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Perceiving the Intangible: Introspective & Meditational Practices in Moroccan Sufism

Anna Gray Morales
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Dr. Taieb Belghazi

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Abstract

Sufism has earned an exponentially prominent role within Morocco's political and social arenas through recent decades. The Moroccan monarchy's endorsement of the religious variant and its prevalence in pop-cultural events, national journalism, and literature are a few indicators of its growing influence. However, the tradition is, by no means, a modern construction and has existed since the beginning of the larger Islamic tradition. What qualities, then, has granted Sufism its relevance as a cornerstone of Moroccan society today? Its chief focus on introspective and meditational practices, rather than physical religious discipline, may foster a more inclusive and liberal form of spirituality to match Morocco's recent political agendas. This paper will investigate what types of exposure Moroccan people have for education on Sufism, what its general perceptions are by Moroccan society, and how its meditational and introspective differentiators might open doors for marginalized groups.

key terms: Sufism, Morocco, introspection, meditation, dhikr, political Islam, religious morality, spiritual awareness, inclusivity, mysticism

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Table of Contents

I. Introduction

"When a Sufi stares at someone, he keeps both eyes closed and instead opens a third eye- the eye

that sees the inner realm"-Elif Shafak, The Forty Rules of Love

The narrative of Sufism within Morocco, akin to an evolutionary process, has continuously reshaped through history to adapt to its everchanging Moroccan environment. Sufism's prototypes of religious authority, levels of affiliation with governmental bodies, and standards of engagement with society have all persistently ebbed and flowed through countless social and political movements in Morocco. Yet through this, a few qualities of Moroccan Sufism, and Sufism more generally, have withstood the test of time to qualify as defining features of the religious variant. One of these distinguishing features is Sufism's notable tendency towards **introspective** and **meditational** practices, rather than exoteric ones[1]. So how, then, does this evolutionarily robust quality contribute to Sufism's impact on the Moroccan nation? And what *exactly* does this introspective priority in its religious ethos signify?

To consider the impact of Sufism on and in Moroccan society is to consider the fate of Sufis and non-Sufi's in Morocco alike. Might Sufism's inclination towards the inner realm encourage a more universal morality? Do Sufism's qualities foster a religious community in which traditionally marginalized individuals are empowered through spiritual agency? With the Islamic tradition resting at the heart of state governance, and subsequently the core of social standards, the characteristic nature and treatment of Sufi practices in the nation have an

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[1] Refer to my list of key terms and definitions on page 6 for definitions of introspective, meditational, and exoteric.

impending impact on the treatment of its state's citizens. Thus, through transitive nature, issues of religious expression, countering extremism, women's rights, patriarchal power dynamics, and international relations are all matters high at stake.

Personal Background, Positionality, Limitations, and Advantages

As an American student conducting research in a foreign country, it is essential for me to acknowledge my positionality and the limits of my research based on my background and beliefs. I am an undergraduate student at the University of South Carolina pursuing my bachelor's degree in Religious Studies through Photo-Visual Anthropology. Through this, I have built on academic focuses in three major realms: religious studies, cultural anthropology, and the art of visuals/photographs as a means of communicating discoveries from those fields. I have taken one course focused on Sufism within the Islamic context at my home university, and a course abroad in Morocco, titled Multiculturalism and Human Rights, which touched on Sufism within Morocco's religious spheres. I want to use my immersive semester abroad in Rabat to test the knowledge I have learned in the classroom by investigating the manifestations of Sufism in a specifically Moroccan context.

While I was raised into a Christian family, I have never identified with Christianity or other major religions. However, my long-term commitment to the study of Yoga and yogic philosophy, which is inherently rooted in ancient Indian Hinduism, has shaped much of my worldview today. I believe this exposure to Yogic philosophy has allowed me to relate to and understand the introspective aspects of Sufism from a new lens. Noteworthy scholars such as Carl Ernst have related the overlap of physio-physical rituals between the two traditions[2]. I aim

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[2] See Carl W. Ernst's article *Situating Sufism and Yoga* to understand how historical yogic and Sufi traditions have encountered overlap while also existing as distinct groups (https://www.jstor.org/stable/25188502).

to maintain awareness of how my developed personal values (which include, but are not limited to, interconnectedness, dharma, non-violence, and non-attachment), along with my non-religious upbringing might influence the way that I collect data while conducting religious studies and cultural anthropology. This self-awareness is a primary step towards more constructive fieldwork for ethical research.

My identity as an American researcher in Morocco preconceives certain advantages and disadvantages while compiling data and engaging in fieldwork. One of these personal disadvantages is my limited access to the Arabic language. Prior to conducting fieldwork, I completed 6-credit hours of study in Classical Arabic Fush'a. However, my language level is not yet fluent, thus my literature review and interviews have been limited to English-speaking sources or have necessitated translation.

Alternatively, my American identity has also granted me privileges as a student researcher in Moroccan society. While living in Rabat I have noticed that several Moroccans have a strong desire to progress their English-speaking skills by practicing with American and other English-speaking individuals. I have seen the English Language and American culture be venerated, in a way, by Moroccans (particularly youth). Morocco World News rationalizes this trend by describing instrumentalization of the language through media platforms: "media is playing a major role in the growing popularity of English as well as spreading positive attitudes towards it. The idolizing of popular music artists and movie stars is a common phenomenon among adolescents. Given that many of these stars are from the English-speaking countries, a positive association between the celebrity and the language spoken or sung may […] influence attitudes towards the learning of English" (Bziker, 2015). My personal experience in Morocco affirms this trend, as I have been approached by many Moroccans in hopes of staying in touch

with me to practice their English skills. This is just one instance where my positionality as an English-speaking American favors my pursuits in research due to a generally positive perception of English in Moroccan society. There are, however, countless additional instances of both privileges and drawbacks that my identity serves me as a researcher abroad. I strive to maintain a comfortable research environment for research participants where divergent aspects of our identities can be both acknowledged and validated, yet unintrusive towards constructive communication.

