

TRANSFORMING SUFISM INTO DIGITAL MEDIA: *Eshaykh* and Simplification of *Tarekat* Orthodoxy

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Abstract

This article seeks to examine the rise of tarekat (Sufi order) in the context of the digital public sphere with a special attention to focus on the Eshaykh website. As this article argues, the Eshaykh existence of the website represents is an adaptation of conventional groups of tarekat combined with information technology. However, this digital adoption progressivity, on the other hand, raises a new problem, especially related to the differences in terms of access between both digital tarekat and the conventional tarekat entities that are present within them. This article—using a virtual ethnographic approach—focuses on the Eshaykh website by the Tarekat Naqsyabandiyah Haqqaniyah (TNH) as the primary source. The website provides all information about the tarekat, both the doctrine and the wirid, which are presented online. There is also an element of the simplification of orthodoxy which has so far been strictly guarded by conventional tarekat, but the rise of the Eshaykh website in the digital public sphere is solely to present offering tarekat practices that are easily accessible and reach all levels of society.

[Artikel ini mengkaji tentang munculnya tarekat dalam konteks ruang publik digital dengan fokus pada website Eshaykh sebagai obyeknya. Hadirnya website tersebut sebagai bentuk adaptasi kelompok tarekat konvensional dengan kemajuan



teknologi informasi. Namun progresivitas itu, di lain pihak justru memunculkan masalah baru, terutama terkait dengan perbedaan entitas tarekat digital dengan tarekat konvensional yang hadir di dalamnya. Artikel ini—dengan menggunakan pendekatan etnografi virtual—fokus pada webiste Eshayekh yang dikembangkan oleh jamaah Tarekat Naqsyabandiyah Haqqaniyah (TNH) sebagai sumber primernya. Website tersebut menyajikan segala informasi tentang tarekat, baik doktrin hingga wirid yang disajikan secara daring. Pun ada unsur proses simplikasi ortodoksi yang selama ini dijaga ketat oleh penganut tarekat konvensional, akan tetapi kemunculan website Eshayekh di ruang publik digital semata-mata adalah untuk menghadirkan praktik tarekat yang mudah diakses dan menjangkau semua kalangan masyarakat.]

Keywords: *Eshayekh, Tarekat, Naqsyabandiyah Haqqaniyah, Orthodoxy*

Introduction

Tarekat (Sufi order), is a globally expanding and developing religious tradition. The *tarekat* is a spiritual activity that focuses on the esoteric rather than the exoteric. Regardless, its activities are generally still closed to all ongoing advancements in information technology. *Tarekat* is a “silent way” that is practiced in a “closed space” within religious expressions connected to technology. It differs from other groups, which view advances in information technology as a threat to be avoided. However, the *Tarekat* Naqshbandiyah Haqqani (TNH) group, led by Shaykh Nazim, recognizes that progress cannot be avoided.¹ This has led to genuine efforts toward self-actualization and progressive steps toward preparing the *tarekat* to survive and develop in spite of the world’s rapid growth.

Consequently, TNH has adapted to advances in information technology, particularly the internet, by regarding advancement as an opportunity. It offers various options that enable devices to connect

¹ Mark Sedgwick, “The Islamization of Western Sufism after the Early New Age,” in Francesco Piraino and Mark Sedgwick (eds.), *Global Sufism: Boundaries, Structures, and Politics* (London: Hurst and Company, 2019), p. 44; William Rory Dickson, “An American Sufism: The Naqshabandi-Haqqani Order as a Public Religion,” *Studies in Religion*, Vol. 43, No. 3, 2014, pp. 1-14; Jørgen Schøler Nielsen, (et.al.), “Transnational Sufism: Haqqaniyya,” in Jamal Malik and John Hinnells, (ed.), *Sufism in the West* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 103-113.

congregations to the internet. The TNH website, clearly and explicitly stated its interest in presenting a *shaykh* or *murshid*² who is connected to the internet.³ Hence, the website is purposefully designed to meet all of the global virtual community's needs of connecting with TNH through several strategic steps. This led to *Eshaykh* quickly becoming popular among the general public because it focuses on aspects of the development of TNH doctrines and rituals via the internet. However, the website covers all aspects of the Islamic field but not all *tarekat*-related issues. By discussing various issues, *Eshaykh* demonstrates the existence of elements contradictory to conventional *tarekat* traditions, which focus more on the orthodox aspects of tradition in a conventional style. Regardless, it has created a simplification of the *tarekat*.

Understanding *Eshaykh* as part of the *da'wah* (preach) strategy carried out by *tarekat* recognizes internet utilization efforts as a strategic step to keep Sufism present in virtual society.⁴ Although the transformation from the offline to the online world has had an impact, the online platform is not fully capable of representing the exact form of the *tarekat* that is understood and practiced by traditional Sufis.⁵ So far, many studies have been conducted on internet-based Sufism, or religion, in the digital public sphere. Cheruvallil-Contractor⁶ investigates

² *Murshid* in Sufism context refers to a spiritual guide.

³ Itzhak Weismann, "The Entire Land is My Lodge: Naqshbandi Responses to the Challenges of Modernity and Globalization," Daphna Ephrat, Ethel Sara Wolper and Paulo G. Pinto, (eds.), *Saintly Spheres and Islamic Landscapes* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2021), p. 417; Luthfi Makhasin, "The Politics of Contending Piety: Naqshabandi-Haqqani Sufi Movement and Struggle for Islamic Activism in Contemporary Indonesia", *Ph.D Dissertation*, Australian National University, 2016, p. 24-36.

