

# Intuitive Instructional Speech in Sufism



# Intuitive Instructional Speech in Sufism:

*A Study of the Sohbet in the  
Naqshbandi Order*

By

Martin A. M. Gansinger

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*Dedicated to Mawlana Shaykh Nazim Adil al-Haqqani (q.a.s.),  
Ismael Yunes, Ahmed-Nouri, and Loubna*



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Soon words became too limited to explore the question, which led me to the sonic sermons of John Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders, the sheer creativity and expression of Sonny Rollins, Archie Shepp, or Sunny Murray. A slightly other angle was introduced to me by the humble and sincere worship of The Abyssinians, Yabby You, or Lutan Fyah, who inspired the courage to set sail and guided me on my pilgrimage to the Motherland, where Black Rasta, Big Youth, Ras Kweku, and Peter introduced me to the rich and surprising elements of African spirituality, and the Honorable Priests Dennis Mills, Henry, and Ferdinand provided a glimpse into the Bobo Shanti Mansion of Rastafari.

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## FOREWORD

While doing fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation in Islamology on the transnational Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi Order, I visited the small village of Lefke in Northern Cyprus several times. This was the home of Shaykh Nazim al-Haqqani (d. 2014), and many of his followers travelled there to be in his presence. I returned to Lefke immediately following the shaykh's death in 2014, when visitors were pouring in from all over the world. On these visits, one of the people I recurrently talked to and learned a lot from was the author of this book. Martin Abdel Matin Gansinger generously informed me about the social and spiritual environment around Shaykh Nazim in Lefke. In addition, he shared his great knowledge of music and kindly invited me to spend the night in his house (thereby saving me from another night on a cramped and uncomfortable mosque floor). For all of this, I am most grateful.

I am also grateful that Martin has now written this book. Although I have not listened to nearly as many improvised speeches of the kind that is in focus here as Martin has, I can certainly confirm their importance. Shaykh Nazim's followers listened to his speeches, known as *sohbets*, all over the globe. In London, where I did most of my fieldwork, they were regularly discussed. I often sat in my small university office—in a basement with a tiny window—and listened to the latest *sohbet* through an online stream. But as this book shows, it was an altogether different experience to be *there*, in the presence of the shaykh when he spoke. This type of free-flowing, intuitive speech is highly dependent on the relationship between speaker and audience – in a way resembling improvisational music. This book is likely to help more people understand the very particular appreciation, and attraction that seekers on the Sufi path feel towards the physical presence and direct oral communication of their shaykh.

—Simon Stjernholm,  
Associate Professor in the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional  
Studies at the University of Copenhagen

## PREFACE

This book is the culmination of a personal journey that started out in Vienna, the city of music. Classical music, but not only. During the late 1990s, I got fascinated with Hip Hop culture, rap, and especially the ability of the latter to bring forth artists able to improvise eloquent rhymes in freestyle sessions. By digging deeper into the history of the music and exploring the Soul-, Funk-, and Jazz-samples used as a raw material for the musical productions, I discovered the master improvisors of the genre—Charlie Parker, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane. It did not take long, and I gave in to the urge of buying a tenor saxophone from the local brass store, attempting to delve into the creative flux I so much admired on the records.

After practically engaging in settings of collective improvisation I started to analyze the practice from a perspective based on my background in Communication Studies and developed the idea to put it in context with Habermas' Ideal Speech Situation for my doctoral thesis. My research of the subject led me to Ghana, where I conducted a nine-month field study on the potential of collective improvisation in the context of intercultural settings. During my stay, I ran into several encounters with extraordinary phenomena of African spirituality and got introduced to the local Sufi brotherhoods. By the time I obtained my degree, I had become a practicing Muslim, initially attracted by the beauty of Rumi's *Mathnawi* and the transcendental *Sema* ceremonies of the whirling dervishes in the Mevlevi Order.

According to the myth, the *Mathnawi* had been recited spontaneously by Rumi while he was whirling and in a state of rapture. On a trip to Yalova and Konya I had been approached by several individuals in mosques, convents, or simply on the street, who inquired about or plainly constated my affiliation with Shaykh Nazim. One of them directly suggested to me to move to his Lefke, his hometown in the occupied Turkish zone of Cyprus, hinting that there is a university I could possibly work at as well. I had heard and read about Shaykh Nazim before, and from his appearance on book covers, I had deduced that he is either a daring con-artist or the real McCoy. However, back in Vienna I had started to frequent Sufi gatherings and could not help but notice the extemporaneous quality of the discourse delivered by the humble teachers.

I could sense that there is something going on during these talks that goes beyond the mere words that were being uttered. There was a

certain quality of attention and anticipation, that started to intrigue me and sparked my interest as a researcher in the field of communication. Surprisingly enough, my wife agreed to move to the sleepy village of Lefke, in order for me to study the ways of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi Order. After selling my record collection to cover an accumulated number of unsettled bills and putting our remaining belongings in a couple of trolleys, we booked two one-way tickets to Ercan airport and off we went. We had no idea what to expect, but the calling was strong.

Ironically enough, a trolley stuffed with dozens of my books, mainly works on Sufism as well as precious volumes of poetry by Rumi, Hafiz, and Yunus Emre never made it to Cyprus, got lost during the transfer in Istanbul and was never to be seen again. I took it as a first sign that my era in the Sufi's notoriously despised realm of secondarily obtained "book knowledge" was over and I had switched into the sink-or-swim situation of the famed experiential teaching. However, I just got my PhD and had hoped it will get me a job at the local university. This turned out to be not as easy as we had thought, which was less related to my qualifications, but linked to the severe skepticism and suspicion the institution held against what they perceived as a sect of mad and brainwashed individuals under the spell of a smart trickster.