Key Terms & Definitions

It is appropriate to define a few terms that have historically described Sufism before analyzing its religious effects. This set of relevant definitions clarifies what I intend to communicate through words that may seem ambiguous or to have multiple meanings to readers. While this reductionist approach will by no means define Sufism in its entirety, it will provide a foundation for moving forward on this analysis of understanding the impact of Sufi religiosity. The sources that inspire my application of these terms are multifaceted and include my previous education on Sufism, the literature review conducted for this research, and on-going discussions with my research participants. I will revisit the issue of defining Sufism through its component labels and the deeper significance of each of these terms at various points throughout my paper:

-*meditational*: a key term in my central argument, I use the term *meditational* to refer to the process of self-knowledge and self-inquiry.

-*introspective*: this term is another historical identifier of Sufism. I will use it to denote actions that are felt, personal, and internal, rather than seen, shared, and external (or extrospective).

-*dhikr* (ذِكُر): this Arabic word translates to "remembrance," or "invocation" and is a primary ritual to differentiate Sufi Muslim from non-Sufi Muslims. While *dhikr* has been presented in various forms across various brotherhoods, it most commonly involves the repetitive chanting of the Ninety-nine names of God to ensure remembrance of Him.

-*muraqabah* (مراقبة): Meaning "contemplation," I use this term to designate a uniquely Sufi way of contemplation and meditation on God. Ways that it may manifest vary depending on the subject, but a few predominant examples include prayer and *dhikr*.

-*ihsan* (إحسان): "doing the beautiful" or "beautification". I will use this term to describe actions within Sufism that derive from sincerity in the heart. Such actions require a deep awareness of God's presence in all things and is the realm of Islam that Sufis specialize in (Chittick, 2000).[3]

-*zawiya* (الزاوية): translating to "corner," a zawiya is the Sufi place of worship that also serves multiple functions as a school, mosque, and gravesite of a prominent Sufi saint or holy person.

-*tariqa* (الطريقة): This translates to the "way" and refers to an organizational structure or school of thought in Sufism (also referred to as a Brotherhood).

-*shaykh* (شيخ): Meaning "leader" or "elder". This term signifies a spiritual leader in Sufism. Also known as the disciple in the Sufi student-disciple relationship.

II. Literature Review

An essential prerequisite for my anthropological research in Morocco is a thorough review and in-depth analysis of the pre-existing literature on Sufism in Morocco. While this

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[3] Chittick describes *ihsan* as the third domain of faith in Islam. He writes that it is "to recognize the truth and reality of faith's objects in the deepest realm of human awareness" and that the heart in Koranic terms, "is the center of life, consciousness, intelligence" (Chittick, 2000).

focus is relatively niche, there are a few notable scholars of Sufism whose names are worth mentioning, as their work sets up a framework for contemporary researchers in the field, like myself, and should not be taken for granted. Much of this literature has inspired the set of definitions that I reference above. These academics include Sufi scholar Alexander Knysh and his text, *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism,* William C. Chittick and his *Sufism: A Short Introduction*, Vincent J. Cornell's *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism*, and Moroccan anthropologist Faouzi Skali's theories of Sufism.

Examples of modern local scholars who have narrowed their research to Moroccan Sufism and its role in its society include Dr. Meriem El Haitami's exploration of activism in Moroccan Sufism and scholar Sarah Hebbouch's thesis on gendered spirituality[4] in the Moroccan Sufi context. Collectively, each of these notable academics in Sufism set standards and expectations for my discoveries on the impact of introspective practices in mystical Islam. Beyond these more recent scholars, however, there seems to be a lack of academic focus and publications on the reality of twenty-first-century Moroccan Sufism. If my research can provoke a boosted focus on Sufism in Moroccan society, it will be a successful project in my eyes.

At its basis, my research works from an approach towards defining Sufism that Chittick upholds at the introduction of his *Sufism: A Beginner's Guide.* He admits that "rather than trying to domesticate Sufism by giving it a more familiar label, we should recognize at the outset that there is something in the Sufi tradition that abhors domestication and definition" (Chittick, 2000). Chittick's point on problematizing language and definitions that attempt to encompass a reality is entirely valid. The Sufi experience is undoubtably ineffable. Perhaps this explains its

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[4] In her thesis on Moroccan Women in Sufism, Hebbouch defines the term gendered spirituality as "the dynamic of cultural, spiritual, and social roles both men and women play towards fulfilling a unanimous goal, which is that of having an ongoing endeavor to grow in their relationship with the Divine" (Hebbouch, 2019)

common labels of "esoteric" and "introspective" aspects of Islam. However, language serves as a

tool towards achieving a *closer* understanding of the ineffable Sufi experience. My approach in

visual anthropology argues photographs as another tool towards closer understanding when

experiencing a reality, itself, is not accessible. Thus, my research will work with words and

complementary visuals to create a definition of Sufism that is built using the collective voices of

Sufis themselves for a ground-up anthropological project. This definition will not be a

straightforward label, but rather it will encompass a new collective perspective to contribute to

the cumulative of existing and future explorations on Sufism.

An Introduction to Sufism: The Heart of Islam

To give an adequate introduction to Sufism with such limited words, or even with

unlimited words, is fundamentally inconceivable. Hence, this introduction will only scratch the

surface of the experiential reality of Sufism that has often been labeled as "esoteric," "mystic,"

or "ascetic" Islam. Sufism is known to lay at the heart of Islam. As Chittick theorizes, three

branches constitute the Islamic faith: *islam,* or "submission," *imam,* or "faith," and *ihsan,* or

"doing the beautiful". This model is a practical reference for understanding the Islamic domain

that Sufism tends to dwell in, as well as how "doing the beautiful" through the heart is a

specified correspondent of its aims (Chittick, 2000). A motif throughout my fieldwork has been

understanding Sufism as the **heart** of Islam by prioritizing **love** as a vital mode to exist through.