⁴ Stéphane A. Dudoignon, "Cyber Sufism," in Alexandre Papas, (ed.), *Sufi Institutions* (Leiden: Boston: Brill, 2021), p. 405.

⁵ Francesco Piraino, "Between Real and Virtual Communities Sufism in Western Societies and the Naqshabandi Haqqani Case," *Social Compass*, Vol. 63, No. 1, 2016, pp. 93-109.

⁶ Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor, "Online Sufism, Young British Muslims, Their Internet 'Selves' and Virtual Reality," in Ron Geaves and Theodore Gabriel, (eds.), *Sufism in Britain* (London: Bloomsbury Academy, 2013), p. 76-161.

Sufi practice among young people, which has lost its philosophical and theological foundations. Online Sufis have also influenced offline Sufi practices that were previously considered rigid and outdated. Piraino⁷ researched the process of Sufism's transformation from offline to online, which resurrected Sufism and gave rise to a new religion. According to Rozehnal,⁸ the presence of cyber Sufi is a balance between traditional Sufi methods and internet progress. However, this transition led to disagreements between acceptance and rejection, but the progress made Sufi doctrine known worldwide.

Alatas conducted significant relevant research in the Indonesian context, researching internet-based Sufism through websites, Facebook, and Twitter.⁹ Sufism's presence in the digital world creates issues, particularly the weakening of the *murshid's* authority. Then, Husein and Slama, online religious practices are ambiguous.¹⁰ Many contradictions exist between online spiritual practices and established Islamic doctrines. The goal has shifted from displaying the *tarekat* to a path of the *murshid* toward God. Therefore, this article aimed to delve deeper into the *tarekat* practice in the virtual world via the *Eshayekh* website and consider the implications for the orthodoxy tradition. This investigation is significant because it attempted to examine the *tarekat's* expression in the virtual world through *Eshayekh*, particularly the goal of exploring the deepest aspects of every doctrine, ritual, and practice. It focused on topics rather than locations and employed the virtual ethnography method.

⁷ Francesco Piraino, "Between Real....," p. 93-109.

⁸ Robert Rozehnal, *Cyber Sufis: Virtual Expressions of the American Muslim Experience* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2019), p. 70.

⁹ Ismail Fajrie Alatas, "Sufi Sociality in Social Media," in Carla Jones and Martin Slama (eds.), "Piety, Celebrity, Sociality: A Forum on Islam and Social Media in Southeast Asia," *Carla Jones and Martin Slama, eds., American Ethnologist website*, November 8, 2017.

¹⁰ Fatimah Husein and Martin Slama, "Online Piety and Its Discontent: Revisiting Islamic Anxieties on Indonesian Social Media," *Indonesia and the Malay World*, Vol. 46, No. 134, 2018, pp. 80-93.

The article object was the website, *Eshaykeh*, as it contains information on Sufism as well as frequent visitors from around the world in a variety of world languages. The virtual ethnography method was used to investigate data sources derived from the internet and was a critical step because it attempted to demonstrate the implications of the research object. The method involved close observation and comprehension of the primary data source. Observations were made flexibly, as the data was obtained from the internet, thereby preventing space, time, or location constraints. The data collection involved identifying, negotiating, contacting, interpreting, and concluding. Finally, triangulation was used to confirm the findings obtained from the research object.

Revisiting *Tarekat* Orthodoxy

Orthodoxy is an essential component of all religions. It is the adherence to the teachings that are important or considered as pure as expected. As a form of religious originality, orthodoxy refers to the understanding and practice of religious doctrines like in the early days, despite the dynamic evolution of religious understanding and practice in response to ongoing changes. The ultimate Sufism orthodoxy is inextricably linked to God's transcendence, which is interpreted through formalized doctrines and rituals performed by Sufis and *tarekat* practitioners based on the teachings of their respective figures.¹¹ Sufism orthodoxy was formed by a strong attitude toward accordance with sharia. This effort was undertaken in response to the existence of heterodox behavior in some Sufi circles, which placed a greater emphasis on its philosophical aspects.¹² However, Sufi orthodoxy implies a focus on the inner as well as outer aspects, which are considered in the practice of life

¹¹ Victor de Munck, "Islamic Orthodoxy and Sufism in Sri Lanka," *Anthropos*, Vol. 100, No. 2, 2005, pp. 401-414.

¹² Syamsun Ni'am, "The Debate of Orthodox Sufism and Philosophical Sufism: The Study of Maqāmāt in the Sirāj al-T}ālibīn of Shaykh Ih} sān Jampes," *Al-Jāmi'ah*, Vol. 58, No. 1, 2020, pp. 1-34.

as inseparable from efforts to build an ideal human relationship with God.

One of the most important orthodoxies in Sufism, particularly the *tarekat*, is the involvement of the teacher or *murshid* in all student activities. The *murshid*'s position is absolute as a spiritual guide as well as an individual who guides students to connect with God through the *wasilah* (medium) doctrine.¹³ The orthodoxy regarding the *murshid* has been maintained and is still practiced in *tarekat*. Another important orthodoxy is adherence to every spiritual activity, such as *wirid*, *dhikr*, prayer, etc., which are led by a *murshid*, who guides and ensures that every practice is performed conventionally.¹⁴ However, technological advancements and increasingly sophisticated media have eliminated the requirement for face-to-face meetings between teachers and students. This necessitates an insight into the response of the Sufi or *tarekat* orthodoxy to these changes.

