The Alternative Institutionalization and Practices of Sufi Orders in Boston

The Pluralism Project

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Woven into the fabric of the religious landscape of the United States is a wide array of religious traditions that have traveled over with their immigrant communities. Among these many traditions some have adapted and evolved in tandem with American society, in its many shades, while others have been more resistant to assimilation and change. While the former of these traditions, from their own perspective, have acquired or assumed an indigenous identity the latter will oftentimes assert their distinctive origins of "elsewhere." Of the many traditions present in America, one in particular interests us here, namely Sufism. Originating from within the Islamic tradition, Sufism is often overlooked in studies in Islam in America. But Sufism itself is a problematic label. In the recently published *The North American Muslim Resource Guide* Sufism receives a cursory mention before being ignored in the book's coverage of Muslim life and institutions in America.[1] The book was written by a member of The Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) an organization whose mission states:

> CAIR is dedicated to presenting an Islamic perspective on issues of importance to the American public. In Offering that perspective, we seek to empower the Muslim community in America through political and social activism.[2]

If the recent publication serves as an indication, the Sufi communities of America are not included in CAIR's perception of what constitutes the "Muslim community in America." But if we turn to the words of some Sufi Orders in America themselves we find instances where such a separation is intended. While I will refer to an "American Sufism" in this paper, it is clear that given the varying and divergent self-descriptions offered, it would be more appropriate for us to speak of American Sufism*s*.

In its broadest sense, American Sufism(s) loosely designates religious movements that straddles the spectrum. American Sufism cannot be easily categorized as indigenous or foreign,

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[1] Nimer, Mohamed. *The North American Muslim Resource Guide: Muslim Community Life in the United States and Canada*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2002.
[2] http://www.cair-net.org/asp/aboutcair.asp from the CAIR website at http://www.cair-net.org/.

as integrated or defiant, or as Islamic or universalistic. Sufism, as I have described, cannot even be defined as a single tradition. In its American manifestations it is not monolithic but covers a wide array of religious forms. Nevertheless American Sufism is an important contributor to the religious fabric of the United States, whether the designation "American Sufism" is taken to represent an Islamic development or a religious tradition in and of itself, distinct from others. In the case of this study, each interviewed adherent of Sufism describes his/her tradition as Sufism in America, and hence have equal share this survey.

Looking at American Sufism two important questions come to the forefront. The first concerns Sufism's self-identification. How does a Sufi tradition explicitly or implicitly describe its relationship to the Islamic tradition?[3] The second question addresses the social manifestation of Sufism in America. Given the American landscape, in what ways do Sufis in the United States organize socially and spiritually? The purpose of the present study is to approach both questions. My research looks at how various Sufis in the urban setting of Boston, Massachusetts connect with Islam, if at all, and it is also directed towards documenting the range of methods in which these Sufi communities organize and practice their faith. In order to sidestep particular difficulties associated with the first question I employ the criterion of self-ascription. If an individual or organization calls him/her/itself Sufi then they were equally investigated alongside other self-ascribed individuals or groups. This measure does not in fact sufficiently or even deftly answers the first question of identity, but for the sake of the current research it will serve as a satisfactory and temporary perspective for questioning. A more sustained investigation will have to take into account both doctrine and practice in exploring the question of what Sufism

[3] For a treatment of this question for the New York City area see Maryam Hassimi's complimentary Pluralism Project study.

designates. Here I am concerned the practice and testimony as useful perspectives to approaching the question of identity.

The method of research is based primarily on interviews as the question of identity is being approached from the vantage of self-ascription.[4] I am interested in how adherents of Sufism perceive themselves rather than how other religious communities view them or how they are categorized according to the particular epistemological categories of the scholars of academia, be they anthropological, sociological, philosophical, etc. The process of interviewing also allows the followers of Sufi Orders to speak for themselves, rather than letting the documents or organizational heads of an Order do so.[5] In the case of Boston, I am interested in what the disciples of Sufi Orders have to say in the absence of their respective spiritual leaders.