In a general sense, the overall division between secularism and religion in Turkey creates an ideologically driven atmosphere, in which modern educational institutions modeled after Western examples consider everything related to Islam as backwards. As such, not only any ties to the suspicious Sufi Order, but also basic Islamic practices like the ritual prayer, fasting, or use of religious vocabulary were badly seen. Locals told me that many visitors of Shaykh Nazim had been trying to get jobs as English teachers at the university to finance a permanent stay, but none of them succeeded.

However, after three months of uncertainty, and with the help of a Palestinian PhD student who held seminars at the university and basically vouched for me that I am not "one of the crazy ones" of Shaykh Nazim's followers, I finally got hired. What was supposed to last a semester or two, eventually turned into around seven years of my life that included some of the most intense experiences I ever went through, in the positive, as well as in the negative sense. A clear sign that I was on "the way," as the Sufis would say. A clear sign of "going native," as the ethnographer would put it.

However, from my arrival in 2009 until October 2010, Shaykh Nazim had made it a daily routine to deliver a dense impromptu discourse every evening, attended by local followers, as well as streamed to audiences all over the world. It is this series of talks that constitute a major part of the

discussion in this book. A striking characteristic of this setting was the visible sincerity and attentiveness of the Shaykh, as well as the audience alike. To me, the level of concentration attained by the listeners seemed to work like a fuel for the flow and imagination of the narrator.

After Shaykh Nazim passed away in 2014, I went back to revisit the material from the perspective of a researcher, trying to apply an analytical framework I had worked with for my dissertation on collective improvisation. It is during this stage of the process that I started to shift my attention from the content of the speech act towards its formal settings, that provided an almost ritualized framework. Obviously, this is not going to be a discussion of the content of the talks in terms of theological and religious aspects, but rather an analysis of its structure, extemporaneous nature, possible function, and potential for modern educational purposes.

It took me quite a while to put together all the pieces of the puzzle that I had laid out in front of me, and one of the key elements here was a broadening of scope towards conceptions in other traditional knowledge systems, as well as aspects of physicality I encountered during my ongoing studies of Taoist health practices. I assume it is the latter that considerably helped to centralize my considerations from intangible, lofty abstractions, towards a greater awareness of internal processes and perceptions, induced by what could be mistaken as a rather clumsy and eclectic speech act, performed by a weak and tired old man. These inner workings and their possible relations to psychological, performance-oriented, and neuroscientific perspectives shall be the focus of the present work—with the aim to maybe remove some of the covers that are veiling this mysterious practice from the curious eye of modern-mind beholders.

—Martin Abdel Matin Gansinger,  
Toulouse, July 2022

## INTRODUCTION

Not only since the arrival of PowerPoint—probably the most misunderstood computer-based presentation tool of all times<sup>1</sup>—the majority of people will relate an effective and successful transmission of information in an educational context with a thoroughly rehearsed, well thought through piece of content, flawlessly reproduced in front of an audience.<sup>2</sup> The painstaking relevance given to the smallest detail of a text body that is supposed to be recited is very much observable in regard to the profession of highly endowed speechwriters. Nothing is left to chance when they carefully put their words in the mouth of politicians who are acting out the intended drama for the press and the public.

The perfect speech—in the eyes of many—is the perfect delivery of largely memorized content, while giving the impression that the brilliant chain of thoughts is being strung together right in front of the audience, for spectators to witness the supposedly genius of the speaker.<sup>3</sup> What's all the drama for? Why can't the Obamas, Bushes, and Clintons of this world not simply read the lines that their professional writers have laid out for them?

The answer can be found in the very simple reason for which oral culture has been considered as superior to written culture in many traditional societies.<sup>4</sup> Confucius' aversion to writing and his employment of the

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelius B. Pratt, "The misuse of PowerPoint," *Public Relations Quarterly* 48, No. 3 (2003): 20-24; Chris Gurrie, and Brandy Fair, "PowerPoint--from fabulous to boring: The misuse of PowerPoint in higher education classrooms," *Journal of the Communication, Speech & Theatre Association of North Dakota* 23 (2010): 23-30.

<sup>2</sup> Janette Collins, "Education techniques for lifelong learning: giving a PowerPoint presentation: the art of communicating effectively," *Radiographics* 24, No. 4 (2004): 1185-1192.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Elbow, *Vernacular eloquence: What speech can bring to writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Foley, John M. "Oral traditions and its implications." In *A New Companion to Homer*, eds. Ian Morris, and Barry B. Powell (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 1997), 147-173; Emmanuel N. Obiechina, "Transition from oral to literary tradition," *Présence africaine* 63, No. 3 (1967): 140-161; Danièle M. Klapproth. *Narrative as Social Practice: Anglo-Western and Australian Aboriginal Oral Traditions* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2004); Rosalind Thomas, *Oral tradition and written record*

*Dialects* as pedagogical tool that is perfectly reflecting the tradition of Chinese oral culture are but one example in that regard.<sup>5</sup> Pythagoras' "firm illiteracy—to write things down was a source of error"<sup>6</sup>—is another indication for the estimated superiority of the spoken word over written sources in previous systems of teaching and learning.

While possibly anybody who is able to decipher knowledge preserved via respective codes of signs and symbols may pass it for its own, the oral recitation of the same hints to an internalization of this knowledge and bears the seal of authenticity and eloquence.<sup>7</sup> From a certain perspective, this is sadly illustrated by the state of mind one encounters more and more often in today's society: "Why would I need to learn this anyway if I might as well just look it up on Google?"