Brief of *Eshaykh*

The Islamic Supreme Council of America (ISCA) manages the *Eshaykh* website. ISCA is a high-level Islamic organization that serves as a liaison between American Muslim communities and to build relationships with other countries.¹⁵ It has been successful in developing *tarekat da'wah* in the Muslim communities of almost all countries. Meanwhile, the *Eshaykh* website is inextricably linked to Shaykh Nazim, an important figure in TNH and a *murshid*, who became a pioneer in spreading TNH throughout the world.¹⁶ It was purposefully prepared as a form of

¹³ Alimova Mahfuza, "The relationship between Pir and Murid in Sufism," *Asian Journal of Multidimensional Research (AJMR)*, Vol. 9, No. 10, 2020. Pp. 15-22, Akhtar Qamber, "The Sufi Pir-o-Murshid (Make thy Sheikh thy Qiblah)," *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 1992, pp. 14-27.

¹⁴ Butrus Abu-Manneh, *Studies on Islam and the Ottoman Empire in the 19th Century (1826 - 1876)* (Istanbul: The ISIS Press, 2011), p. 27-35.

¹⁵ Joseph Hill, "Sufism Between Past and Modernity," in Ronald Lukens-Bull and Mark Woodward (eds.), *Handbook of Contemporary Islam and Muslim Lives* (New York: Springer, 2020), p. 1-26.

¹⁶ Itzhak Weismann, "The Entire Land is My Lodge: Naqshbandi Responses to the Challenges of Modernity and Globalization," *Handbook of Oriental Studies* (Brill

dedication to preserving and developing the doctrines and heritage taught by Shaykh Nazim to ensure their continuous propagation. The entire website's content is centered on the dissemination of doctrines taught through TNH and is managed by the group.

Hence, it is part of an effort to present Islam, particularly the *tarekat*, as part of *da'wah* in the virtual world. The virtual development of *da'wah* by TNH demonstrates that this spiritual organization recognizes the need to present and adapt *da'wah* to societal realities amidst ongoing global developments.¹⁷ The presence of the *Eshayekh* as a platform for virtual *tarekat* preaching is in accordance with development and emphasizes its managers' ability to read situations and conditions in the global world. Following the advancement of information technology, *Eshayekh* is a form of *da'wah*. It is purposefully designed to provide information and knowledge that can be easily accessed by anyone and anywhere, facilitating a global impact and inviting all people to join the congregation.

The *Eshayekh* website provides information about Islam by offering an open question-answer space for curious individuals to make inquiries. This space or room is a part of the efforts to fill in the blanks and allow the global community to seek answers, particularly about Islam or personal issues. The website manager responds to each question raised by providing evidence-based arguments sourced from the al-Qur'an, *hadith*, and the opinions of religious scholars. Every answered question is posted for everyone to read and learn from. Hence, this is the most popular

Academic Publishers, 2021), p. 417-436, 20; Simon Stjernholm, "The Centre of the Universe: Shaykh Nazim and His Murids in Lefke, Cyprus," *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2015, pp. 38-57.

¹⁷ Widiyanto, "Spirituality amidst the Uproar of Modernity: The Ritual of *Dhikr* and its Meanings among Members of Naqshbandi Sufi Order in Western Europe", *Al-Jami'ah*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 2006, pp. 252-269; Marcia Hermansen, "Hybrid Identity Formations in Muslim America: The Case of American Sufi Movements," *The Muslim World*, Vol. 90, 2000, pp. 158.

section, which is considered capable of answering global problems.¹⁸

Generally, answers are provided within two weeks to one month. The reason for the time lag in response is that incoming questions are directed to experts who will provide answers, which are presented on the website. The questions are presented anonymously to protect the identity of the questioner and are majorly about personal problems and Islamic issues, particularly Sufism or *tarekat*. The *Eshaykh* developed this column to solve the presented problem as well as provide understanding to others with similar issues and provide knowledge to all readers.

It also mentions the names of prominent scholars in order to strengthen its religious legitimacy. Some names used as references include Shaykh Ali Gomaa, Egypt's grand mufti and jurisprudence expert, Shaykh Hisham Kabbani, a prominent Sufi successor to Shaykh Nazim, Shaykh Gibril, an expert in the study of classical Islamic texts, and others, who are recognized in the Islamic field.¹⁹ These references indicate that the website is Islam-related and linked to scholars with religious authority.²⁰ The legitimacy provided by Islamic experts is critical in efforts to strengthen its involvement in developing Islamic *da'wah*, particularly regarding *tarekat*. The involvement of leading experts strengthens *Eshaykh*'s existence as an Islamic website and serves as an effort to establish religious authority, thereby enabling the execution of the *tarekat* expansion project.²¹

The Question-Answer Column of *Eshaykh*

Eshaykh is specifically presented for the benefit of conveying information related to TNH, particularly doctrine and rituals. Its open presentation, like other websites, ensures easy accessibility by all groups by all groups. It can be found using search engines, such as Google, Yahoo,

¹⁸ <https://eshaykh.com/ask-a-question/> accessed November 15, 2022.

¹⁹ <https://eshaykh.com/about/> accessed November 15, 2022.

²⁰ <https://eshaykh.com/about/> accessed November 15, 2022.