Conceivably, what has earned Sufism the frequent label of "esoteric" (indicating secret or

obscure knowledge), is its basis in the tightly knit disciple-to-master relationship. Sufi *shaykhs*

are valued for their religious authority through specially inherited knowledge. They are said to

hold what is called *baraka*, or a "blessing" that grants them the responsibility of disseminating

Sufi knowledge to rising generations. This intimate relationship between *shaykh* and *murid*

(disciple) creates a system through which knowledge may be confined to those who actively

search for it, emanating an esoteric spirit. However, with its stress on universality and openness

to all individuals, Sufism truly embodies the very opposite of esoterism. Consequently, with all

the mis-leading labels that Sufism has earned, "esoteric" might be its greatest misname.

Sufi theory and practice are deeply rooted in the Quran and Hadith (sayings and accounts

of Muhammad the Prophet). These texts drive the Sufi belief that there is no God but God (the

Shahada) and that Muhammad is a model for the perfected being. The systemization of Sufism

began with the development and distribution of Sufi literature. Sufi literature, including

hagiographies and religious manuals, democratized and globalized Sufi knowledge with the

spread of its theories and practices to new societies. al-Qušayri's *Epistle on Sufism*, which will

be touched on later, is one example of a collection of hagiographies of Sufi saints. The text's first

chapter translates to "On the masters of this path and their deeds and sayings that show how they

uphold the Divine law," and unveils how Sufi saints are used as various models of the behavior

of the Prophet. In the Islamic context, this veneration of Saints in Sufism is a controversial

practice (along with *dhikr*) due to the worshipping of beings other than God, and using behavior

other than the Prophet's as a model. Some Muslims argue that this dismisses the message of the

Quran's Shahada.

The Sufi path contains several paths or "stations" along its goal towards spiritual

perfection, or union with God. In Abū Nasr as-Sarraj's Sufi manual, *Kitāb al-Luma'* (*The Book

of Flashes*), he discusses each station (maqāmat) along Sufism's spiritual journey. These

maqāmat include stages of repentance, watchfulness, renunciation, poverty, patience, trust, and

acceptance. Each of these stations requires psychological developments that contribute to

Sufism's introspective quality. For example, proper renunciation not only entails letting go of material matter, but further requires "giving up of all good or benefits for the self" including "tranquility, honor, praise, and status" (Sells, 1996). A deep understanding of each station along the Sufi path will reveal its rootedness in psychological and introspective spirituality.

Etymology of Sufism

An etymological approach is useful as an introduction to investigating its essence. The origins of the word "Sufism" have been historically contested. From these debates, three major theories of etymological origins have been devised, each of which reveals important historical precepted qualities of the religion. The first, and most commonly referenced, is that Sufism comes from the Arabic word '*suf*' which translates to 'wool' to represent the "mystic way of life [wearing] coarse woolen clothes" (Khanam, 2011) This theory of origin dwells on the ascetic nature of Sufism by demonstrating ancient Sufis' choice to renounce their physical comfort by wearing material that, it its time and place, was understood as unideal and uncomfortable. A poem in Elif Shafak's novel, *The Forty Rules of Love,* artfully illustrates this inclination of detachment (or *zuhed*), in Sufi customs:

Whatever you see as profitable, flee from it!

Drink poison and pour away the water of life!

Abandon security and stay in frightful places!

Throw away reputation, become disgraced and shameless! (Shafak, 2009)

Another chief theory of the origins of Sufism claims that the term derives from the Arabic word, *saf*, which means "row" or "line," to signify a tendency for Sufis to reach the mosque early, making it to the first row at the morning prayer (Khanam, 2011). This theory emphasizes Sufi's efforts to go above and beyond the requirements of Sharia law by exemplifying additional efforts of devotion.

A final etymological consideration of origins is often claimed by Sufis themselves, and that is that their name derives from the Arabic word "*safa*" or "purity" to represent the process of purifying the soul through their rituals (Khanam, 2011). This third theory underscores the robust moral vision of the Sufi individual and community: a topic closely relevant to the socio-moral impacts of Sufi nature on Moroccan society. Although these three theories of meaning and origin are disparate, they each highlight central aspects of Sufism that may lead us towards a better grasp of its unique existence within Islam. It is useful, then, to keep in mind how *suf* (wool), *saf* (row), and *safa* (purity) have each linguistically contributed to generalized understandings of Sufism.

Sufism's Moral Vision

Sufism's manuals and hagiographies are primary sources for analyzing its stress on inclusive and universal love, which supports its emphasis on a precise moral vision. Take, for example, Abū l-Qāsim al-Qušayri's eleventh-century *Risālah fi al-tasawwuf* (*Epistle on Sufism)*. Translated by Knysh, this text is one of the early complete Sufi manuals that explains Sufism's placement and legitimization within the Islamic tradition, its original "high moral[s] and ethical standards," and its several internal stations on the path of mysticism (al- Qušayrī, 2007). Through this manual, it becomes clear that the standard to strive for in terms of Sufi morality is

an embodiment of the prophet Muhammad's character. This indication of a modeled religious ideal is essential while exploring Sufi morality. The Epistle also designates that "a good moral character is the servant's greatest virtue, one by means of which the true essence of men is known" and that Sufism itself *is* good moral character (al- Qušayrī, 2007). The age-old priority to perfect morals based on the prophet's character begs the question of if this moral code opens space for a universally inclusive form of spirituality through Sufism.

Female Sufi icon Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya (or Rābi'a Basri), presents one case where Sufi philosophy facilitates gender inclusivity in Sufi morality. Hagiographies that detail the Sufi saint's rare authority in a harshly patriarchal society have inspired Sufi women towards spiritual autonomy and equality in Sufi societies. Some sources even claim Rābi'a Basri as "the mother of Sufism", whose influence on the tradition is comparable to the renowned Rumi (Shoaib, 2021). In Sufi poet Farīdu d-Din Attār's text, *Memorial of the Friends of God,* which includes accounts of Rābi'a, 'Attar answers the public controversy of a woman's high religious ranking by responding that "the deity regards only a person's inner intention, not the outward form" (Sells, 1996). To further his argument for the social inclusivity of universal bodies, he begs the question that Sufis are "one" and "in oneness (tawhid), there are no individuals, and thus what room is there for man or woman, you and I, just as in prophecy there is no room for class distinctions of 'noble' and 'common'?" (Sells, 1996). Through these early claims, deep-rooted attention towards inward focus for outward universality in Sufism sets a standard for its moral vision. Although systematic social structures have certainly perpetuated a subordination of the spiritual authority of women, these hagiographies validate Sufism as a potential space for social minorities to regain a voice through spirituality.