The initial trajectory of my research was directed towards investigating the similarities and differences between two types of Sufi communities. On the one hand there are comparatively large Sufi groups spread across the United States. These groups have established extensive networks of organization and communication to facilitate and structure the spiritual and social aspects of their adherents' lives. This is partially a result of these groups' longer historical presence in America. On the other hand, are individuals living in localities remote from their sources of spiritual guidance and organization. These persons have to seek more localized and independent means of practice and worship. At the beginning of the project these two groups of Sufis were respectively designated as "institutionalized" Sufis and "non-institutionalized" Sufis. These two types were to be compared to locate the ways in which each

[4] See Appendix A for details on my interview methodology.
[5] In comparing my findings with Hermansen's 2000 study of American Sufi Movements I found numerous contradictions concerning particular Sufi Orders, which I primarily attribute to our two different methods of approach. Instead of interviews her work is drawn mostly from secondary scholarly literature and from publications produced by the Sufi Orders. Hermansen, Marcia. "Hybrid Identity Formations in Muslim America: The Case of American Sufi Movements" in *Muslim World*, vol. 90, no. 1 & 2, 2000, p. 158-197.

type practiced Sufism. However, as I proceeded with interviews it became clear to me that my adopted comparative methodology was arbitrary and inadequate. The approach assumed that there is a clear division between the ways the more institutionalized groups and the more individualistic practioners organize, conduct, and practice their spiritual lives. But, as the interviews revealed, the Sufis I spoke with do not always fit neatly into either category.

The interviews instead indicated that rather than speaking of "institutionalized" and "non-institutionalized" Sufi groups, it would be more appropriate for me to examine the degrees and forms of institutionalization that each Sufi adopted. Each group will be compared against one another rather than categorized into the two types initially proposed. A great degree of overlap is evident in the various ways these Sufi groups organize themselves despite the differences in doctrine and/or practice.

Over the course of the summer of 2003, I was able to interview seven adherents of Sufism extensively, from five different Sufi Orders. The data collected is presented in a primarily descriptive manner with minor analytical comments interspersed. The bulk of the critical analysis and synthesis has been reserved for the conclusion. The interviews are presented in the order in which the interviewees were first contacted, unless otherwise noted, and the interviews are divided according to the Sufi Order to which each interviewee identifies. Lastly, the names of the interviewees have been changed to provide anonymity, whether or not it was explicity requested.

Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship : Ben, Nora, and Khadijah[6]

I first contacted the Cambridge branch of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship (BMF) by phone through a local contact number provided from the records of the Pluralism Project. I spoke with Ben, the head of the Boston group, who invited me to visit the Fellowship during one of its weekly meetings in Cambridge. At this time I was also directed to the group's website at www.bmf.org that reflects the larger national organization. Other satellite fellowships exist across the country and are primarily connected to one another through the headquarters in Philadelphia. The contact information provided on the website however is solely for the Philadelphia branch. There the BMF has a mosque, publishing facilities, and administrative offices. As Ben would elucidate, Philadelphia is both the organizational and spiritual center of the Fellowship. The founder of the Fellowship lived in Philadelphia primarily while he was in the United States and after passing away in 1986 he was buried 40 miles from the city in Coatesville, PA. The facilities in Philadelphia are comparatively extensive compared to the Fellowship presence in Boston. However, in relation to other Sufi orders in the Boston area, the BMF is among the largest in membership and one of the more well structured in terms of regular meetings and communication.

Ben described the history of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship according to the life of its founder, Guru Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen was a Sufi master from Sri Lanka, who came to teach in the United States after receiving an invitation from several eager American students in 1971 in Philadelphia. From 1971 to his death in 1986 Bawa Muhaiyaddeen traveled between Sri Lanka and Philadelphia leading the respective Sufi communities there. Ben often referred to Bawa Muhaiyaddeen as Guru, using the more indigenous South Asian term for

[6] I was able to formally interview Ben and Khadijah, following the method detailed in Appendix A. Nora I was able to interview informally as she was the first person I meet that Fellowship meeting and as she was that week's meeting leader.

teacher or master rather than the Arabic term Shaykh more commonly used in other Sufi orders. The title however does not indicate any sort of variation in the Sufi tradition from which Bawa Muhaiyaddeen arose. In Islamic Sufism Shaykhs will have *silsilas* that list the chain of teachers going back to the Prophet Muhammad. A *silsila* indicates a Shaykh's lineage of mystical learning from which he draws his spiritual authority. Ben informed me that Bawa Muhaiyaddeen has no explicit *silsila* connecting him to a Sufi order. The only connection he mentioned was that Bawa Muhaiyaddeen was linked to the medieval Sufi master 'Abd al-Qadir Jilani. Also Ben described the Guru as a Sufi of a "high order" even though Bawa Muhaiyaddeen never admitted this degree of advancement himself. Rather, other Sufis recognized the Guru as the *qutb*. A *qutb*, Arabic for "pole", in the Sufi tradition designates a master who is acknowledged as the spiritual axis of his/her era. It is also traditionally held that there is only one *qutb* for each era.