²¹ Dahlia Hidayati, "Online Sufism and Reestablishing Religious Authority," *Ulumuna*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2022, pp. 204-237.

and Bing, and is intended to be open to everyone, regardless of agreement with TNH.²² It allows anyone with an internet connection to visit at any time and from any location.²³ *Eshaykh* is aimed at promoting information about itself, as well as introducing TNH as a *tarekat* organization to be used as a reference in the spiritual life of the community, particularly for interested groups. It presents information related to Sufism or *tarekat*, alongside other details deemed important and relevant to the needs of the global community.²⁴

TNH views the website as an effort of a spiritual organization that regards connectivity to the internet network as an important part of realizing the existence of a spiritual doctrine. It is also a calculated strategy to keep students and sympathizers connected to Shaykh Nazim, the main character of TNH. Connection with TNH's spiritual leadership is considered important because the position of *murshid* is critical to the preservation of the doctrines and rituals of the group.²⁵

Therefore, *Eshaykh* is a means of communication and connection of students all over the world to TNH, enabling the maintenance of a core part of spiritual activities, which is a continuous connection to the source. It meets all the requirements for executing the doctrines and rituals taught in TNH and allows all connected groups to maintain these activities as part of their spiritual life. Consequently, the website is regarded as effective for disseminating information about TNH because people or groups are constantly attempting to connect and engage in the

²² Milad Milani and Adam Possamai, "Sufism, Spirituality and Consumerism: The Case Study of the Nimatullahiya and Naqshbandiya Sufi orders in Australia", *Contemporary Islam*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2016, pp. 67-85.

²³ Jamal Malik, "Introduction", in Jamal Malik and John Hinnells (eds.), *Sufism in the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 15.

²⁴ Wahyu Nugroho, "Sufism and Interreligious Dialogue: The Naqshbandi Haqqani Sufi Order in Indonesia," *Teosofia: Indonesian Journal of Islamic Mysticism*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2021, pp. 111-126.

²⁵ <http://eshaykh.com> accessed November 15, 2022.


available spiritual activities.²⁶

The question column on *Eshaykh*, a self-development website based on spiritual education, encourages interaction between managers and readers. Readers are allowed to ask questions based on their preferences, which are grouped according to the subtitles provided. A perusal of the questions and answers on the website is requested before presenting a new inquiry. The goal of this instruction is to prevent repetitions, thereby enabling visitors to find answers to questions that have already been asked.²⁷ Every question and answer is posted to provide readers with information or knowledge. This column is an effort to meet the needs of all people, particularly those related to spiritual aspects, as well as a service that allows *Eshaykh*'s managers to maintain connectivity with all students or sympathizers worldwide. Spiritual guidance is ensured by providing a website that can explain all aspects required by its readers.

Prayer Request
Before submitting your request, please try searching first. There are many similar requests. As you type in the search form you will see tips.

Search

For those seeking a prayer request. Your request will appear on the site, but it will remain anonymous.



Title *
Please provide a brief title to keep track of your prayer request.

Enter your brief title here.

0 of 80 max characters

Prayer Request *

Enter your request here.

0 of 255 max characters

Captcha

☐ I'm not a robot

reCAPTCHA
Privacy Terms

Submit

Figure 1. Question Submission Process

²⁶ Luthfi Makhasin, “Urban Sufism, Media and Religious Change in Indonesia”, *Ijtima’iyya*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2016, pp. 24-35.

²⁷ <https://eshaykh.com/ask-a-question/> accessed November 15, 2022.

Meanwhile, visitors are requested to ask questions anonymously by keeping their names confidential. This step is aimed at protecting the privacy interests of the questioner as well as guaranteeing comfort without the fear of other readers discovering any personal issues. The responses are proffered with a disclaimer that they provide only one perspective on the problem and no person is under any obligation to agree to or obey the instructions given. The *Eshaykh* manager openly states that after proving the correctness of an answer to a question submitted, the questioner is given full authority to make a choice.²⁸ This open attitude proves that opinions differing from the responses provided are welcome.²⁹

The website also requires visitors to log into the appropriate column in order to ask technical questions. This login process is a separate mechanism that demonstrates accountability to the website manager, as only the asker and the manager are aware of the message submitted. Following its success, an 80-word title must be provided for the submission to help managers group incoming questions that will be answered. Then, the question column, which is limited to 255 words, will be filled out.³⁰ The displayed list of questions comprises items in various languages that are related to a private group or family interests, from which the questioner must select a category, such as worship, family, Sufism, etc. The categories facilitate the grouping of similar questions and simplify the process of providing answers from people deemed worthy. Afterward, the asker must click on the captcha to confirm the correctness of the question and send it to the website manager.³¹ The described technique for submission to the *Eshaykh* demonstrates that management is performed systematically and measurably, allowing

²⁸ Rhiannon Conner, "From Amuq to Glastonbury: Situating the Apocalypticism of Shaykh Nazim and the Naqshbandi Haqqaniyya," *PhD Thesis*, The University of Exeter, 2015, p. 118.

²⁹ Garbi Schmidt, "Sufis Charisma on the Internet," in David Westerlund (ed.), *Sufism in Europe and North America* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 18.

³⁰ <https://eshaykh.com/ask-a-question/> accessed November 15, 2022.