More recent grounds for theorizing an inclination for a strong moral vision in Sufi Islam are found in Paul L. Heck's arguments in his piece *Mysticism as Morality: The Case of Sufism.* In this piece, Heck covers a heightened moral appetite in Sufism because of its emphasis on inner life and self-renunciation. He describes how mystic practices, rather than physical ones, can sustain this. Heck goes as far as to label symbols of physical devotion, such as wearing the wool coat, as grounds for "hypocritical" religiosity. He writes that "the wolf in sheep's clothing for Sufism can actually lead to an exaltation of the self out of an arrogant disdain for others whose religious deed may appear to be performed hypocritically- that is only in outward form" and that Sufi's have abandoned this through renunciation of the self for any action to have real moral worth (Heck, 2006)[5]. Here, Heck reminds us of the importance of sincerity behind all action, and abandonment of the ego, for true progression on the Sufi moral path and argues a "formulation of moral judgment via mystical awareness" (Heck, 2006). Rābi'a Basri is remembered for her sincerity in renunciation. Rather than acting to boost her ego or earn comfort in her afterlife, she reflects this in her famous words: "I want to put out the fires of Hell, and burn down the rewards of Paradise. They block the way to God. I do not want to worship from fear of punishment or for the promise of reward, but simply for the love of God" (al- Qušayrī, 2007). Although outwardly, acts of renunciation appear to be godly, the level of authenticity in worship is always predetermined by one's internal motive. For Sufis, this is validated through love, or *ihsan*.

Recent Moroccan news publications strengthen Sufism's case as a moral code for inclusivity and veracity. Morocco World News makes the momentous suggestion that Sufism is the most inclusive of all religions, and attribute this to the Sufi tendency to "focus on looking

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[5] This point should be considered while considering which theory of etymological origin best suits Sufism, and how its translation to "wool" might be derivate from its true goals.

into one's inner self, [so] they are compelled to respect the dignity and integrity of others"

regardless of race, religion, class, or ethnic identity (Hekking, 2019). These modern platforms

back Sufism's vision for an inclusive moral code. Nonetheless, Moroccan journalism is not the

only platform through which these claims have arose.

Beyond primary literature and news sources, one channel for Moroccan exposure to

Sufism to consider is through pop culture. One of the principal questions predetermining the

findings of my research is: *what avenues are available for Moroccans to access knowledge on*

Sufism? Consequently, *how is Sufism generally perceived by the greater Moroccan and Islamic*

societies based on the biases and limitations of these avenues of knowledge? The Fez Sufi

Culture Festival is a relevant platform for learning about Sufism in Morocco. Founded in 2007

by Sufi scholar Faouzi Skali, this annual festival employs education on Sufism as a device to

inspire global peace, universality, and spirituality registered in the heart of Islam (Fez Sufi

Culture Festival, 2021). The festival website describes the experience as a quest towards the

morals that each source above stresses, including purity, inclusivity, love, nourishment, and self-

growth. The event has inspired an increased interest in Sufism for people within and across

Moroccan borders.
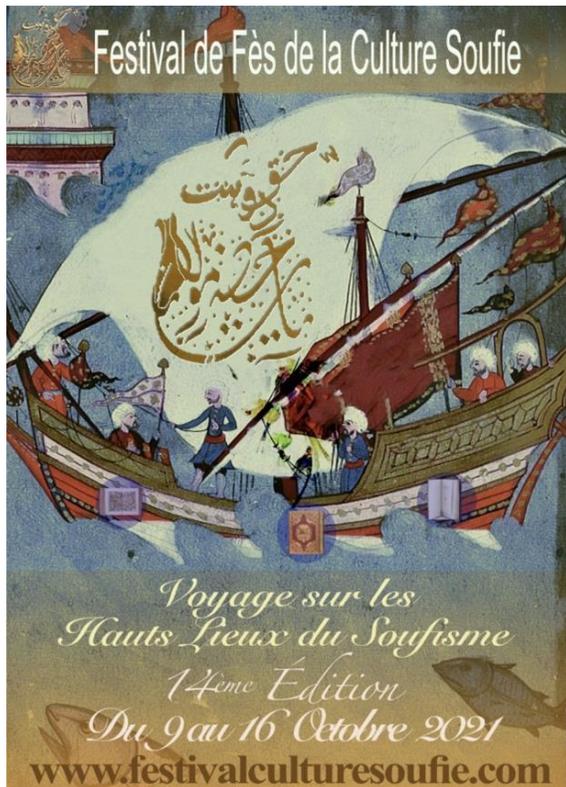
Figure 1: Fes Festival of Sufi Culture 2021 Poster (14th edition). Translates to "Travel to the high places of Sufism. 14th Edition. From October 9-16, 2021".

Figure 2: Photograph of a gathering at the Fes Festival of Sufi Culture by Benjamin Bini

Lastly, Elif Shafak's novel, *The Forty Rules of Love,* populates countless book stands through Moroccan medina streets as an insightful source into Sufi philosophy and love. The novel dissolves two narratives from distant spaces and times by intertwining the life of a twenty-first-century American housewife to that of a twentieth-century Sufi mystic. Its divergent characters exemplify how Sufism is not contained to one place or moment but is, rather, a spirit that is traced everywhere. This (perhaps) more approachable door to Sufism paints it in a similar light as the journalistic and cultural educational sources mentioned above. Insights throughout

the text[6]: embody Sufism's introspective spirituality and moral vision for inclusivity and spiritual growth:

> "*For your faith to be rock solid, your heart needs to be as soft as a feather. Through an illness, accident, loss, or fright, one way or another, we are all faced with incidents that teach us how to become less selfish and judgmental, and more compassionate and generous. Yet some of us learn the lesson and manage to become milder, while others end up becoming even harsher than before. The only way to get closer to the Truth is to expand your heart so that it will encompass all humanity and still have room for more Love*" (Shafak, 2009).