The Cambridge branch of the Fellowship gathers every Sunday near Harvard Square. I attended several of these meetings and interviewed two members extensively, Ben and Khadijah. Ben, a Caucasian American and father of two young children, attended Harvard for his undergraduate in the 1970s. During this time his brother was exploring the various new spiritual movements arising at this time in America. On one such exploration by his brother Ben was prompted to meet Bawa Muhaiyaddeen in 1976. Ben was in his mid-twenties at this time. He described his first encounter with the Guru as follows "I was like a child before him". He said he felt open, vulnerable, and exposed when he spoke with him. Somehow, Ben sensed that Bawa Muhaiyaddeen "knew things" about him just by looking at him. After this encounter Ben took an active interest and increased his involvement with the Fellowship until he was asked to serve as the contact leader of the BMF in Boston.

Khadijah, of mixed American and Chinese heritage, came from a Catholic home as her mother converted to Catholicism. While her family was not very religious in her words, her parents still wanted her to have a religious upbringing. After studying science and philosophy in high school she began to question her earlier religious education. When she arrived at Harvard for college she focused on social studies and did human rights work. She met a musician at a jazz club who was Muslim. Because of her meeting with him and out of her own interest in studying languages, particularly languages of scripture, she began to study Arabic. She eventually took lessons at Masjid al-Quran, a predominately African American Mosque in Dorcester. She fondly remembers this experience as a beacon for her. During this time her interest in the Qur'_n increased as she wanted to connect with the inner meaning of the text. Her classes eventually extended to include classes covering the basics of Islam. Once, while at the Mosque a member there mentioned to her Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, though her interest in the Guru was dormant for a time after this.

In March of 1992 Khadijah "embraced Islam" through conversion. Before she took her shahadah, the testimony of faith signaling a conversion, she first dreamed of it. In her dream she entered a mosque and walked upstairs to the prayer space. Here she was greeted by a man and woman dressed in white. They embraced her and taught her how to pray. Through them she took the shahadah in her dream. In 1992, she happened across a mosque in Philadelphia. It was the same one as the one she had dreamed of earlier. She then proceeded to take her shahadah, celebrated with the community there and took a Muslim name. Later she realized that this mosque was the Mosque built by the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. Though she never met the Guru she became interested in the group and eventually joined the Fellowship. I met Ben at two Fellowship meetings and Khadijah at the latter of the two.

The meeting place for the BMF meetings does not belong to the Fellowship but is a rented room from the Cambridge Adult Learning Center. The group has rented the space from the Center since 1979 at the generous rate of $10 a week. The space is regularly used as drama stage, however on Sunday mornings the room is set up with a circle of chairs in the center where the members of the Fellowship sit and listen to the teachings of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and offer a shared prayer. On a table outside the circle of chairs is a collection of publications from the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. These materials, ranging from pamphlets, catalogues, and books, are produced by the Fellowship publication office in Philadelphia and are available at each weekly meeting. Also present is a small portable stereo, which is used to play cassette tapes. Nora, one of the members present at my first visit, informed me that on occasion they would have a television and VCR to play videotaped lectures of the Guru. All the materials, whether in print or taped, feature the teachings of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. According to Ben, there is approximately 20,000 hours of audio taped lectures and over a hundred hours on videotape.

Before the session begins Nora spoke briefly to me about the community that gathers weekly. The members who attend regularly, or as Nora describes, the "core members" number from around ten to fourteen people. Ben later numbered the general membership at between fourteen and eighteen. At this session six Fellowship members and two children attend. At later sessions the average is roughly the same. What follows is a description of how a Sunday morning session would typically run. Each session is lead by a different member of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. Both men and women are in attendance and either of them can lead the group. Families with children also attend but the children typically do not have to sit with the circle. The environment is relaxed with people free to get up and stretch or get breakfast,

which is provided by the week's leader. Typically members sit and listen intently, a few in meditative fashion, to the words being spoken or played.