³¹ <https://eshaykh.com/ask-a-question/> accessed November 15, 2022.

continued development as a means of communication between global communities and TNH as a spiritual organization.³²

The *Eshaykh* and Simplification of Orthodoxy

The issues discussed on *Eshaykh* cover almost every aspect of Islam, with the *tarekat* as a subset. This is a strategy to attract the attention of visitors, where the al-Qur'an, *hadith*, marriage, worship, history, and congregations are among the topics discussed.³³ Some issues raised are part of efforts to compile comprehensive information about the global Islamic community.³⁴ Although *tarekat* is a separate aspect directly related to the website entity, the issues mentioned are general discourses posed by *Eshaykh*. This is because both issues are interconnected, as general issues become an integral part of *tarekat* discussions.

The specific issue raised on *Eshaykh* is consistent with its stated goal of disseminating the *tarekat* taught by TNH. It is intriguing because related issues are not commonly discussed by other *tarekat* leaders and managers.³⁵ As a result, the website is a type of virtual representation of the *tarekat*. The accessibility of information is also tailored to the needs of the global community. Specific *tarekat* discussions, as well as other issues, are presented in the form of questions and answers. Some doctrines and practices are also mentioned to answer *tarekat*-related issues, which can be divided into three major categories on *Eshaykh*, namely online *bay'at*,

³² Marcia Hermansen, "Global Sufism: "Theirs and ours", in M. Dressler, R. Geaves and G. Klinkhammer (eds.), *Sufis in Western Society* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 26.

³³ <https://eshaykh.com/about/> accessed November 15, 2022.

³⁴ Margaret J. Rausch, "Encountering Sufism on the Web: Two Halveti-Jerrahi Paths and their Missions in the USA," in Catharina Raudvere and Leif Stenberg (eds.), *Sufism Today: Heritage and Tradition in the Global Community* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), p. 159-176.

³⁵ Robert Rozehnal, *Cyber Sufis: Virtual Expressions of the American Muslim Experience* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2019), p. 70; Milad Milani and Adam Possamai, "The Nikmatullahiya and Naqshabandiya Sufi Orders on the Internet: The Cyber-Construction of Tradition and the McDonadlisation of Spirituality," *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2013, pp. 51-75.

online praying, and dream interpretation.³⁶ These categories explain that the issue of Sufism is more than just a shift between the offline real world and the online virtual world. The intersection of the congregation and internet technology enables the TNH management group to resolve issues presented virtually by selecting topics deemed most important to the global community.

Online *Bai'at*

One of the categories on the website is targeted at persons interested in becoming involved with TNH.³⁷ Online *bai'at*³⁸ is a form of adaptation of the *tarekat* to the internet technology and constitutes an important part of the doctrine because it allows the global community to join TNH without engaging in offline *bai'at*. This has changed the orthodoxy of the *tarekat*, from “strict” and “rigid” to offering an easier process of becoming a practitioner.³⁹ Through internet connectivity, online *bai'at* contributes to the global strengthening of the TNH network. A factor that has contributed to this rapid development is the ease with which Sufi followers can become *tarekat* members, particularly through the maintenance and practice of doctrines and rituals.

³⁶ <https://eshaykh.com/about/> accessed November 15, 2022.

³⁷ Andrey Rosowsky, “Virtual Allegiance: Online “Baya’a” Practices within a Worldwide Sufi Order”, in Andrey Rosowsky (ed.), *Faith and Language Practices in Digital Spaces* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2017), p. 382-407.

³⁸ *Bai'at* literally means to sell yourself or to make a pledge of allegiance to the Almighty Allah.

³⁹ Rachida Chih, “Sainteté, Maîtrise Spirituelle et Patronage: Les Fondements de L'autorité dans le Soufisme,” *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, Vol. 125, 2004, pp. 79-98.

Baya*

Posted on October 27, 2013 by Taher Siddiqui

Question:

Assalam Alaikum wa RahmatAllah wa Barakatuhu

I gave online *bay'ah* to Sheikh Nazim, *RahmatAllah alaihi*, just yesterday however I had reason to believe that it might not have gotten through. Last night however I had a dream in which I remember reciting words after a man who I assume now may perhaps have been a *khalif* of theirs but shaytaan then caused me to forget by entering his own whisperings after this dream had ended.

I want to know if I am now a follower of the Naqshbandi Tariqah as I believe myself to be or is it still undecided?

I apologise for the awkwardly worded question. *JazaakAllah Khair*.

Answer:

wa 'alaykum salaam,

Actions are by intentions and Mawlana Shaykh Muhammad Nazim al-Haqqani does not turn anyone away, so you are accepted as a Naqshbandi *mureed*, *in-sha-Allah*. Keep the wird of the initiate and keep in touch with the Shaykh via sufilive.com

Taher Siddiqui

Figure 2: Online *Bai'at*

The question shown above was asked to ensure that the online initiation had been completed because the TNH membership status of the questioner was still in doubt. The response given was a guarantee that the online initiation had resulted in a connection with Shaykh Nazim as a TNH murshid. This shows that online *bai'at* requires a connection to the various websites provided. Meanwhile, online *bai'at* via the *Eshaykh* has transformed the strict *tarekat* with established orthodoxy into an easier and more practical process that provides membership to all without the need to meet the murshid in person.⁴⁰ This makes becoming a *tarekat* practitioner simpler. However, there is no direct interaction and