The "magic of the moment" is a much thought after effect in the areas of politics, arts, sports, and entertainment, as well as in other areas of human life—with romantic love stories and states of religious rapture obviously being one of the most prominent—as compared to education,

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*in classical Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Wesley Bernardini, *Hopi oral tradition and the archaeology of identity* (Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 2005); Carole Pegg, "Sacred Knowledge: Schools or Revelation? Master–Apprentice System of Oral Transmission in the Music of the Turkic Speaking World," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 20, No. 1 (2011): 107-109; Carole Blackwell, *Tradition and Society in Turkmenistan: Gender, Oral Culture and Song* (London, New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Ye Shu-xian, "The Dialects of Confucius and the Oral Tradition," *Journal of Lanzhou University* 2 (2006).

<sup>6</sup> Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston, New York: Mariner Books, 2000), 290.

<sup>7</sup> Boivin, Michel. "Oral Knowledge and the Sufi Paradigm". In *The Sufi Paradigm and the Makings of a Vernacular Knowledge in Colonial India*, ed. Michel Boivin (Basel: Springer International Publishing, 2020): 269-285; Nile Green, "Oral competition narratives of Muslim and Hindu saints in the Deccan," *Asian Folklore Studies* 63, No. 2 (2004): 221-242; Nile Green, "The uses of books in a late Mughal takiyya: Persianate knowledge between person and paper," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, No. 2 (2010): 241-265; Gardezi, Hasan. "Sufi Cosmology: An Indigenous Oral Tradition." In *East-West Dialogue in Knowledge and Higher Education*, eds. Ruth Hayho, and Julia Pan (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1996): 195-205; Martin S. Jaffee, "A Rabbinic ontology of the written and spoken word: On discipleship, transformative knowledge, and the living texts of oral Torah," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, No. 3 (1997): 525-549; Louis Brenner, "A living library: Amadou Hampâté Bâ and the oral transmission of Islamic religious knowledge," *Islamic Africa* 1, No. 2 (2010): 167-215; Fiachra Long, and Siobhan Dowling Long, eds., *Reading the Sacred Scriptures. From Oral Tradition to Written Documents and their Reception* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

where everything must be pre-programmed, scheduled, and even rolled out in almost minuteous synchronicity.<sup>8</sup>

Many memorable events in human history—from MLK’s “I Have A Dream” speech to Glenn Gould’s “Goldberg Variations,” or the last soccer world cup final, for that matter—are known to be pre-staged, rehearsed, or captured according to a precisely lined out set of camera angles that make sure the sponsors of the spectacle are prominently placed in the glorious moments of victory. However, the audience most definitely will fall again and again for the overwhelming feeling of being part of history in the making.

Indeed, the magic of the moment consists of a temporarily collapse of the past and the future, a vortex with the present moment in its center, the *now*, the one and only time there is, according to Einstein, Tesla, Carl Gustav Jung, and plenty of predecessors in traditional knowledge systems.<sup>9</sup>

There is something special about this realm, about the undivided attention on an event that unfolds before our eyes, an event that has never been happening before and that will never be produced in the same way again. One might have the impression that the spectators who witness this event almost manage to take away some of the magic that they assist to. Being able to claim “I have been there when this and that happened” somehow makes you a part of that memorable moment in a way. This is certainly not wrong, however, since all the examples listed in the above paragraph share the fact that for them to unfold the way they are supposed to, they absolutely rely on the *presence* of an audience to witness the moment of greatness.

As a matter of fact, the degree of attention and active participation on the side of the spectators might even be a crucial element for the constitution of the desired magic. These factors could be essential for the generation of the vortex that folds up the past and the future and catapults the assembly into a shared experience of the *presence*, the *now*—with its

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<sup>8</sup> Ray Land, and Siân Bayne. “Computer-mediated learning, synchronicity and the metaphysics of presence,” *Proceedings, EdMedia+ Innovate Learning. Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE), 1999*; Stephen R. White, and George A. Maycock, “College teaching and synchronicity: Exploring the other side of teachable moments,” *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 36, No. 5 (2012): 321-329.

<sup>9</sup> Harold Coward, “Taoism and Jung: Synchronicity and the self,” *Philosophy East and West* 46, No. 4 (October 1996): 477-495; Gerhard Böwering, “Ideas of time in Persian Sufism,” *Iran* 30, No. 1 (1992): 77-89; Patrick Wolfe, “On being woken up: the Dreamtime in anthropology and in Australian settler culture,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 33, No. 2 (1991): 197-224.

seemingly unlimited potential of possibilities. In a way, it is a vehicle for leaving the boundaries of linear thinking behind and tap into one's—and probably even more so into a collective—subconsciousness, the area of our mind located beyond the conscious experience of time and space.

In the context of religion, the mystic's reunion with God—a shared principle in most, if not all, internal teachings of the world's religions and knowledge systems perfectly symbolizes this state of being.<sup>10</sup> In Islam, the inner teachings focusing on the mystical aspects of the religion's outer structure are transmitted in the many different Sufi Orders.