Snippets like this are embedded throughout the novel and collectively named as "Sufism's forty rules of Love." As I carried this book with me throughout my time in Morocco, many people that I encountered recognized it as their first and only source of exposure to Sufism. This limited access and restricted perception towards Sufism explains hesitancy towards it from the larger Moroccan society.

Clearly, in early and contemporary academia, local journalism, popular literature, and pop-culture in Morocco, there is a rising collective perception of Sufism as more inclusive due to its focus on the "inner self." My fieldwork will test this theory using a bottom-up approach to see how individuals in Morocco might contribute to or deviate from this assumption.

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[6] Refer to the opening quote of this paper for additional exemplification: *"When a Sufi stares at someone, he keeps both eyes closed and instead opens a third eye- the eye that sees the inner realm."*

III. Methodology

Political Sufism

My research focuses on Sufism as a social and religious practice. However, its political implications have, in many ways, cultivated and sustained the authority it holds within Moroccan society. Therefore, a brief acknowledgment of its political involvements must precede my analysis of its religious and cultural effects. Religion does not exist within a vacuum; it is inherently subject to influence from these surrounding spheres of influence. Regarding its political influences, Morocco's law which assigns the monarch the dual role of both head of the state and "Amir al-Mumineen" or "commander of the faithful," sets the floor for a strong interrelatedness, perhaps even inseparation, between religious and political tendencies in Moroccan society. This role empowers the King to interweave and instrumentalize religious tradition through Moroccan law. The recent State sponsorship of Sufism is just one example of this.

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's 2021 article, *The Moroccan Monarchy's Political Agenda for Reviving Sufi Orders,* explains Morocco's political agenda: "the government since has been pushing a revival of Sufism as a supposedly less rigid, more moderate, and more inward-focused approach to spiritual life that is seen as being less prone to radicalization and violent extremism than Salafist traditions" (Fakir, 2021). This claim reintroduces the importance of analyzing *why* and *how* Sufism has been employed as a more "moderate" Islamic variant. Its introspective quality is one principal explanation that the source recognizes by referencing "inner-focused" approaches.

King Mohammad VI's avid networking with Moroccan Sufi brotherhoods allows for his control over Sufi populations in the country. While his sponsorship offers a new channel of

authority for Sufis in Morocco, a historically religious minority, it also inevitably offers
opportunities for exploitation and propaganda. Because of the King's influence on Sufi spheres,
during the Moroccan constitutional referendum in 2011 the shaykh of the Boudshishiyya
brotherhood used his religious authority to sway his disciples to vote in favor of the new
constitution. Hebbouch problematizes this in a discussion on the event:

> "I surmise that every Moroccan citizen should be concerned about the political situation
> of their country, but this should be a personal choice. A Shaykh should not reorient the
> public opinion or deploy his authority to influence his adepts. […] Voting should be a
> choice, not an obligation" (Hebbouch, 2021).

Evidently, the religiosity of Morocco cannot be properly analyzed without considering its close
ties with the monarchy as the commander of the faithful. The Moroccan government's affiliation
with Sufism is largely to thank for its exponentially increased publicity and acknowledgment in
society. The consequences of this have offered benefits as well as drawbacks in terms of personal
security, freedom, and religiosity in Morocco.

The Boutchichiyya Sufi Order

Through my research, I have discovered that the Quadiriyya Boutchichiyya Sufi
brotherhood is a dominant tariqa in contemporary Morocco. With its origins in early twentieth-
century Morocco, this brotherhood is distinguished for its liberal tendencies and ongoing from
the monarchy. Sufism, and the Boutchichiyya order especially, ordered a superlative opportunity
for the fulfillment of spiritual growth that youth craved while simultaneously satisfying political

agendas by the Moroccan monarchy. Hebbouch discusses the impact of this in her work on gendered spirituality, claiming that the order successfully "redefined notions of female spirituality, authority, empowerment, and sociability be way of contestation of the historical premises and assumptions on Sufi women" (Hebbouch, 2019). These qualities supportive of Moroccan feminism matched the evolving political agenda of Moroccan youth populations. For this case, the Boutchichiyya order is a central focus in my research in investigating how an employment of Sufism opens a space for socially marginalized groups in society, such as women.

The influence of the Boutchichiyya brotherhood has been verified through its relevance in the discoveries of my research. I have observed that this is due not only to its social and political appeals but also because of its comparative accessibility and relevance. One Sufi that I spoke to noted that she chose the Boutchichiyya order because it exists as the "only order that has a Living Spiritual Master [or sheik]" in Morocco (anonymous, personal communication, December 15, 2021). Here, the subject was referring to Dr. Sidi Jamal-al-Din Al Qadiri Boutchich, whose father was Sifi Hamza: a Sufi spiritual leader recognized for his contributions to revitalizing Sufism in Morocco (The Sufi Way, 2018). The ancestral lines of each of these figures are said to trace back to the Prophet Mohammad, which permits them significant measures of authority in the Sufi community. Evidently the Boutchichiyya brotherhood has marked its relevance in Morocco through political and social appeals in contemporary Morocco.

Meditation/Prayer

While engaging with Moroccan Sufis and scholars of Sufism, one form of meditation that was most emphasized in discussions was prayer, or *salat*, itself as a central form of meditation.