The week leader opens with a prayer that begins with the Bismillah, the traditional Islamic invocation of God's Name that Muslims utter before performing most actions and that precedes every religious function. Also invoked is protection from Satan, another common Islamic phrase in Arabic that is heard before the reading of the Qur'_n. The content of the prayer itself is spoken in English. While the prayer is said the attendants hold their hands open before their face, the traditional hand posture of supplication among Muslims. Afterwards the leader offers introductory remarks as the lessons given are often geared to the season or forthcoming holidays. Then either an audiotape or videotape of one of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen's lectures is played or a selection(s) of his writings are read aloud. The taped lectures are given in Tamil, the native language of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, alongside an on the spot English translation on the recording. The lectures or readings are timed to run about an hour and a half.

Afterwards the entire group takes part in a discussion on the topic. This continues until noon, when the meeting officially ends. It is during these last minutes that the meeting leader closes with another prayer. On occasion other members will request a particular prayer. In one instance a member asks for the *Fatiha* and *Salat* to be performed. The members, hands raised in supplication, chant in Arabic the *Fatiha*, the first chapter of the Qur'an, and then joined in one round of dhikr, where they sing in unison praises upon the Prophet Muhammad. The sessions are practiced as they were initially instructed by Guru Bawa Muhaiyaddeen.

Despite the death of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen in 1986 he continues to lead the members of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. The weekly gatherings provide a means for members to receive his guidance through his recorded teachings and from one another. During one of the

discussions, one member, Franklin recognized the continued guidance of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. Commenting on one of the readings, Franklin said that the purpose of life is to establish wisdom through communication with God. However, one may need a teacher to stimulate wisdom, and "even though the teacher [Bawa Muhaiyaddeen] is not physically present now" he continues to direct them. Members of the Fellowship acknowledge a definite spiritual presence guiding them. Nora characterized each of them as a fish in a pond, rubbing against one another as they come to better understand themselves. She also stated that none of the members would dare describe themselves as a Sufi, that is a title reserved for spiritual master such as Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. Rather she described herself and her peers as being on the Sufi path. And their guide on the path, though deceased, continues to touch them spiritually.

After one of the sessions I spoke with Ben and Khadijah at length about the activities and organization of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. In addition to weekly gatherings Fellowship chapters will arrange various activity days or retreats. In August a retreat was held at a Quaker Retreat Center in Western Massachusetts. The theme of the retreat was "The Seven Levels of the Human Being" and was open to members of the Fellowship. During the Guru's life, small Fellowships were formed wherever he visited in the North America. Chapters arose in New York, Connecticut, Toronto, Iowa, and California in addition to Boston and the headquarters in Philadelphia. "Unity Days" are also held in Philadelphia for members from across the country to congregate, learn, and worship. As Ben claims, one can find west of Philadelphia the tomb of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, which marks the first Sufi shrine or *mazar* in the Western hemisphere and has become a pilgrimage site for members of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship as well as other Sufis in America.

The organization has continued to teach and guide after the passing away of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, even though he never designated a successor. When I asked Khadijah and Ben about how the Fellowship continued to function after his death they mentioned that there were in fact some disputes within the Fellowship. These disputes, they said, were not about Bawa Muhaiyaddeen but about other matters, such as following other Sufi teachers. However, in their opinions, the Fellowship overall has thrived, not because of central leadership, but because the health of the Fellowship depends on the dedicated "duty work" of the people in the group and the maintenance of the archives. The efforts of individuals within each community has provided a strong base for which the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship to continue.

In fact, I found the interaction among members of the Boston Fellowship to resemble the relationships one would find among an extended family. The membership stretches over several generations, from children, college students, adults, and the elderly. I observed great warmth and support in their conversations with one another. In one case, a student had just moved to the area. Her grandmother had been an active member in Boston before she passed away. The Boston members made every effort to welcome her to the community, several of them reminiscing with the granddaughter on fond memories they had of her grandmother. One member, Franklin, had attempted to help her find housing before she had come to Boston. Through being connected with the larger Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship a member moving from one locality to another was able to draw upon a network of support present in the new location. Furthermore, at least in the case of Boston, the connection takes on a familial instead of a formal nature.