⁴⁰ Syariful Anam, "Murshid Contestation: Betwen Iktisābī and Minhāh Ilāhiyyah," *Teosofia*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2017, pp. 121; Lauren A. Caruso, "Bay'a: Succession, Allegiance and Rituals of Legitimization in the Islamic World", *Thesis*, Athens, Georgia, 2013, p. 44.

communication between the murshid and the students in online *bai'at*, which is an important part of *tarekat* practice. The murshid-student relationship is supposed to be an effort for familiarization as well as a step to form an inner bond between both parties through a constant connection. The online *bai'at* has resulted in the loss of this bond, as only one party, the student, becomes familiar with this practice. Conversely, the murshid has no direct relationship with the student, as *bai'at* is done through a website that is incapable of fostering the formation of deep emotional ties.⁴¹

Online *bai'at* is a practice that often clashes with *tarekat* orthodoxy because it necessitates the formation of a bond between students and murshid. Although this practice simplifies the *tarekat*, it has shifted the orthodoxy aspects of the inherent doctrines and rituals. *Bai'at* is essential in *tarekat* because acknowledges that all learning obtained from the murshid as a spiritual guide to God must be obeyed.⁴² It is a defining element of *tarekat* that can be referred to as *mu'tabarab* because the process is a form of total commitment from a student to implement the mentor's teachings in order to achieve spiritual goals.⁴³ Another simplification strategy offered by *Eshaykh* is allowing students to easily practice all forms of *wirid* and *tarekat* practices that should be done under the supervision of the murshid. The website provides a special link to becoming a student by outlining the targets to be prepared for

⁴¹ <https://eshaykh.com/ibadat-worship/en-question-regarding-baya-of-baraka-imporant/> accessed on November 15, 2022.

⁴² Rachida Chih, "Le Livre pour Guide: Éthique (Adab) Etcheminement Spirituel (*Sulūk*) dans Trois manuels sous d'époque Ottomane (al-Sayr wa al-sulūk de Qāsim al-Khānī m.1697, Tuh}fat al-sālikīn de Muhammad al-Samanūdī m. 1785 et Tuh}fat al-ikhwān d'Ah}mad al-Dardīr m. 1786)," *Ethics and Spirituality in Islam Sufi Adab* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), p. 520-541.

⁴³ Achmad Zainal Arifin, "From Magics, Dances, to Cafés: The Role of Sufism in Constructing Identity among the Urban Youth", *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, Vol. 339, 2019, pp. 166; Sam Han and Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir, *Digital Culture and Religion in Asia* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 75.

and the expected actions during the online initiation process.⁴⁴ The openness to practice the teachings originating from the *Eshaykh* allows anyone to become a *tarekat* practitioner. All forms of doctrine, rituals, and practices are given to students after completing a specific training process. Through the website, TNH has virtually replaced the position of a real murshid using internet tools. This practice runs counter to the excavation efforts undertaken in various rituals and *tarekat* practices that emphasize the spiritual aspect. In addition, online rituals allow anyone to create a personalized interpretation of spiritual activities, which can lead to a loss of the *tarekat*'s fundamental goals.⁴⁵

Online Praying

Another service provided by the *Eshaykh* is online prayer rooms related to the *tarekat* as an alternative to answering and assisting people who require spiritual support to solve their problems. Prayer stimulates a hope that all of one's wishes will come true and is also one of the steps to avoid despair in any endeavor. Recognizing its importance in Muslim society, a special space was created for prayer through an online room that promotes connection to the community and presents solutions to life's problems.⁴⁶ A prayer or request can be submitted to the murshids connected to *Eshaykh*. The prayer room is one of the most frequently visited locations for requests involving personal, family, or professional reasons. Although prayer requests are an essential part of *tarekat* practice, particularly for groups who believe that pious people's prayers are a step toward quickly granting all wishes, the virtual performance is a new

⁴⁴ Hanisah binte Abdullah Sani, "The Rise and Role of Tariqa among Muslims in Singapore: The Case of The Naqshbandi Haqqani", *Thesis*, National University of Singapore, 2010, p. 101.

⁴⁵ Linda Marianne Sijbrand, "The Social Role of Spiritual Communication: Authority as a Relationship between Shaykh and Follower in the Contemporary Tariqa Shadhuliyya-Yashrutiyya in Amman, Acre and Jaffa", *PhD Thesis*, The University of Exeter, 2014, p. 309.

⁴⁶ <https://eshaykh.com/sufism/permission-for-dua-sayfi/>, accessed on November 15, 2022.

practice in the tradition. Hence, *Eshaykh* has transformed the tradition of prayer requests by providing an online platform where requests can be submitted.

Prayer Request:

Assalaam alaikum,

I feel blessed to be accepted as *mureed* in Naqshbandi Haqqani Tariqah.

I would like to request Mawlana Hisham Kabbani to pray for us to be granted pious children soon. We are trying for baby since long time.

Answer:

Audhbillahiminashaytanirajeem

BismillahirRahmanirRahim

Recite *HasbunaAllah wa ni'm al wakeel* 100 per day for 40 days and repeat. Also put a *sadaqah* box at your door or digitally give *sadaqah* for each day of the lunar month for example give 29-30 dollars for the new lunar month or how much you can give per day of the month on the intention you have.