In the words of Shah:<sup>11</sup> “Sufism, they say, is that which enables one to understand religion, irrespective of its current outward form.” As such, Sufism, or *tasawwuf* in Arabic, predates the history of Islam and features the same principles one can find in Taoism or other pre-monotheistic cosmological systems.<sup>12</sup>

The Huiyu period of the 17th century—in which Chinese Muslims translated classical Islamic texts by using the traditional concepts and terms of the Taoist philosophy<sup>13</sup>—is a good example for the compatibility of these seemingly distant approaches to decipher the unknown and eternal.<sup>14</sup> Within the spectrum of Sufism, various branches or *tariqas*—Arabic for “way,”

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<sup>10</sup> Edward S. Ames, “Mystic Knowledge,” *The American Journal of Theology* 19, No. 2 (1915): 250-267; Neil W. Brown, “Mystic union: an essay in the phenomenology of mysticism,” *Parergon* 11, No.1 (1993): 171-172; Ian Richard Netton, *Islam, Christianity and The Mystic Journey: A Comparative Exploration* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Shah, Idries. “Sufi Spiritual Rituals and Beliefs”. In *Sufi Thought and Action*, ed. Idries Shah (London: Octagon Press, 1990), 14.

<sup>12</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A comparative study of key philosophical concepts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light: Wang Tai-yu's Great Learning of the Pure and Real and Liu Chih's Displaying the Concealment of the Real Realm. With a New Translation of Jami's Lawa'ih from the Persian by William C. Chittick* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); Carl W. Ernst, “Situating Sufism and yoga,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 15, No. 1 (2005): 15-43; Fourd, Benjamin Ellis. “An Appraisal of Sufi Learning Methods”. In *Sufi Thought and Action*, ed. Idries Shah (London: Octagon Press, 1990), 48; Gairdner, Canon W. H. T. “Theories, Practices and Training-Systems of a Sufi School”. In *Sufi Thought and Action*, ed. Idries Shah (London: Octagon Press, 1990), 148.

<sup>13</sup> Sachiko Murata, “The Muslim Appropriation of Confucian Thought in Eighteenth-Century China,” *Comparative Islamic Studies* 7, No. 1-2 (2011): 13-22.

<sup>14</sup> Sachiko Murata, *The Tao of Islam: A sourcebook on gender relationships in Islamic thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Sachiko Murata, William C. Chittick, and Tu Weiming, *The sage learning of Liu Zhi: Islamic thought in Confucian terms* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

which also translates as *Tao* in Chinese—offer plenty of different paths towards a state of ecstasy and rapture found in the desired mystic union. Next to the repetition of holy names and formulas in the practice of *Dhikr*<sup>15</sup>—Arabic for “remembrance of God”—one might seek to calm the senses during *Khalwa*, the practice of seclusion.<sup>16</sup> The *Sema* ceremonies of the well-known whirling dervishes<sup>17</sup> or the self-flagellation practiced in the Rifa’i Order<sup>18</sup> are but a few other transmitted means to reach to that aim.<sup>19</sup>

Within the Naqshbandiyya, however, the aspirant walks a much more sober path.<sup>20</sup> Since the experience of regular ecstatic states and visions

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<sup>15</sup> Arthur Saniotis, “Understanding Mind/Body Medicine from Muslim Religious Practices of Salat and Dhikr,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 57 (2018): 849-857; Chittick, William C. “On the cosmology of dhikr”. In *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Indiana: World Wisdom, 2004), 55-56.

<sup>16</sup> Butrus Abu-Manneh, *Studies on Islam and the Ottoman Empire in the 19th Century (1826 - 1876)* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011); Abu-Manneh, Butrus. “Khalwa and Rábita in the Khálidi Suborder”. In *Studies on Islam and the Ottoman Empire in the 19th Century (1826-1876)*, ed. Butrus Abu-Manneh (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2011), 27-41.

<sup>17</sup> Nurgül Kilinc, “Mevlevi sema ritual outfits and their mystical meanings,” *Humanities Sciences* 6, No. 4 (2011): 809-828.

<sup>18</sup> Amy Catlin-Jairazbhoy, “Sacred pleasure, pain and transformation in African indian Sidi Sufi ritual and performance,” *Performing Islam*, 1, No. 1 (2012), 73-101.

<sup>19</sup> Nile Green, *Sufism: A global history* (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Hamid Algar, “The Naqshbandī Order: A Preliminary Survey of Its History and Significance,” *Studia Islamica* 44 (1976): 12; Brian Silverstein, “Disciplines of Presence in Modern Turkey: Discourse, Companionship, and the Mass Mediation of Islamic Practice,” *Cultural Anthropology* 23, No. 1 (February 2008): 124; Itzchak Weismann, *The Naqshbandiyya. Orthodoxy and Activism in a Worldwide Sufi Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2007); Dina Le Gall, *A Culture of Sufism: Naqshbandis in the Ottoman World, 1450-1700* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005); Nielsen, Jorgen S., Draper, Mustafa, and Yemelianova, Galina. “Transnational Sufism: The Haqqaniyya”. In *Sufism in the West*, eds. Jamal Malik, and John Hinnells (London: Routledge, 2006), 113-124; Damrel, David M. “Aspects of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Order in North America”. In *Sufism in the West*, eds. Jamal Malik, and John Hinnells (London: Routledge, 2006), 115-126; Simon Stjernholm, *Lovers of Muhammad: A Study of Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufis in the Twenty-First Century* (Doctoral thesis, Lund University, 2011); Stjernholm, Simon. “What Is the Naqshbandi-Haqqani tariqa? Notes on Developments and a Critique of Typologies.” In *Sufism in Britain*, eds. Ron Geaves, and Theodore Gabriel (London: Bloomsbury, 2014): 197-212; William R. Dickson, “An American Sufism: The Naqshbandi-Haqqani Order as a Public Religion,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 43, No. 3 (2014): 411-424; Francesco Piraino, “Between real and virtual

is considered as more of an obstacle on the way to the final goal, the presence of God, the practices of the Order are all based on orthodox principles of Sunni Islam.<sup>21</sup> However, Murata notes that the term orthodox is everything else but homogenous itself—by referring to the exclusivity with which the jurists claim it for themselves as a distinction from the religion’s rich sapiential tradition:<sup>22</sup>

There are many reasons for this, not the least of them the fact that Westerners have always considered “orthodox” Islam to lie in the Sharia, in spite of the fact that some Western scholars have pointed out that the Sharia deals only with “orthopraxy,” not “orthodoxy.” The “sound teachings” of Islam are the concern of people who are not primarily jurists, though typically they are also experts in jurisprudence. Nor can “orthodoxy” be limited to the views of the proponents of Kalām (dogmatic theology). There are other ways to investigate the underlying teachings of Islam that have at least as much claim as Ash’arite Kalām to “orthodoxy.”