One last aspect of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship requires addressing. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen explicitly associates his teachings with Islam. His lectures draw upon the

symbols and metaphors of the rich long developing Islamic mystical tradition. However I was unclear as to the level of Islamic practice that was integrated into the activities of the Fellowship. The weekly meetings themselves contained clearly Islamic elements. The prayers and postures clearly are from the Islamic tradition, even if they did not adhere strictly to the most common models of Islamic worship. Ben characterized Bawa Muhaiyaddeen as progressive in his measures. Rituals were secondary. Nevertheless the teachings of the Guru were "very Islamic in its principles." Bawa Muhaiyaddeen was more concerned with bringing the lessons of the Sufi path and Islam to his students. The essential moral principles of his tradition and his spiritual guidance took priority over the ritualistic dimension of Islam.

This is not to say that all the members were uniform in their approach to the Islamic dimension of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen's teachings. As in the traditional master-disciple paradigm, each student of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen was given individual instruction that was appropriate to his or her personal level of spiritual development. The five daily prayers is observed by some but was not made incumbent upon all members. One member of the Sunday gatherings wears the hijab, or headscarf. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen only stressed the principle of modesty, choosing not to define it strictly. He left its definition to the personality of his disciples. As Ben stated, "the Islamic Shariah is totally individual." Also almost all the members had Muslim names in addition to their birth names. These former names were usually ones given by Bawa Muhaiyaddeen himself. However, in Khadijah's case, her name was taken after she first converted to Islam.

Finally vegetarianism was urged upon his American followers, many of whom are vegetarian. Contrastly, very few of his Sri Lankan followers are vegetarian. The Sri Lankan cultural perception of vegetarianism is such that only those of elevated spiritual attainment can

take vegetarianism upon themselves. As such, the practices set by Bawa Muhaiyaddeen do not enjoin heavy strictures of conduct. Rather he allowed each member the comfort of flexibility. This approach was meant to make the teachings of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen more accessible, both on a cultural and personal level. As Ben notes however, the Guru began to introduce more Islamic elements into his lessons as he sensed his death approaching. What remains today however, is a dynamic institution that mirrors the progressive approach of its founding teacher. The inner principles of Sufism are stressed over the Shariah, which nevertheless is significant on an individualized level.

Sufi Order International : Sandy

The following two interviewees, Sandy and Jeremy, both identify with the teachings of the founding Shaykh of Sufi Order International. However, the two affiliate with the Order in two contrasting ways. As such their respective interviews have been separated. Sandy, 61-years-old, has had a long relationship with Sufi Order International. She characterizes herself as an active member. Her husband, while supportive, is not himself a member. Sandy conducted her own study of the Order in 1993.

However, before proceeding to Sandy's involvement with the organization, some background to the Order will help contextualize the current situation. Sufi Order International was founded in the West by Hazrat Inayat Khan. As Sandy traced, since Hazrat Inayat Khan's time his son, Pir Wilayat Khan and his grandson Pir Zia Khan ("Pir" being the Persian equivalent of Shaykh) have led the organization sequentially. The Sufi group has a relatively large following in comparison to other Sufi Orders in America. However Sufi Order International

does not identify itself as Islamic. Rather, described as Sufism in the West, Sufi Order International applies Sufi principles to a universalistic faith framework. Meditative and healing aspects of the Sufi tradition are adapted to the universalistic context of the Western audience. Sufi Order International is the organization's current designation. It refers to the followers of the current Shaykh Pir Zia Khan. In addition to it are other related organizations. The Sufi Ruhaniyyat International Order is extremely close in principles and structure to Sufi Order International. The originating distinction lies in the chain of transmitted authority. Adherents of the Sufi Ruhaniyyat Order recognize Samuel Lewis, popularly called Sufi Sam, as their guide. But like Pir Wilayat Khan, Samuel Lewis was a student of Hazrat Inayat Khan. Sharing common origins these two groups often cosponsor and jointly coordinate events. In fact, Sandy noted that the two Orders were so close that the initiation ceremonies were interlocking. The teachers, not the principles, are the distinguishing feature between these two religious kin groups.

