmos, the Prophet was assured that heaven and earth are undivided geography (el-Aswad 2002, 2012).

The prophet Muhammad is venerated by Sufis as an exemplary model for being a true Sufi due to his solitude, meditation and contemplation in the cave on the Mount, *Ghār of Hirā’* (Ibn Hisham 1978). All mystic doctrines refer essentially to Muhammad’s illuminating truth (*al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥamadiyya*) as present in both Sufism and Shi’ism (Nasr 1988). Sufis refer to the luminous quality of the Prophet Muhammad (*al-nūr al-Muhammadī*), a prototype of the mystic experience. They emphasize that only the Prophet with his radiating light can penetrate the cosmos in such a short period of time. Although inner insights and meditations are important

aspects of mystic thought, divine knowledge (*laddunī* or *rabbānī*), bestowed directly by God to the faithful is viewed by mystics as the highest form of mystic knowledge that generates spiritual-psychic energy. Hierarchically, highly revered and holy persons such as prophets and friends of God (*awliyā' Allah*) have powerful souls and psychic energies enabling them to receive divine knowledge as well as to demonstrate miracles and wonders (*karāmāt*).

All cosmoses have an invisible existence as well as a visible one. This is to say that what is visible (*ẓāhir*) or present (*hāḍir*) is not the only substance that exists in the cosmos. What is invisible, hidden (*bāṭin*) or absent (*ghā'ib*) also exists. Metaphorically speaking, what is invisible or absent is concealed (*maḥjūb*), either by its very nature, such as a soul, or by something else, such as a veil or cover. It is the cosmological context within which the problems of concealment, veil, cover, mystery, secrecy, and esoteric experience can be understood.

The visible and invisible cosmological domains necessitate two distinct, but interconnected modes of knowledge. One is associated with the knowledge of common sense and everyday observation; the other, with the knowledge of the spiritual, mystic and inner esoteric realm (*bāṭin*) or unseen reality (el-Aswad 2017, 2019a, 2019b). Muslims, impacted by Qur'anic verses (2: 29, 164; 3: 190; 14:32; 16:12; 33; 39: 5; 41: 9-12; 67:3), believe that there are seven skies or heavens situated and leveled one above the other. The only visible cosmos is the first heaven (*as-samā' al-ūlā*), also called the lowest heaven (*as-samā' ad-dunyā*). The other heavens and their inhabitants are invisible. The visible constituents of the first heaven are the sun (*ash-shams*), the moon (*al-qamar*), the stars (*an-nujuūm*, sing. *najm*), and the comets (*ash-shuhub*), in addition to the earth (*al-arḍ*). The invisible components of the cosmos consist of the six upper or higher heavens, and all unrevealed entities, spirits and forces that exist above (such as the Highest Angelic Host, *al-Mala'u al-'Ala*), within, and beyond these imperceptible heavens (el-Aswad 2012).

The invisible cosmos, however, is viewed by Muslims as hierarchically superior to, and encompasses the visible cosmos and therefore stands for the whole universe. In other words, though the visible and invisible constitute two different

cosmoses and are associated with different modes of thought, they are not separated but rather form a unity which is the cosmos or universe itself. To reiterate, the cosmos as a whole consists of two opposite, yet hierarchically ordered parts including the visible and the invisible. In terms of hierarchical oppositions, a highly developed idea contradicts and includes a lower idea (Dumont 1986). In this connection, the invisible, which is a dominant concept in Muslim cosmology, both contradicts and encompasses the visible. This sort of mystic thinking might be incomprehensible to Western patterns of thought that stress the intellectual and rational, while neglecting the imaginative and emotional, or mystic aspects of non-western people.