In this sense—and as compared to Sufi brotherhoods like the Bektashi,<sup>23</sup> for example—Soileau differentiates between *esodoxy* as internally oriented forms of religion and *exodoxy* as outwardly oriented rites and practices. Sorgenfrei<sup>24</sup> deduces from this that the Naqshbandi Order can be termed “an example of how such *esodox* relations to religion might be intimately related to and ‘contained’ by *exodox* attitudes.” As pointed out by Abu Rumman:<sup>25</sup>

The Naqshbandis cite the importance of “fellowship” (*suhba*), “gathering” (*jam’iya*), and “community.” Shah Naqshband’s famous saying, which his followers constantly repeat, making it something of a slogan for the order, is “Our way is fellowship, and the goodness is in the gathering” (i.e., in

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communities: Sufism in Western societies and the Naqshbandi Haqqani case,” *Social Compass* 63, No. 1 (2016): 93-108.

<sup>21</sup> Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, *Classical Islam and the Naqshbandi Sufi Tradition* (Fenton: Islamic Supreme Council of America, 2003); Simon Sorgenfrei, “Hidden or Forbidden, Elected or Rejected - Sufism as 'Islamic Esotericism'?,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 29, No. 2 (2018): 145-165.

<sup>22</sup> (Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 3)

<sup>23</sup> Nathalie Clayer, “The Bektashi Institutions in Southeastern Europe: Alternative Muslim Official Structures and their Limits,” *Die Welt des Islam* 52, No. 2 (2012): 183-203; Mark Soileau, “Conforming Haji Bektash: A Saint and His Followers Between Orthopraxy and Heteropraxy,” *Die Welt des Islams* 54 (2014): 423-459.

<sup>24</sup> Sorgenfrei, “Hidden or Forbidden, Elected or Rejected,” 151.

<sup>25</sup> Mohammad Abu Rumman, *Mysteries of the Sufi Path. The Sufi Community in Jordan and Its Zawiyas, Hadras and Orders*. Trans. William Ward (Amman: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2020): 265.

community). While emphasizing the importance of *khalwa*, *muraqaba*, and *dhikr*, they simultaneously persist in rejecting isolation and scorning of community activity. This gives the order vitality and an ability to adapt and acclimate to the demands of the contemporary world, combining the exoteric dimension of engagement with society and the esoteric dimension of attachment to God, or in other words, material and spiritual aspects. This has enabled many Muslims in the West and the contemporary world to be involved in their societies while maintaining their identity.

The terms *esodox* and *exodox* similarly apply to the equivocal character inherent to the practice of instructional discourse—*sohbet* in Turkish or *suhba* in Arabic—in the Naqshbandi Order as its central method of transmitting its teachings to its followers—which provides a solid base for approaching the matter from the perspective of Communication Studies. As compared to the traditional transmission of knowledge in oral culture societies—such as in the form of African *griots* for example, who relate events of the past to the audience—the delivered talks discussed in this study serve an instructional purpose that goes beyond the recollection of preserved knowledge and consist of intuitively related, extemporaneous content. To have a handle on the improvised nature of the speech act, existing research on similar processes in the performing arts will be applied as a model to identify and define structural elements for the analysis of the talks delivered by Shaykh Nazim between 2009 and 2010.

## CHAPTER ONE

# INSTRUCTIONAL FUNCTION AND SOCIAL DIMENSION OF THE SOHBET AS A TEACHING METHOD IN SUFISM

The transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next has been one of the major concerns for pre-modern civilizations on all continents. To achieve this aim, humanity has turned to encrypting information preserved in architecture and monuments—reserved for those who are able to decode its messages—to transcendental rituals or formal initiation ceremonies.<sup>26</sup>

Precious accounts of past events, customs, beliefs, and practices have been collectively memorized and guarded in oral cultures by stories, songs, and parables—as in the case of the African *griots* or medieval bards. The exclusive access to recorded information granted to scribes and literates in early societies based on written forms of transmission already experienced an unprecedented process of democratization in the Gutenberg era. Even more so, today's society is characterized by a never-ending flood of audio-visual tutorials for every possible field of interest.

However, there are obvious limitations to these new possibilities as well. Despite the potential reach of videos on the web, Master Chu King Hung—lineage holder of the Yang style Tai Chi Chuan tradition—is one of the few among his peers who does not authorize recordings of the techniques and principles applied in his school, for instance. He insists on the perspective that the process of teaching is embedded in a personal relationship between student and teacher and can only be conducted in presence.