Sandy, my primary contact for Sufi Order International, has a long-standing relationship with the Order. She is currently is a *cheroga* or minister in the organization. Her job is to teach within the Order as a "representative" volunteer. In order to perform her current ministerial duties she received formal training through the Order. Among her activities she has served as a retreat guide, is a member of the "Healing Order", has taught classes, and overseen ministerial functions. Her responsibilities reflect the five arms of the star that symbolizes the nature of Sufi Order International. The arms are the "Healing Order", "Zirrat", which is the ecological branch connecting the cycles of agriculture with the soul's well-being, "Kinship" or the "path of service", "Universal Worship", and the "Esoteric School", which is the branch for the teaching of Sufism according to Hazrat Inayat Khan. A high degree of structure overlays the Order. This systemization facilitates how the Order provides ministry and support to its adherents who come

from a variety of backgrounds and who are spread across the continent. Most of the members are not Muslim prior to joining. Rather they come primarily from American Christian and Jewish traditions if from any tradition at all. Nor do members consider themselves Muslim after joining. Instead, they call themselves Sufis while at the same time maintaining their former religious identity or identities.

Sandy, for example, grew up in a "tolerant household" in Nebraska. Her mother was Catholic, but she did not "make a big fuss about it" to Sandy. Her father told her when she was young that she could be whatever she wanted to be when she grew up, as he himself came from an open environment, or what Sandy calls as an "open spirit in the lineage." She completed her undergraduate in Florida and moved to Boston afterwards. During this time she was an artist and an art teacher as well as a "scientific Agnostic." However, after a discussion with a Buddhist friend she began exploring the various forms of mysticism percolating in the urban setting surrounding her. It was during this time of spiritual exploring that she ran across the teachings of Baba Ram Daas and Samuel Lewis. This latter interest eventually led her to Sufi Order International. In fact, it was Pir Wilayat Khan who gave Sandy her Arabic Sufi name. Though members may have Arabic names this has more to do with identifying with the Sufi Order's heritage than it does with the Islam religious tradition. Sufi Order International recognizes its Islamic heritage but allows its members to practice their respective faiths in accordance with the universalism taught by its founder Hazrat Inayat Khan.

Sandy also contextualized the current situation Sufi Order International. According to her, the organization is undergoing a transition on two levels. On the broadest level, the leadership of the group is transitioning from Pir Vilayat Khan to his son Pir Zia Khan. The former is officially retired leaving the latter to assume leadership responsibilities. Zia Khan,

currently pursuing a PhD at Duke University, has recently studied with the Chishti Order in South Asia to learn more of the Sufi tradition from Sufi Order International's more distant historical heritage. While he completes his studies, Pir Zia must find a balance between his recent assumption of leadership with his academic pursuits. His time and family commitments have limited his ability to visit the Sufi Order's various communities. Sandy predicted that Pir Zia Khan will not be able to visit Boston for another two or three years. He did lead a retreat, however, in New Lebanon, New York at the Abode of Peace, a Sufi Order International retreat center, this past August. The Abode is several hours west of Boston. Pir Zia Khan also is trying to seek other Sufi Orders in the United States in order to work with their respective Shaykhs.

The Order in Boston is also undergoing a transition in terms of its physical decentralization. In the absence of the Pir, the Sufi Order International group in Boston is meant to serve as a hub for activities for its local members. Based in Jamaica Plain, the Boston branch however is more of a network than a center. In the past few decades the members of the branch have gradually moved out of Jamaica Plain to more suburban areas. As Sandy described, as their children grew up, member families began to move outward to access the more advantageous suburban schools. Nevertheless Jamaica Plain continues to serve as the center of the communication network that exists among the Order's members. A phone tree and email list keep the community in touch.

According to Sandy, the most prominent activity of Sufi Order International is the Universal Dance of Peace. The dances were initially a vision of Samuel Lewis, and hence such events are typically cosponsored with The Sufi Ruhaniyyat International Order. Nevertheless these gatherings are an opportunity for members of both branches to meet and worship. These dances are held twice a month, on the first and third Fridays of the month from September to

June. The dances intermix the worship practices of many different traditions. The primary binding theme of the dances is religious universalism. Likewise special holiday universal worship services are held. For example in the past year a Thanksgiving service was done with other religious communities in the area and a children's universal worship service was arranged. Some key ideas expressed by Sandy were that worshippers "honor the spirit of the creator" and focus on "inward communication" with the divine.

In addition to the dances and services a class is held once a month, the first Tuesday, in Marblehead from October to June. About a dozen students attend and the lessons relate to the five arms of the Order are taught. Much of the Order's efforts are turned to the civic arena as outlined by Pir Wilayat's instruction. A high degree of social activism is encouraged and done by the Order. To ease access potential students can sign up for classes online. Finally, mentioned briefly above, retreats are held that alternate between the East and West Coasts of the United States. For the East Coast, the Abode of Peace is the main gathering center. In addition the main headquarters of Sufi Order International moved from Seattle, WA to the Abode, allowing members in Boston much easier access to the center.