Wa Allahu Alam,

Kamau Ayubbi

Figure 3. Request for Prayers

The prayer shown above indicates a supplication for godly children. The response to the request is supplemented by suggestions to perform various rituals that must be maintained continuously, such as reading *H}asbunā Allāh* 100 times per day for 40 days and giving alms with the intention of achieving success.⁴⁷ Many of these online prayer requests are directly related to the Muslim community's belief that the murshid is the intermediary for the acceptance of any wish. People prefer online

⁴⁷ <https://eshaykh.com/ibadat-worship/meaning-hasbunallah/> accessed on November 15, 2022.

prayer through *Eshaykh* to convey their wishes. The languages used for submission include English, Arabic, and French.⁴⁸ The use of other languages besides from English indicates that the groups involved in the online prayer process are from various social groups or countries. An online prayer is a form of development in the *tarekat* practice that is linked to internet technology.⁴⁹ Although it provides a large space for anyone to pray and ask for prayer, it has altered the praying traditions practiced in *tarekat*.

Several types of online prayer requests are submitted through the *Eshaykh*, indicating essential as well as unusual requests, such as prayers to become famous, have many subscribers, obtain a specific mate, etc. The different types of submissions are evidence that prayer requests are not always based on critical aspects of essential or good needs. An online prayer is an option for anyone who believes in the tradition of praying through people considered pious and spiritually wise. It is a strategy to balance *tarekat* traditions with the ongoing advancement of internet technology.⁵⁰ The availability is part of the TNH group's connection with the global community, as well as a *da'wah* "attraction" that is being developed to be relevant to all current progress. However, since the identity of the supplicant is unknown, online prayer practices can weaken the *tarekat* orthodoxy of various rituals, particularly the request from pious people to serve as intermediaries to ensure all wishes can be fulfilled.

Interpretation of Dreams

Another aspect of the *tarekat* element presented online by the *Eshaykh* is the interpretation of dreams. The section allows people to

⁴⁸ <https://eshaykh.com/category/sufism/page/2/> accessed on November 15, 2022.

⁴⁹ Mouloud Haddad, "Zawiya Réelle, Zawiya Virtuelle: Soufisme, Francophonie et Nouvelles Technologies au Québec," *Globe*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2008, pp. 197-208.

⁵⁰ Milad Milani (et.al.), "Branding of Spiritual Authenticity and Nationalism in Transnational Sufism," in Patrick Michel (ed.), *Religions, Nations, and Transnationalism in Multiple Modernities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 197-220.

convey their dreams for interpretations, which are based on aspects referring to the traditions prevalent in Sufism as well as spiritual values and traditions existing in *tarekat*. The interpretations are performed for specific purposes and by spiritually inclined figures or people. The dream is interpreted closely to the reality of life in the Sufi tradition.⁵¹ According to the intrinsic facts and imagination, though the truth aspect cannot be confirmed. However, this space for dream interpretation is unrelated to the *tarekat* tradition.

In general, *Eshaykh* interprets dreams as a positive occurrence to the questioner, assuming the dream conveyed is good according to Sufi tradition. Good dreams are believed to come from God, while bad dreams are the work of Satan. As a result, dream interpretation can be divided into two categories, namely good and bad dreams. The good dreams that are expressed typically begin with a narrative about a good event, such as meeting a pious person or a spiritual figure. Some of the dreams conveyed involved meeting Shaykh Mahmud Effendi, Shaykh Nazim, Shaykh Faiz Daghestani, etc. Encountering a Sufi figure is interpreted as a positive bond between the dreamer and the mentioned character. Bonds in dreams have meaning in the Sufi tradition because they are not only regarded as sleep-related events but also as a means of spiritual elevation. Hence, positively interpreted dreams are thought to inspire others to increase their spiritual activity.⁵²

Meanwhile, *Eshaykh* describes interpreted as something bad to avoid. Dreams of meeting jinns and devils are among the nightmares proposed. Nightmares are interpreted as bad information in an attempt to avoid negative outcomes for oneself or the environment. Bad elements in dreams are used to prevent these negative events from happening, and their interpretation is an encouragement to avoid or refrain from actions

⁵¹ Eyad Abuali, "Dreams and Visions as Diagnosis in Medieval Sufism," *Journal of Sufi Studies*, Vol. 8. No. 1, 2020, pp. 1-29.

⁵² S.M. Mirbagherifard (et.al.), "The Content of Dreams in Islamic Mystic Prose Texts (Pre-Seventh ah/13th ad Century)," *SAGE Open*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2016, pp. 1-9.

that lead to their materialization. Nightmares are a type of subconscious expression that has implications for aspects of everyday life. This indicates that the dream interpretation on *Eshayekh* avoids all events that can bring negative aspects to those involved.

Tiger and Surah Maida

Posted on September 28, 2022 by Imam Wissam

Question:

Saw myself in unknown location and tried to run but the door was locked. There were tigers roaming and others were locked. I pretended to dead but my head was under tiger mouth. Saw sudden flash of Surah Maida, dont remember ayat number.

Answer:

As-Salāmu `Alaykum wa rahmatu l-lāhi wa barakātuh

The tigers means that you have enemies !

Recite *Ya Hafeezh* 100x and *Hasbunallah wa ni`ma 'l-wakeel* 100 times daily to save yourself from the evil of these enemies.

The flash of Surah al Maida means that you will be saved from them by the *barakah* of the light of Holy Quran and *dhikrullah*.