With all the different techniques, systems, and methods humankind has developed to ensure the preservation of existing knowledge—a challenge in itself—the passing on of wisdom is yet another story. Often related to the notion of experiential knowledge in the context of Sufism, the preservation of wisdom clearly exceeds the simple process of transmitting

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<sup>26</sup> Manly P. Hall, *Lectures on Ancient Philosophy. Companion to The Secret Teachings of All Ages* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 2005), 370.

information. The difficulty here is to transfer a highly individual state of internally manifested views and perspectives. Therefore, the task encompasses more than the proper formulation of corresponding content. There also is a formal dimension to it, which is asking for a certain active effort and involvement from the designated recipient. Hall notes the following in this regard:<sup>27</sup>

The communication of esoteric knowledge requires a method far more than any at the command of metaphysical mountebanks. The proper custodians of this knowledge—the ancient Mysteries—realized too well that its transmission and perpetuation were the most difficult of all the tasks, in many instances bordering on the impossible. How shall we reveal to another that which entirely transcends the province of the senses, that which is nonconvertible into mundane terms, and with which nothing physical is comparable? (...) It must be communicated by a method which, while it awakens no response in the sensory organisms, renders knowledge comprehensive to the inner perceptions.

In a similar sense, Krokus<sup>28</sup> hints to the function of the sohbet as a technique to provide conversational focus among listeners—hence, followers, or *murids* in Arabic—and stimulate companionship: “These sohbetts are critical for distant murids to develop a living relationship with their shaykh and provide the conversational focus on Allah that nurtures companionship.”<sup>29</sup>

As further pointed out by Krokus,<sup>30</sup> “[t]he term *sohbet* shares roots with *sahaba* (Ar., the Companions of the Prophet) and connotes the dialogue that accompanied their deep friendship.” She furthermore states that “[o]ne of the functions of *sohbet* is to nurture a ‘morally structured disposition’ which is achieved through ‘disciplines of presence.’”<sup>31</sup>

In line with Krokus, Silverstein<sup>32</sup> argues that companionship needs to be considered as more than just a functional aspect of the sohbet: “In Arabic the term sohbet itself derives from the same root as the word *ashab* or *sahaba*, ‘companions,’ and the two terms participate in the same semantic extension. Sohbet is what, by definition, sahaba do.” In reference to

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<sup>27</sup> (Hall, *Lectures on Ancient Philosophy*, 317)

<sup>28</sup> Krokus, Melinda. “‘There is an ‘I’ deeper than me.’ The Ansari Qadiri Rifa’i Tariqat and Transcendence in America”. In *Varieties of American Sufism. Islam, Sufi Orders, and Authority in a Time of Transition*, eds. Elliott Bazzano, and Marcia Hermansen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020), 175-208.

<sup>29</sup> Krokus, “‘There is an ‘I’ deeper than me’”, 192.

<sup>30</sup> Krokus, “‘There is an ‘I’ deeper than me’”, 189.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Silverstein, “Disciplines of Presence in Modern Turkey,” 127.

Messick,<sup>33</sup> he furthermore asserts the significance of the *sahaba*, the companions of the Prophet, for the overall focus on orality as the defining nature of instruction and learning in the Muslim tradition:<sup>34</sup>

Their significance can hardly be overstated, as it was they who transmitted the hadith and the Quran before these were written down and compiled, ensuring a critical structural role for companionship and face-to-face speech—"presence"—in the transmission of Islamic knowledge.

However, as pointed out by Graham's,<sup>35</sup> who accentuated the fundamental orality of religious scriptures in general, this is by far not exclusive to Islam. Hall's subsequent observation regarding the relevance of oral transmissions in the context of the esoteric "inner doctrines"<sup>36</sup> introduces a similar perspective:

It has been said that no philosophy can survive translations, for no sacred teaching can ever be actually understood except by one able to transport himself into the locale and time in which the material was originally indited. Hence arose the practice of perpetuating the inner doctrines through oral traditions, for it was presumed that each generation would reclothe these basic ideas with proper vestments and thus preserve them free from distortion at the hands of time.

In relation to Bourdieu's<sup>37</sup> notion of habitus, Silverstein states the following regarding the discursive practice of *sohbet* in the Naqshbandi Order:<sup>38</sup>

As such, the specific status of selves produced in and through discursive traditions, as well as their historicity, is equivocal in a practice approach that focuses solely on the implicit and unconscious workings of habitus.

Similarly, Silverstein's notion regarding the constitution of "a morally structured disposition in the devotee" can be interpreted as equivalent to

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<sup>33</sup> Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Silverstein, "Disciplines of Presence in Modern Turkey," 127.

<sup>35</sup> William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Victoria: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>36</sup> (Hall, *Lectures on Ancient Philosophy*, 352)

<sup>37</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>38</sup> Silverstein, "Disciplines of Presence in Modern Turkey," 128.

Bourdieu's mention of "the specific status of selves produced in and through discursive traditions."<sup>39</sup>

In the Sufi practice of *sohbet* (from the Arabic *suhba*)—which I translate as "companionship-in-conversation"—the kinds of relationships formed in the act of oral transmission of texts and interpretations are considered liable to constitute a morally structured disposition in the devotee and are the object of careful cultivation through what I propose to call disciplines of presence. These practices are effective as means for cultivating an ethical self, partly due to the fact that the status of the events in which they take place is equivocal.

He furthermore attributes the constitution of "ethically structured dispositions" to "the role of presence and repetition in the training of affect" during the *sohbet*:

In *sohbet* events, alongside the importance of the content of the sheikh's discourse, the relationships ("companionships" as these Sufis refer to them) formed in the act of oral transmission and liable to constitute ethically structured dispositions in devotees are the object of careful cultivation. Central to the functioning of this discipline of presence is the role of presence and repetition in the training of affect.

The very same perspective is accentuated by Silverstein in his discussion of Gündüz' description of the *sohbet*:<sup>40</sup>

"Taking in," "perceiving," "being together," "influence"—Gündüz is laying bare here the ways in which *sohbet* is felt to be effective, namely, through *affect*. *Sohbet* is the harnessing of a metaphysic of influence to form proper, morally structured dispositions to do what God commanded as the Good.