While Sufi Order International in Boston is undergoing a transition phase in terms of leadership and decentralization the organization continues to thrive by turning to an extensive communication network. The gathering power of a site has been supplanted with an array of communication lines. Furthermore, the wide variety of activities offered by the Order provides followers of the Order a range of possibilities in practicing their spiritual life, a diversity that reflects the universalistic principles of the Order. The longevity and continued vibrancy of the group, despite changes, seems to be rooted in the flexibility offered in the universal approach to

faith. Instead of doctrine, Sufi Order International emphasizes nonexclusive spiritual principles to supplement the beliefs of whatever faith tradition a member identifies with.

Sufi Order International : Jeremy

The second member of Sufi Order International that I interviewed was Jeremy, a 25-year-old graduate student pursuing a career in education. Born and raised in Boulder, Colorado Jeremy is of Jewish-Italian and German-English descent. He first came to Boston for his undergraduate studies. After two years away he returned to his undergraduate institute to begin graduate studies. Offered the opportunity to write his religious background he wrote:

> "I was raised Jewish and had a Bar Mitzvah, then took a hiatus from religion for many years. My senior year in college (1998-99) brought a new interest in spiritual matters, which included my first meditation retreat at Green Gulch near San Francisco (a Zen center). In 2001 I traveled to India and studied yoga and Vedanta, and then upon returning home decided to connect my spirituality with my Jewish origins. I read about Zalman Schachter-Shalomi in the book *The Jew in the Lotus* and tracked him down in Boulder. Under his tutelage and that of his disciple Nataniel Miles-Yepez (January, 2002 to the present), I learned some basics of Kaballah [sic] and began to weave together the strands of Buddhist, Jewish, and Hindu teachings I had learned. As it turned out, Zalman is also a Sufi sheikh in the lineage of Hazrat Inayat Khan, and had ordained Nataniel. I took initiation from Nataniel in March of 2003."

Jeremy describes his entrance into Sufism in individualistic terms, "We are part of Hazrat Inayat Khan's lineage, so in a sense we are connected. We do not maintain much contact with other people in the lineage, however." His association with Sufi Order International is namely through the chain of teachers, rather than his involvement with the larger community of followers.

While Jeremy's particular case appears to deviate from the other interviewees in regard to the intersocial dimension of Sufi Orders, it does in fact closely follow the master-disciple

paradigm found throughout the history of Islamic Sufism. Many scholars and adherents of Sufism agree that an integral component of Sufism is the relationship between the master and the student. The student submits entirely to the discipline of the master, without question. The master than proceeds to test the student by submitting him/her to numerous trials, many of which require ascetic isolation, some form of abstinence, or withdrawal. Interaction with the large community of disciples is considered secondary, consequential, unnecessary, or even prohibited. In the case of Jeremy, his relationship to Sufi Order International is the guidance provided by his master who received his authority from another master who in turn received his authority from Shaykh Hazrat Inayat Khan, the founder of Sufi Order International. In fact, each of these respective masters since Hazrat Inayat Khan has only initiated one student each, Jeremy being the current disciple. It is a lineage of one mentor and one student.

In terms of practice Jeremy also refrains from what he describes as the "the most visible manifestation of Sufism in America", namely Sufi Order International's Universal Dance of Peace. The manner in which he practices is again a highly individual and intimate one. He maintains contact through email correspondence and periodic phone calls with Zalman and Nataniel, who both are in Boulder, Colorado. Jeremy's spiritual practices began with his initiation, where he learned several forms of meditation, particularly Sufi meditation, Hatha Yoga, and Vipassana meditation. His Sufi meditations entailed "listening to the heartbeat, visualizing myself pouring into other peoples' perspectives to develop empathy, and silently reciting a mantra to connect with the Spirit of Guidance." The only communal spiritual activity that Jeremy participates in is a "Quaker-style" meditation group, where the members, six in all, come from a variety of faiths. The group meets once a week for a half hour of meditation. As Jeremy details, they have been "a wonderful community for supporting each other's practice and

providing a space for people's troubles, concerns, needs, triumphs, and joys to be heard." However, as noted, religious lines do not connect this gathering under one particular tradition. Instead its closeness appears to hinge more on interpersonal spiritual resonance.