All in all, for mystic thinking, the idea of encompassment resolves the problem of the opposition between the seen and the unseen. That is, the invisible or interior aspect of the cosmos for Muslims is more significant than the visible or exterior aspect. This is a matter of the values attached to each domain of the cosmos. As Roy Rappaport (1979, 156) maintained, “A hierarchy of values is a hierarchy of meaning, for values are a category of meaning.” Nevertheless, all cosmoses, visible and invisible are integrated signs or expressions of the same divine cosmological order in the sense that they are created, preserved and encompassed by the One God (Allah al-Wāḥid). To authenticate this belief, Sufi members occasionally utter the colloquial phrase, “a cosmos ordered by its Owner [God]” (*kawn wa munazzamu ṣāḥbuh*).

Mystic Participation and the Glorification of Allah (*tasbīḥ*)

The concept of mystic participation is used here “to designate all experience which apprehends forces and relationships imperceptible to the sense. All perceptions in some degree transcend the bare sensual experiences and incorporates meanings of the subject” (Bunzel 1985, xii). Put differently, for the Sufis, mystic participation is the apprehension of hidden dimensions of the cosmos, sensed or felt rather than reasoned. There is a mutual substantiation between mystic participation and Muslim cosmology in the sense that certain forms of mystic participation are justified or sanctified by religious beliefs, while some significant aspects of Muslim cosmology, especially those related to invisible domains, are validated and

substantiated by mystic participation. In all cases, religious meanings are essential factors in maintaining and accentuating the notion of sanctity especially when it is applied to non-religious domains. For instance, statements concerning certain cosmological features may be sanctified by associating them with religious propositions. That is, when cosmological beliefs are sanctified, they become as real as the natural world. Within this context, sanctified cosmologies empower the faithful (el-Aswad 2003).

By and large, the cosmological belief system, influenced by Muslim culture, determines the appropriate time and place in which people conduct certain practices and rituals. For example, the dawn (*al-fajr*) or morning twilight is favored for its spiritual quality as being the time not only for Muslims to perform the first prayer of the day, but also for all creatures to participate in the cosmic awakening. In this context of Muslim cosmology, mystical participation implies the fusion of the physical and spiritual domains of the universe represented in the notion of the inhabitation of the cosmos (*y'ammār al-kawn*) in both visible and invisible domains. Muslims ascribe to everything in the cosmos, including animals, birds, and other creatures, unique features for performing the glorification of God (*tasbīh*) through mystical participation, rituals, sounds or languages and enduring energies that are beyond human comprehension.

This feature of the cosmic energy explains the fact that although Sufi adherents are aware that secrets of the unseen or unknowable (*asrār al-kawn*) are beyond their capacities, they never stop aspiring to have glimpses of them either through mystic participation in rituals and meditation or through the mediation of their patron shaikh. I heard a Sufi leader, holding Islamic roseries (*sibḥa*), saying that the visible cosmos is surrounded and penetrated by spirits, angels, jinn and other invisible forces and beings. He also mentioned Qur'anic verses according to which all creatures as well as all the heavens praise and glorify Allah (*yusabbiḥu lillahi*): “The seven heavens and the earth and all beings therein, glorify Him and there is not a thing but glorifies His Praise. but you do not understand their glorification” (Qur'an 17:44). Stanley Walens (quoted in Sahlins 2022, 29, italics added) wrote, “every human activity and characteristic is in some way *participant*

in the world of power; similarly, every animal, spirit, and plant being *participates* to some degree in the possession and exercise of supernatural power.”

Participation in the Sufi orders is organized and practiced in local and regional contexts facilitated by traditional modes of communication and networking. A Sufi leader differentiated between what he metaphorically called the “rope of God” (*ḥabl Allah*) and the “rope of people” (*ḥabl an-nās*). The rope of God, he recounted, refers to the spiritual relation between people and God that must be maintained not only by praying, but also by observing and preserving the Qur’an, which is the actual rope holding Muslims together. By the “rope of people” he meant the social relationships between individuals. Here, the model of participation extends to relations between persons in such a way that the Sufi order may succeed or fail according to whether its members are faithful and observe the prescribed Islamic-Sufi principles or whether they fail to do so.