Silverstein furthermore relates the notion of authority invoked with such claims to Arendt's<sup>41</sup> modality of power, "characterized by a moral obligation to obey, not because of a compelling argument but because of the status of the source of the demand in an environment of shared norms."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Silverstein, "Disciplines of Presence in Modern Turkey," 121.

<sup>40</sup> Silverstein, "Disciplines of Presence in Modern Turkey," 129.

<sup>41</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking, 1968).

<sup>42</sup> Silverstein, "Disciplines of Presence in Modern Turkey," 131.

As similar view is provided by Hall,<sup>43</sup> who even places “the veneration for age” at the very origin of religion:

The physical origin of religion, to my mind, is the veneration for age. Those who have lived long have experienced the most. Tradition is the record of the long-lived. Not many reached to great age in primitive times and among savage peoples; there were too many hazards in the way; so most of the races respected the old, and accorded them dignities and honors equal with the gods and spirits. For, in the first state of human society, those who reached fullness of years excelled in simple thoughtfulness – the survivor was the superior man.

As pointed out by psychologist Julian Jaynes, the empowering collective cognitive imperative fostered within religious groups bears a highly transformative potential—due to its perception as an authentically felt source of spiritual authority, as compared to the average individual:<sup>44</sup>

We are learned in self-doubt, scholars of our very failures, geniuses at excuse and tomorrowing our resolves. And so we become practiced in powerless resolution until hope gets undone and dies in the unattempted. At least that happens to some of us. And then to rise above this noise of knowings and really change ourselves, we need an authorization that ‘we’ do not have.

This perspective needs to be taken into consideration regarding the practice of the sohbet, in which the narrator declares to rely on inspiration of divine sources, not unlike similar notions in the Evangelical tradition.<sup>45</sup> These are attempted to be reached by establishing a chain of authority, leading from the spiritual guide of the orator to previous masters, saints, and prophets, as noted by Krokus:<sup>46</sup>

The talk is said to be “inspired” and “from Allah”, which creates a setting of profound authority through which teachings are mediated in prose and poetry, while the voice and visage of the shaykh animate his authority with personalized concern and a gentle delivery.

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<sup>43</sup> Manly P. Hall, *Healing. The Divine Art* (Eastford: Martino Fine Books, 2021), 35-36.

<sup>44</sup> (Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness*, 403)

<sup>45</sup> Emily Murphy Cope, “‘Inspiration of Delivery’: John A. Broadus and the Evangelical Underpinnings of Extemporaneous Oratory,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 45, No. 4 (2015): 279-299.

<sup>46</sup> Krokus, “‘There is an ‘I’ deeper than me’”, 190.

As for the spoken delivery of the content, “the voice” may be considered as the primary point of reference for listeners—and a major vehicle for reaching the audience and establishing attention. In this regard, Jaynes furthermore points out that “[t]o hear is actually a kind of obedience:”<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, both words come from the same root and therefore were probably the same word originally. This is true in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French, German, Russian, as well as in English, where ‘obey’ comes from the Latin *obedire*, which is a composite of *ob* + *audire*, to hear facing someone.

He argues that we are especially vulnerable and more likely subject to volition when being exposed to sound, or speech respectively, as compared to the other senses. As a means of protection in the process of filtering these influences, next to adjusting the spatial distance to the speaker, “the second and more important way to that we control other people’s voice-authority over us is by our opinions of them:”<sup>48</sup>

We constantly rate others and pigeonhole them in often ridiculous status hierarchies simply to regulate their control over us and our thoughts. Our personal judgements of others are filters of influence. If you wish to allow another’s language power over you, simply hold him higher in your own private scale of esteem.

In his discussion of a related encounter between the mythical *Khidr*—a popular figure in Islamic folklore who also appears as the mysterious teacher of the prophet Musa in *Sura al-Kahf* of the Quran—and the famed Sufi scholar Ibn ‘Arabi (1165-1240), Halman<sup>49</sup> explores the meaning of the notion that the former addressed the latter “in his own language:”<sup>50</sup>

The term “his own language” symbolizes the distinction between spiritual guidance (*suhba*) and instruction (*ta’lim*) and the need to pursue each in its appropriate way. Each has its own language. Spiritual guidance works with patient action and silence; instruction with concepts and questioning.

This interpretation explains the juxtaposition of sohbet with conversation as a common practice, although it is rather an exercise in listening to a

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<sup>47</sup> (Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness*, 97)

<sup>48</sup> (Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness*, 98)

<sup>49</sup> Hugh Talat Halman, *Where the Two Seas Meet: The Quranic Story of Al-Khidr and Moses in Sufi Commentaries as a Model of Spiritual Guidance* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2013).

<sup>50</sup> (Halman, *Where the Two Seas meet*, 245)

perceived authority than engaging in a two-way communication. In reference to Schimmel<sup>51</sup> and Trimmingham,<sup>52</sup> Silverstein<sup>53</sup> notes the following:

The term *sohbet* is used in modern, everyday Turkish to mean “conversation.” But in Islamic sources it has a more technical meaning of companionship, including shades of fellowship and discipleship.