The Shari'a requires five prayers throughout the twenty-four-hour day for Muslims. However, what discerns Sufi prayer from any standard traditional Islamic prayer, is its validity of practice in various forms, such as *dhikr* and *sema*. During an interview, religious scholar Youssef el Berrichi touched on how prayer can exist in even more discrete forms through daily life. El Berrichi notes that *salat* is a pilar of Sufism and Islam that is universal; anyone can perform it with their unique personal ways of communicating with God, so long that it comes from the heart. For him, the simple acts of honesty or showing love to someone are forms of prayer. Since Sufism validates prayer through its sincerity in the heart, it opens space for unique expressions from all members of society, including those who may be unable to perform salat in traditional ways. Thus, the universal and inclusivity of Sufi prayer is exemplifies how marginalized bodies may gain new spiritual authority through Sufism.

Dhikr

     Dhikr, or remembrance, is a key distinguisher of Sufi prayer and ritual. Its roots trace back to the teachings of the Prophet to his close companions as an alternative way to practice submission and remembrance of God. Chanting the many names and qualities of God, including The All Merciful, The Creator, The Pure One, The Loving One, The First, and The Last, is a tool to increase conscious awareness so that the "name fills up the mind and consciousness, leaving no room for remembrance of others" (Chittick, 2000). Through rituals such as this, an intimate concentration on God by renouncing oneself and all else is vital. It is intended to be deeply felt inside of each practitioner. In his chapter on *dhikr*, Chittick notes that by nature, it "is connected much more to intention and awareness than to the outward activity that is ruled by the Sharia" (Chittick, 2000). While analyzing Sufism within Islam, it is essential to note that Orthodox Islam

generally understands daily prayer, itself, as a satisfactory form of remembrance, while Sufis

generally believe in a specified form of remembrance through the repetition of Gods names as

obligatory for proper remembrance (Chittick, 2000). Introspective and meditational by nature,

this is one central practice of Sufism that has been historically controversial within the Islamic

context. Chittick writes on its meditational and uniquely Sufi application: "the Sufis use the word

dhikr to designate the method of achieving one-pointed concentration on their Beloved. More

than anything else, it is this practice that differentiates Sufi Muslims from non-Sufi Muslims"

(Chittick, 2000). It is not required by the Quran, yet is an opportunity for individuals to

voluntarily exercise increased focus on God to strive for eventual union, often alongside fellow

Sufis in a community.

In its outer shell, *dhikr* resembles a communal gathering (although it can also be

accomplished individually) where Sufis gather in a circle to chant rhythmically the names of

God. One verse chanted across all Sufi orders is "La 'iilaa 'iilaa allah", or "there is no God but

God:" an echo of the Qurans Shahadah. The short film, *The World of Rumi Part 3: The Circles of*

Remembrance is one source for visual anthropology on the ritual. The documentary explores

forms of dhikr across various contexts, including its specifically Moroccan expressions. One

unique form of *dhikr* referenced is *sema,* which is popularly referred to as the dance of the

whirling dervishes. This dance involves Sufis spinning in circles to resemble the earth spinning

around the sun as they chant the names of God to symbolize all aspects of the universe's nature

as remembrance of God[7]. Through forms of *dhikr* such as *sema*, the circle as a reoccurring

symbol of Sufism is revealed. *Dhikr* in its many forms has been depicted through art forms such

as medieval "miniatures" which are small paintings that attempt to represent historical events. It

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[7] Elements of *sema* can also be traced in the Fes Festival Sufi Culture Poster included on page 16.

is interesting to note how circles embedded in this art form symbolize Sufi concepts such as universality and interconnectedness. A couple of examples of Islamic miniatures are included below.
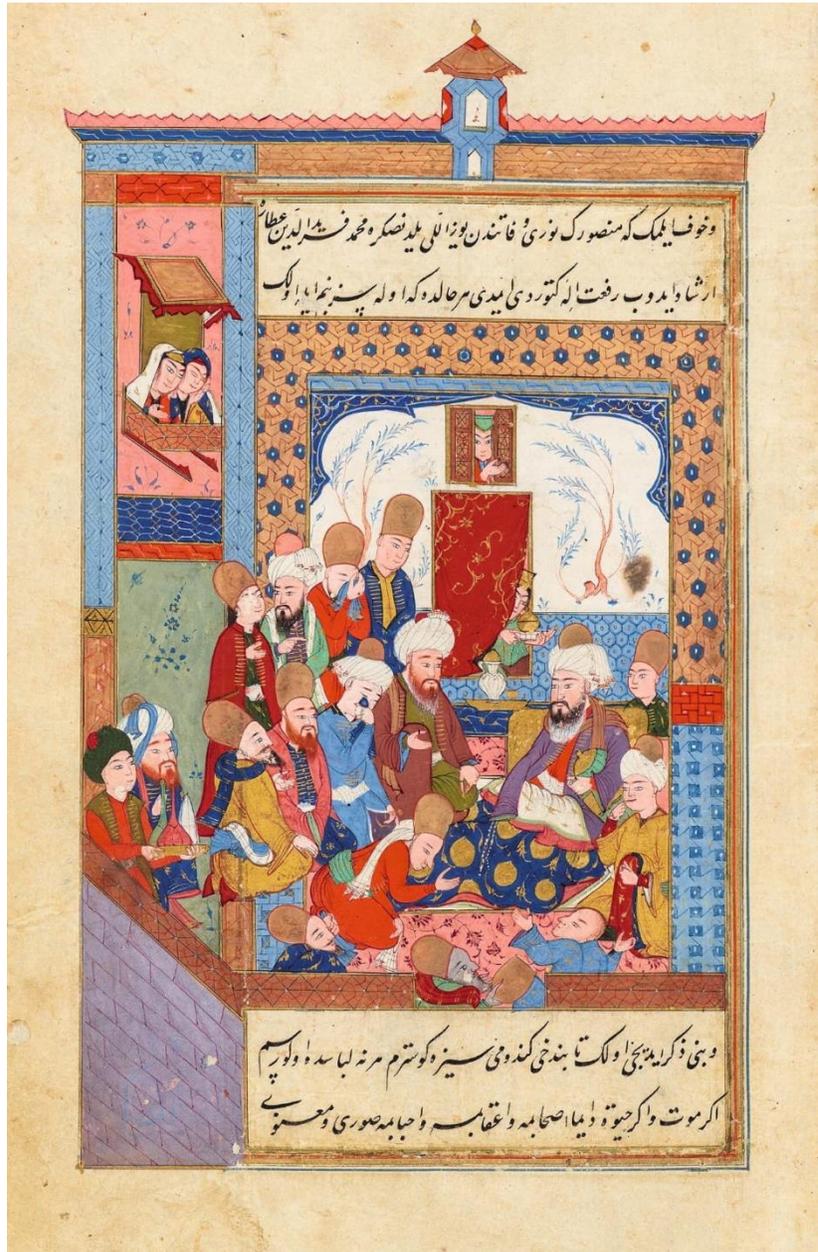
Ottoman Empire "miniature" painting portraying *dhikr*.
https://www.cs.umb.edu/~abakbal/miniature.htm