Members of the Shinnawiyya Sufi Order I interviewed seek to elevate the spiritual quality inherent in people. To varying degrees, they see the possibility of making a better world, starting with their immediate personal relationships with members of the Order, friends, family members and others within the broader society. This social and spiritual consciousness enables people to be aware of higher dimensions of being as well as of the hidden secret that can be transmitted through faith. In their gatherings, Sufis feel secure to express and expose, emotionally and spiritually, what they consider as pure and true. They see themselves on a path of self-discovery; a path of growth, which they hope will lead to spiritual empowerment and ability to love and share.

There is a dominant belief among Muslims which is supported by the Qur’an and Islamic tradition that nobody, visible or invisible, alive or dead, can know the future or what is unseen and absent (*al-ghaib*) except for Allah. Nevertheless, in their everyday lives people show great curiosity about the unknown, *al-majhūl*, and the future, particularly in times of crises. Generally speaking, what is unknown, unseen, or hidden, is either feared, revered or both. This awesome and distressing preoccupation with secret, mysterious or mystic and concealed matters is expressed in a widely used saying; “we seek our God's

protection against the concealed (*al-mikhabbī*) when it appears and reveals itself (*zāhar wa bān*).”

In their discourse regarding both this cosmos or world and the world to come, Sufi members expressed their concern about three foremost transitional cosmic events: the end of this cosmos (*nihāyat al-kawn*), the liminal period in which the cosmos remains inactive or dead (*al-barzakh*), and the day of resurrection (*yaum al-qiyāmah* or *al-ba‘th*). The underlying theme here is that both the person or individual and the universe independently participate in the process of transition from one stage to another until they reach the final eternal stage (el-Aswad 1987).

Spiritual-Psychic Energy and Participation in the *Zikr* Ritual

Sufis perform practices and rituals (*sha‘ā‘ir* [sing. *sha‘ira*]) aimed at disclosing the unknown and unseen in the cosmos. Ritual, in general, refers to “*the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterance not entirely encoded by the performers*” (Rappaport 1999, 24 italics original). Additionally, ritual is a conventional mode of communication implying symbolic repetitive pattern of behavior that conveys affective or emotional sensibility and is distinguished from ordinary instrumental activity. Such a definition connotes that not all repetitive behavior is religious. However, all manner of spiritual and “moral acts may be understood by those performing them and by communities within which they occur to be innately religious, or at least to be informed by religious principles” (Rappaport 1999, 25).

Rituals and communicative performances express something internal and emotional which is difficult to explain verbally (Dissanayake 1979; Rappaport 1999; Turner 1982). Specifically, the transformation of the psychic energies of those engaged in ecstatic-ritualistic participation embodied in the rituals is highly valued by members of the Shinnawiyya Sufi Order. In this context, the spiritual-psychic energy (that can be captured through bodily rituals) is indivisible from the belief in *al-ghaib* (the unknowable or invisible) the goes beyond any specific Muslim sect and is associated with overarching Muslim worldviews. Muslims use rituals as bodily ways of creatively enacting and embodying their hidden thoughts and beliefs concerning the spiritual and psychic energy hidden in the cosmos (el-Aswad 2022, 2023).

I attended various Sufi rituals and gatherings (*ḥaḍra*) in which Sufi participants organized themselves in a “circle for the collective remembrance of Allah” (*ḥalaqat zikr*). After reciting some verses of the Qur’an, praying, and reading poems praising God, the Prophet and his family (*Āl al-bait*), the participants stood to collectively perform the bodily *zikr* (*dhikr*) in a particular fashion. While moving their bodies toward right they said, “Allah”; toward left, they said “alive.” They spent almost one hour solemnly repeating the phrase “God is alive” (Allah *ḥayy*) in the same fashion. The leader, standing in the middle of the circle, was uttering, in a deep voice, the word, “He” (*huwa*) with reference to God. The shaikh asked the participants to remember God (*udhkur* Allah). They responded collectively, “there is no God but Allah.” Then, he said, “confirm the oneness of God” (*waḥhid* Allah) and the attendants responded, also collectively, using the same phrase, “there is no God but Allah.”