Referring to Silverstein’s<sup>54</sup> analysis of the *sohbet* in the Naqshbandi Order in Turkey, Jurgens<sup>55</sup> lines out the historical tradition of the practice as well as the significant relevance of oral transmission in Islam and, specifically, in the Naqshbandiyya:<sup>56</sup>

In Silverstein’s analysis, the *sohbet* is embedded in both the Islamic and broadly Aristotelian traditions. On the one hand, Naqshbandis trace the *sohbet* to the exemplary practices of the Prophet Muhammad, who also sought to impart his teachings through companionship and conversation with his disciples. In the process, Naqshbandis attribute particular authority to the oral—as opposed to written or scriptural—transmission of ethical instruction, a stance that accords with the centrality of spoken revelation and recitation in Islam more generally.

In correspondence, and as compared to the premeditated nature of a *khutbah*—the sermon of the Imam at the Friday prayer—or other forms of theological discussions, the *sohbet* as a discursive practice in Sufism typically evolves in an impromptu, spontaneous manner. As any type of improvisational endeavor, this process depends on the ability of the speaker to be present in the moment and express intuitively captured ideas and thoughts in a train-of-consciousness style. Yawar notes the following

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<sup>51</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 366.

<sup>52</sup> J. Spencer Trimmingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 311.

<sup>53</sup> Silverstein, “Disciplines of Presence in Modern Turkey,” 126.

<sup>54</sup> Brian Silverstein, *Islam and Modernity in Turkey* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 121.

<sup>55</sup> Jeff Jurgens, “MOOCs, Sufi Devotion, and the Ethics of ‘Presence’”, The Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities, September 7, 2013, <https://hac.bard.edu/amor-mundi/moocs-sufi-devotion-and-the-ethics-of-presence-2013-07-09>.

<sup>56</sup> Jurgens, “MOOCs, Sufi Devotion, and the Ethics of ‘Presence’”.

regarding the extemporaneous nature of the sohbet delivered by Shaykh Nazim:<sup>57</sup>

Shaykh Nazim was said never to give scripted talks. Instead, he acted as a kind of amanuensis for his masters, expressing what he felt they wanted to say. Some books of his talks do not just contain set-piece talks, but fragments of dialogue or advice: since he was said to be always in a state of connection with his masters, every word of his was considered to be valuable.

Therefore, instead of preparation, the speaker solely relies on inspiration in shaping the content of his talk, which unfolds in real-time before the eyes of the spectators. Although this principle applies to basically every random conversation during the day, speech acts that are based on a premeditated intention usually are expected to be rehearsed and well-prepared.

As compared to dialogic communication—that can hardly be premeditated due to the unpredictability of the possible responses—the outcome of monologues aiming at persuading, entertaining, or educating a specific audience will rarely be left to the inspirational guidance and intuition during the process of delivery.

Hence, the willing exposure to the specific risk of the situation—to potentially get stuck during delivery or run out of words—seems to be a deliberate choice of the Sufi teachers. This risk may be taken with possible benefits for the learning outcome of the students in mind.

Considering the notorious disdain in Sufi circles for what is often derogatory referred to as “book knowledge,” one might assume that the exposure to this situation is part of a systematic strategy that corresponds to the outlined oral nature of instructional methods in the sapiential tradition. The interest of the present contribution will be to dissect and analyze—as much as possible—the nature, structure, and intention of such an approach, and to determine which insights may be derived for possible adaptations in the context of modern educational practices.

Jaynes, in his discussion of the trance-like state common among shamans and indigenous spiritual traditions, notes that “supposed possession is the obliteration of consciousness,”<sup>58</sup> and refers to the following quote of Philo Judaeus:<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Athar Ahmed Yawar, *From madness to eternity. Psychiatry and Sufi healing in the postmodern world* (Doctoral dissertation, University College of London, 2020), 159-160.

<sup>58</sup> (Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness*, 341)

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

When he (a prophet) is inspired he becomes unconscious; thought vanishes away and leaves the fortress of the soul; but the divine spirit has entered there and taken up its abode; and this later makes all the organs resound so that the man gives clear expression to what the spirit gives him to say.

In a footnote, Jaynes refers to a corresponding notion of Cohn and Wendland: “He who is really inspired and filled with god cannot comprehend with his intelligence what he says; he only repeats what is suggested to him, as if another prompted him.”<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, in his work on cognitive dimensions of Jazz improvisation, Fidlón<sup>61</sup> refers to Atkinson’s and Schiffrin’s<sup>62</sup> framework in cognitive theory. They assigned two different neural systems as being responsible for the processing of information in long-term memory:<sup>63</sup>

Declarative memory can have explicit symbolic and propositional representations (i.e., information that can be expressed in statements such as “I know that...”), whereas representations of procedural memory are implicitly-held and non-propositional, and expressed through behavior.

Fidlón furthermore offers a more detailed distinction between the two functions by referring to a characterization formulated by Schacter:<sup>64</sup>

Implicit memory is revealed when previous experiences facilitate performance on a task that does not require conscious or intentional recollection of those experiences; explicit memory is revealed when performance on a task requires conscious recollection of previous experiences.

A similar cognitive perspective is regularly suggested by Shaykh Nazim, as will become visible with the corresponding excerpts of the sohbet in the analysis part. On one occasion, the Shaykh formulated this common

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<sup>60</sup> (Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness*, 341)

<sup>61</sup> James Daniel Fidlón, *Cognitive Dimensions of Instrumental Jazz Improvisation* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Texas, 2011), 14.

<sup>62</sup> Richard C. Atkinson, and Richard M. Shiffrin, “Human memory: A proposed system and its control processes,” *The psychology of learning and motivation: Advances in research and theory* 2 (1968): 89-195.

<sup>63</sup> (Fidlón, *Cognitive Dimensions of Instrumental Jazz Improvisation*, 14)

<sup>64</sup> Daniel L. Schacter, “Implicit memory: History and current status,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 13, Nr. 3 (1987), 501.