Ottoman Empire "miniature" painting portraying *sema*
https://www.cs.umb.edu/~abakbal/miniature.htm

IV. Findings

As I mentioned earlier, a substantial priority in my research methodology is to build an

understanding of Moroccan Sufism from the ground-up. This entails engaging with Moroccan

Sufis as much as possible, highlighting their perspectives in my research, and utilizing grassroots

sources for understanding. Through semi-structured and ongoing focused discussions, I engaged

with several Moroccan individuals to learn about their experience with and thoughts on Sufism in Morocco. I chose four subjects to highlight a synopsis of diverse Moroccan perceptions on Sufism. Through these interviews, disparate aspects of the effects of the tradition on Moroccan society were brought to light. Topics such as Sufism's controversial nature in the Islamic sphere, the benefits and drawbacks of its political affiliation, its opportunities for personal development, and its introspective variants came to light through these conversations.

Fieldwork

Interview 1 (anonymous)

My first conversation was with a female disciple of the Boutchichiyya order. During my discussion on Sufism with the subject, she spoke about **Sufism as a tool to practice self-betterment**. When I asked her if she identifies as a Sufi, she responded that "Sufism is a huge concept." She noted: "I am working on myself to be a better person; that is all I can say. For me, being a Sufi is a **higher level of self-consciousness**" (anonymous, personal communication, 2021). The subject identifies as Muslim, and rather than seeing Sufism as separate from Islam, she confirms that it is quite the opposite: that is that it lays at the **heart of Islam**. What discerns it from traditional Islam, she notes, is how it goes beyond what the Quran requires. "It needs a lot of commitment," she says. She references Chittick's model of the three realms of Islam: Al-Islam, Al-Imam, and Al-Ihsan and understands that "a Sufi needs to move gradually from one level to the next until reaching 'Maqam **Al-Ihsan**,'" or the level of 'doing the beautiful' (anonymous, personal communication, December 14, 2021) The subject sees Sufism as a path to move beyond mechanical religious practice by having sincerity and intentionality behind the requirements of the Sharia.

She spoke of going above and beyond the requirements not only with her sincerity but also through intentional actions. For example, she could exercise prayer more than the required five times each day, put in extra work to help with difficult situations at work, and exercise compassion towards all creatures that she interacts with. The subject demonstrates a shift from sub-conscious religiosity to *ihsan,* or "doing the beautiful," as she has learned to embrace Sufism as a path for self-growth, fulfillment, and religious sincerity. Through meditational rituals including prayer and *dhikr*, she described feeling the vibrations of each word she invocated, and the **positive and pure energy** that these practices created for her and her Sufi community.

Interview #2: Youssef El Berrichi

My second interview was held with Youssef El Berrichi, a Moroccan Islamic religious scholar at Al Qarwiyin University Dar El Hadith Al Hassani. In our discussion on Sufism, Youssef problematized confining concepts like Sufism to its many labels, as these fuel its misunderstanding and judgment from society. Indeed, Sufism within Morocco has been rejected by many Moroccan Muslims as a true component of Islam. From afar, Moroccan Muslims often associate Sufism with the outwardly eccentric appearance of invocation and *dhikr*, and its taboo veneration of saints and shaykhs. However, El Berrichi understands Sufism as a legitimate form, flowing not only through Islam but through all forms of life. He argues it is not something that can be reduced to a single image, label, or definition, but rather is an intrinsic **part of all livelihoods**. "Where do I see Sufism?" he asks himself. "I see Sufism in weddings; I see Sufism in Gnawa music; I see Sufism in nature. It is not confined to a mosque, or the hijab […] **The secret is in the spirit** and backed by true belief and sincerity" (Y. El Berrichi, personal communication, December 7, 2021). The scholar's insight on Sufism sheds light on its

omnipresence and **universality** while simultaneously sending a nod to "doing the beautiful" with his mention of sincerity**.**

El Berrichi also defines Sufism as a way for **finding balance**. Just as Heck and recent Moroccan journalism claim Sufism as a more "**moderate**" form of Islam, this Sufi confirms the relevance of adopting balance through Sufi spirituality. For example, Sufism promotes renunciation, but to live without all material things, including relationships, is impractical. Thus, one can learn to love God through the world's people and objects without giving them up completely. He further discusses the feeling of **ecstasy** that often comes with practicing *dhikr*. A Sufi must employ balance to come back from states of ecstasy, because they are not meant to remain in this mental state. This is one aspect of balance, or *zuhed* (abstinence) in practice through Sufism. This quality of moderation is a principal reason for its popular adoption in Moroccan society.

Interview #3: Sarah Hebbouch

A third discussion was with Sufi scholar Sarah Hebbouch, who confirmed Sufism as more of a "**practical**" understanding of Islam than an "esoteric" one because of its fundamental capitalization on tolerance, respect, and love. She explains that Sufism has often been viewed as "the religion of the oppressed and the marginalized" because of this **tolerance to difference** (S. Hebbouch, personal communication, November 27, 2021). Hebbouch personally embraces Sufism as a philosophy for these reasons, while academically applying it through anthropology. The beauty in tolerance that she speaks of is that it creates a religious environment where "one can be Sufi in the **heart** without being part of an order or exhibiting a certain degree of obedience" (S. Hebbouch, personal communication, November 27, 2021). Through this, its

introspective commitment is demonstrated as a priority over any extrospective religious rituals, and the **universal** quality of Sufism surfaces.