Though mysticism is not necessarily based on ecstatic experience, Sufis do not reject such an experience when it occurs. And the acquisition of psychic energy varies from person to person. For instance, while performing the *zikr* ritual, one of the participants experienced a tense ecstatic incident when his body began to shiver and his teeth began to chatter. He also exhibited exceptional energies and began uttering repeatedly and rapidly the name of Allah. In addition, this particular participant started making some audible ecstatic utterances (*shaṭahāt*) such as: “light upon light, light upon light, He [Allah] is light.” Finally, he felt, during the *zikr* ritual, as if there were energies or radiations of loving unseen forces such as angels, and affectionate spirits coming from an extraterrestrial spiritual world (*‘ālam samāwy rūḥāny*). Other Sufis participants described such a person as *majzūb* (mystically attracted). It is noteworthy that in his discussion of three hierarchical levels of meaning, Rappaport (1979), employing Charles Peirce's tripartite classification of signs (icon, index, and symbol), states that high-order meaning is grounded in indexicality, identity, participation or unity as represented in the identification of self with the cosmological entities. Here, mystic-ritualistic participation indicates a cognitive paradigm in which invisible forces and spirits are ever-present participants in Sufis’ liturgies. Interestingly, the *majzūb* Sufi conveyed

that he experienced having dream-visions (*ru'yā*) for two days before participating in the *zikr* ritual. He perceived the “divine light” and woke himself up reiterating the same phrase of “light upon light” he had uttered during his ecstatic experience. The *majzūb* is believed, through ritual performance, to display spiritual and psychic energies due to participating in the cosmic energy and life forces of the universe. Participation, Tambiah (1990, 108), maintains, is a mode of relating that implies “sensory and affective communication” as perception and emotion are inseparable from cognition or consciousness.

For the Sufis, spiritual-psychic energy, immeasurable and esoteric in nature, is driven by spiritual and unseen cosmic forces whose representation may have to be corporeal if it is to be taken indisputably and rendered credible. As Rappaport (1999, 141) stated, “Corporeal representation gives weight to the incorporeal and gives visible substance to aspects of existence which are themselves impalpable, but of great importance in the ordering of social life.” Further, psychic energy can be embodied in “self-referential,” which embraces non-discursive and affective dimensions of ritual as well as identifies “current physical, psychic or social states of ritual participants” whose participation forms a core element of ritual (Rappaport 1999, 52). Here, subject and object are inseparable. That is, within the *zikr* ritual, ecstatic and mystic occurrences, conveying a self-referential message, are viewed positively and as a normal and expected state of energetic consciousness. In this context, the *zikr*, empowered by the force of collective participation, becomes a dynamic bodily agent permeating a new state of awareness of God’s sublime transcendence.

In an interview with a Sufi leader, he affirmed that through performing specific rituals, praying and reciting certain sacred verses of the Qur’an or uttering the divine names of God (*tasbīḥ*), he, by God’ willing (*mashī’at Allah*), would be given signs (*ishārāt*) or markers (*‘alāmāt*) revealing aspects of the hidden cosmos or reality. This is to say that all sense of contact with a reality other than the perceptible surroundings “is an experience of participation, as is all apprehension of meanings that go beyond the visible thing in itself” (Bunzel 1985, xiiv). Clearly, these rituals, prayers and utterances reveal the belief that behind one cosmos or

world lies many others. The invocation or remembrance of Allah through *zikr* rituals is believed to form an inner or psychic-spiritual connection with God. God bestows spiritual enlightenment on those who enact their faith in their daily life and a person should do his/her best to draw closer to Allah. However, when I asked the Sufi leader about what would happen to him tomorrow or in the future, he replied, “this matter belongs to the realm of the unknown” (*fī ‘ilm al-ghaib*).