{*There has come to you from Allah a Light (Nur) and a clear Book*} (Surat al-Maida 5:15);

Wissam

Figure 4. Interpretation of Dreams

The question above mentioned a dream about a tiger and surah al-Ma'idah. In the dream, a tiger was in a locked room, which indicated the protection of the questioner by surah al-Ma'idah. The answer to the dream involved the recommendation to read *Yā H}afīz}* and *H}asbunā Allāh* 100 times daily for protection from enemies and other bad things. The *Eshayekh*'s interpretation is part of a long-standing tradition in *tarekat*. Although dreams are usually kept private by the owner and

the interpreter, *Eshayekh* provides a platform for their publication. This activity is justified by attempts to interpret dreams, despite the fact that dissemination is uncommon in the *tarekat* tradition. Interpretation is an effort to legitimize figures associated with Sufi groups who are frequently mentioned in dreams. The open interpretation is part of the simplification of Sufi traditions and is more focused on offering a motivational boost. However, this practice eliminates the spiritual element and may conflict with the goals of the *tarekat*.⁵³

Various *tarekat* activities carried out by connecting to the internet, particularly online *bai'at*, online prayer, and dream interpretation have impacted the process of *tarekat* orthodoxy simplification. *Tarekat* orthodoxy, carried out directly and offline, has become indirect and can be connected online, affecting the aspect of extracting meaning from various spiritual activities. Media-based spiritual activity online *Eshayekh* has transformed *tarekat* orthodoxy into spiritual simplification, particularly in efforts to internalize spiritual values, typically carried out under the direct supervision of a murshid. So far, *tarekat* orthodoxy regards the murshid's position as critical to achieving the *tarekat*'s goals.⁵⁴ However, *Eshayekh* has replaced the murshid with a website tool that has yet to be fully able to return and represent the presence of the murshid in spiritual activities.

TNH's various rituals, on the other hand, have removed the boundaries between the sacred and profane in multiple spiritual activities. In practice, various online rituals have been unable to distinguish between sacred areas, which are a core part of various doctrines and rituals, and profane boundaries, which only serve to support the achievement of the different ritual objectives carried out within them. The blurring of

⁵³ Fatimah Husein and Martin Slama, "Online Piety and Its Discontent: Revisiting Islamic Anxieties on Indonesian Social Media," *Indonesia and the Malay World*, Vol. 46, No. 134, 2018, pp. 80-93.

⁵⁴ Éric Geoffroy, "La Relation entre Maître et Disciple dans le Soufisme: Une Relation Exigeante," in Cristina Noacco, (et.al., eds.), *Figures du Maître: De l'Autorité à l'Autonomie* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013), p. 43-50.

the sacred and profane aspects is the impetus for the simplification of *tarekat*, which can result in not only disorientation but also in various ritual practices being carried out only as ceremonial and formalities so that the spiritual aspects obtained can also be fictitious.

The website's replacement of the *murshid*'s position can also cause a deviation in the meaning of the spiritual activities performed. The most fundamental aspect of internet-based spiritual practice will also eliminate *adab*, a key component of *tarekat* orthodoxy.⁵⁵ *Adab* is an essential component of spiritual activity because the *adab* practiced in the *tarekat* cannot be carried out optimally by the *Eshayekh*. *Adab* orders are always associated with divine aspects in orthodoxy, so anything done without the formation of servitude will not produce the best results. Apart from *adab* to God, it is also important to maintain the *tarekat adab*'s orthodoxy towards the *murshid*, so that the position of the *murshid* as a teacher and the congregation as students in a relationship connected to the website does not form a deeply spiritual bond. Every interaction through *Eshayekh* is separate from the *murshid* because the website managers carry out the interactions. In this context, *Eshayekh* has simplified *tarekat* orthodoxy, which makes the *tarekat* is losing its purpose as a path to God.

Conclusion

According to the discourse advanced by *Eshayekh*, the problems encountered in the transformation of the *tarekat* from offline to online are not limited to the virtual society. These efforts have also impacted the formation of Sufi forms and expressions displayed. It is an online presentation of Sufism or a *tarekat* that is congruent with the development of information technology, particularly the internet. Due to differing scopes, offline and online congregations are two distinct entities. As a TNH website, *Eshayekh* allows the realization of *tarekat*

⁵⁵ Alexandre Papas, "No Sufism without Sufi Order: Rethinking Tariqa and Adab with Ahmad Kasani Dahbidi (1461-1542)," *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2008, pp. 4-22.

based on technological progress, though the attempt to reduce its rigidity by accommodating a virtual society has shifted from an esoteric to an exoteric focus. *Eshayekh* has succeeded in becoming a *tarekat* representative capable of surviving and thriving in the face of advances in information technology. However, this has resulted in the simplification of the Sufi orthodoxy, leading to a disoriented practice that contradicts the *tarekat*'s essential goals.

The implications for *tarekat* orthodoxy extend beyond the actual practice, as the virtual platform will change the practice from a greater emphasis on esoteric aspects in order to become exoteric. The shift in *tarekat* practice may also impact the implementation of traditions that emphasize the symbolic aspect of formality rather than efforts to explore its deepest meaning. Traditional practitioners uphold congregational orthodoxy, as the doctrines and rituals practiced are believed to achieve the *tarekat*'s goals while maintaining its orthodoxy. Although changes in its development are unavoidable, efforts to actualize the *tarekat* while maintaining orthodoxy are an important part of preserving the tradition and facilitating a direct connection with God. Therefore, the actualization of the *tarekat* in virtual society following evolution must ensure aspects of orthodoxy are retained.

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