Interview #4: Faouzi Skali

My fourth interview subject was Mr. Faouzi Skali, a Moroccan anthropologist and prominent Sufi scholar who founded the Fes World Festival of Sacred Music and the Fes Festival of Sufi Culture. In 2001, Skali was named by the United Nations as a top twelve global contributor to the dialogue of civilizations. Reasons for this included his recruitment of Sufism as a device for **religious peace** during the clash of religions during the 1990's Gulf War and his promotion of world peace through the mission of his spiritual festivals.

Skali was first introduced to Sufism through Rumi's poetry while pursuing his Ph.D. in France. This exposure caused him to shift towards a focus on the spiritual form, both personally and academically, as a method for personal growth and preventing religious conflict. He joined the Bouchichiyya order and became the disciple of Sidi Hamza. Agreeing with the first research interview subject, Skali asserted that, "Sufism is a way to work on yourself to become a better person, but also to get closer to the meaning of life, closer to God, and **elevate your consciousness**" (F. Skali, personal communication, December 2, 2021). Its potential for religious harmony is not exclusive to the Gulf War era, he claims, and can still be applied in places today, especially Morocco, to "lead a kind of **renewed spiritual humanism** in the Islamic field" (F. Skali, personal communication, December 2, 2021). These claims echo the Moroccan monarchies present endorsement of Sufism for countering religious extremism and international conflict. Skali emanates Sufism's potential as a tool for social morality through this discussion.

Case Study: (virtual) Dhikr

I was lucky to be able to attend a virtual *dhikr* session with Morocco's Bouchichiyya order to get a more intimate grasp of the true nature of the practice. Due to the limitations of the pandemic, a national closure of all zawiyas was enforced to limit close contact and large gatherings. Unfortunately, this has meant that many Sufi *dhikr* sessions and community gatherings have been canceled or moved to online platforms. Several research participants that I spoke with explained their remorse for this. Thankfully, I was able to attend a *dhikr* session that was held through the Microsoft online meeting software. There were six total participants in the session, including myself, and each member had their camera off. The only member with the camera on was the admin (whose name I will keep anonymous) as she led invocations for the group.

The admin continued invocations for the entire hour-long session, with rare pauses of silence that lasted for no longer than ten seconds. Verses chanted included "La 'iilah 'iilaa Allah…" repetition of "Allah, Allah, Allah…," and more than seven other noticeable variants. Throughout the invocations, other members would send heart emojis to the group in the chat feature. I could noticeably hear the admin losing her breath, and taking sharping inhales, after several minutes of non-stop chanting. The meeting ended exactly one hour later, with participants thanking the admin and saying goodbye. This virtual session revealed the dedication and intention that members of the order exhibited, by continuing practices like *dhikr* through alternative platforms through limitations of the pandemic. The admin's devotion through the hour-long session proved her strong intentions of remembrance and upholding it in her Sufi community. Finally, the female voice behind the screen demonstrated how women, a historically

marginalized group in Moroccan society, *can* and *do* hold leadership positions in Sufi communities.

V. Conclusions

We have shifted from an exploration of Sufism through its systematic definitions towards a focus on the reality of the ineffable Sufi experience through this analysis. Hence, if we are to come to one point of consensus with all the evidence found through my research outcomes, it is that Sufism cannot be understood through its component labels. While it has been described through constituent qualities, such as balance, purity, consciousness, renunciation, mysticism, love, truth, and sincerity, no single word may convey the true essence of the religious path. Designating practices and phenomena as "Sufi" or "non-Sufi" is a purely academic habit, while "Sufis" themselves see their name within and across all forms of religiosity and life. Thus, this research is limited to an academic realm and is produced as an effort to encourage increased engagement with Sufism in Moroccan society.

Sufism's reality can only be discovered through self-introspection. Research participants have confirmed that it is not a religious concept confined to any of its labels listed above, to mosques, or even zawiyas. Rather, it is a spirit that is embedded in the Islamic tradition. The limited forms of access to education on Sufism in Moroccan society has sustained misunderstandings of the word. This condition encourages a perception of Sufism as something separate and disadvantageous to broader Islam. However, Sufism and its emphasis on love and universality may offer a platform for religious integration that supports strong morality and peaceful attitudes across religious spheres in and across Morocco. The religious variant is an increasingly resourced tool to practice self-betterment, social inclusivity, and spiritual intimacy in Moroccan society, and these benefits are rooted in its uniquely introspective nature.

As institutions have recognized this potential, Sufism has evolved to become a two-tiered tool: a personal means for spiritual embodiment, and a political instrument for religious moderation. Due to the ties between religion and the state in Moroccan governance, the power in the commander of the faithful has upheld this multifaceted influence of Sufism on a national level.

Due to its tendency to legitimize spirituality by measuring sincerity from the heart, Sufism proves to be a universal spiritual path with space for all members of society. Its moral vision backed by intentionality supports more of its members to strive to be ethical contributors to society. Heck backs this with his description of Sufism as a case for morality: "it is only by goodness that one can approach the presence of God, anyone who improves your moral character improves your Sufism (Heck, 2006). Hence, Sufism in its authentic form may support a more peaceful and inclusive society in Morocco. While it should be recognized that Sufism is by no means the only religious tool towards moral inclination, it is certainly an increasingly relevant one within Moroccan Islam today. The importance of focusing on Sufism's qualities and stakeholders exponentially grows as its relevance its Morocco's political and social spheres is amplified. As a Sufi does, by opening the third eye, and focusing on the inner realm to live through love, new opportunities for religious and social prosperities in Morocco are born.

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