The aforementioned examples show differing patterns of mystic participations dealing with cosmic energy. Although they are collective, mystic participations, in certain cases, are based on psychic experiences known as spiritual states, *ahwāl* (sing. *hāl*) attained by means of the *zikr* ritual, spiritual guidance, meditation, intuition, dreams, and visions (el-Aswad 2010b). In terms of mystic reciprocity, it is the *divine will* of God that explains the Sufi mystics’ extraordinary actions, blessings and wonders (*karāmāt*). It is worth pointing out that the *awliyā’* (friends of God) are metaphorically depicted by Sufi members as cosmic navigators who know the geography and traffic of the cosmos. Within this mystic framework, people's belief in the ability of a living *walīy* to be in different places or different periods of time simultaneously can be rendered understandable. This is also manifested in the image Muslims have of al-Khiḍr, the evergreen but unseen cosmic *walīy*, upon whom Allah has bestowed divine hidden knowledge (*‘ilm laddunī*), and who is believed to be alive and attentive to whomever mentions his name. It is within this mystic cosmos imbued with divine miracles that al-Khiḍr, like other revered *awliyā’*, is able to be present, though invisibly, among those who recall his story.

Although this worldly life is depicted by Sufis as deceptive and full of contradictions and illusions, Sufis and Muslim mystics are not detached from mundane reality. They live in an “enchanted” world, a cosmos of spirits and forces, which can be described in terms of “embodied spirituality” requiring ethical and aesthetic attitudes to the world that are also central to self-nurturance and psychic energy. Sufis are interested in achieving the genuine understanding of *ḥaqīqa* or what is real and hidden underlying the surface of cosmological phenomena. To know the truth, *ḥaqīqa*, Sufis rely on the “disclosure” or “unveiling” (*al-kashf*) of

what is the hidden or veiled in themselves as well as in the cosmos. Sufis believe life has only one ultimate source or Truth (*Ḥaqq*), Allah, rendering the entire world or cosmos a unity notwithstanding the apparent divergences.

Conclusion

This research has shown that cosmologies, embodied in the rituals, mystic participations, practices and discourses of Sufi members and ordinary Muslims, reveal deep inner meaning systems. The Muslim cosmology is not constructed solely by religious scholars (*‘ulama*), or literate intellectual elite; rather it is latent in Islamic tradition, embedded in popular imagination, and triggered by Sufis’ rituals and mystic participation in the hidden realms of the universe. That is, the Muslim cosmology does not form a monolithic bloc, but represents uniquely ordered syntheses of multiple differing views and practices. What is unimaginable, esoteric or invisible, and incomprehensible becomes, through participation in rituals and related utterances, imaginable, visible, and comprehensible. Embodied spirituality necessitates an understanding that the hidden cosmos is not inanimate, but animated and highly significant.

This article has demonstrated that the belief in the sacred or divine “invisibility” (*al-ghaib*) strengthens the visibility of Muslim cosmology and empowers a spiritual-psychic energy of the faithful. I argue that it is the power of the imagined, internalized, and sanctified invisible within and through which the Muslim cosmology can be understood. The Muslim cosmology of Sunni Sufis is infused with deeply significant mystic dimensions according to which there exists, beyond the cosmos’ material reality, another imperceptible cosmos that is viewed as more real and more authentic. The permeability of the esoteric cosmology of the Sufis is embedded in its ability to construct a sense of identity that is fortified by participating in the imaginary cosmology as well as by acting out the inner views related to past and future events of particular religious and cosmic significance.

As far as the cosmos as a whole is concerned, the invisible or unseen domain (*al-ghaib*), gives meaning to the visible cosmos or world, (*az-zāhir* or *ālam ash-shahādah*). It is to be noted, however, that, although the visible domain, including the perceived cosmos and the human body, is encompassed by, and inferior to the

invisible or spiritual sphere, it is not denounced or neglected. Muslims show a great concern of their well-being in the tangible cosmos or this-worldly life. The visible parts of the cosmos, which are gifts given by God, are (or must be) taken care of and maintained in good condition. Muslim cosmology accentuates the theme of a divine higher power surpassing any other. Such a belief represents an inexhaustible source of spiritual, social, emotional and psychic empowerment. The future of Muslim cosmology is not a matter of purely local or regional concern but is bound up with the future of tradition of Islam as a whole.

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