This final form of practice points to the issue of Jeremy's spiritual identification. While he describes himself as part of a Sufi lineage and a practitioner of Sufi meditative practices his sense of religious identification is not limited to that. In fact he identifies most closely with his Jewish background as it comprises his heritage and as both his preceding teachers are deeply involved in it, Zalman being a rabbi. The more inclusive descriptor that Jeremy uses for his form of spirituality is the "crossroads" tradition, of which Hazrat Inayat Khan is a "quintessential" teacher. Jeremy defines the crossroads tradition as "the tradition of those who understand the differences and interactions between faiths, and help people find their way to their spiritual home." Jeremy admits that his own grasp of Islam is "rudimentary" as he does not practice the ritual dimensions of Islam nor is he familiar with the scripture. His teachers however are much better versed in it. As he states, "Sufism is, for me, a universalist umbrella over my understanding of God and Spirit, one that is formed from personal experiences almost completely disconnected from Islam." The strength of Sufism for Jeremy is in its meditative dimensions, its emphasis of the teacher-student paradigm, and in the particular philosophy of universalism. His practice and beliefs reflect this understanding of Sufism.

The Shadhili Order : Yusuf

The Shadhili Order has a fairly recent presence in Boston. A member of the order, a law student, came to Boston and organized at a grass roots level a small circle of Muslim interested

in the teachings and practices of his Sheikh[7]. The efforts to organize semi-regular gatherings began roughly three years ago. Over the course of the past three years more members of the Order have either come to the area for career or educational purposes. In addition several Muslims joined the Order after first attending these gatherings out of curiosity. The founding member of the Boston gathering has since left the area, however the members of the Shadhili Order continue to meet.

I contacted and interviewed one such member, Yusuf, a 28-year-old married graduate student living in Boston. Of mixed European American descent Yusuf was born and raised in New York before coming to Boston. He has been a resident of the area for just over ten years. Raised in what he describes as an "atheist/agnostic" environment, Yusuf converted to Islam later in life when he was a young adult. His conversion however is not connected to his encounter with Sufism. It was several years after his conversion that he came to be involved with the Shadhili Order. He was initiated into the Order as a *Murid*, an Arabic term meaning "student."

The Shadhili Order in Boston follows the teachings of Sheikh Nuh Ha Mim Keller, an American Muslim convert. The Sheikh studied Arabic and philosophy at the University of Chicago before studying Islamic jurisprudence, religious sciences, and the Sufi path in the Middle East, primarily in Jordan and Syria, his current residence. Sheikh Keller does frequently visits the United States for lectures and meetings. The Shadhili Order, from which Sheikh Keller has received the authority to guide, traces its origins through a variety of traditional Sufi lines, namely the Junaydi line, which, Yusuf states "connects it to many different Qadari, and Darqawi lines." Yusuf also clearly connected his Order's teachings with those of the Prophet Muhammad's to assert and legitimate its Islamic association. The major activities of the Boston

[7] For this segment we will use the transliteration "Sheikh" instead of "Shaykh" as the master of this particular order uses this transliteration convention.

branch were detailed by Yusuf as group dhikr gatherings, called *Latifiyya*, and bi-annual meetings where members of the Order receive live lessons from the Sheikh, both of which he has taken part in. In fact, it was during one of the Sheikh's visits to Boston, in particular a lecture set up by the founding member of the area, where Yusuf met the Sheikh and became a part of the Order. The *Latifiyya* conducted in Boston is held semi-regularly and is comprised of all men. They are either followers of the Order or invited Muslims who have expressed interest. At a session, one member leads the dhikr, "remembrance" of God, by chanting the names of God. The teachings of Sheikh Keller are also read. At the end of the session the individual leading the session provides sweets for the other attendants.

The group in Boston, around three to five attending members, comprises only a small number of the followers connected worldwide. Members of the Shadhili order, according to Yusuf, maintain contact with one another through primarily email and a website. Arranged meetings also serve as places for members to congregate and meet. When I asked Yusuf how he would characterize his interaction with his Sufi community he described it as "mostly virtual." For him the internet served as the primary means for staying in contact with the Order regarding its spiritual dimensions. Direct interaction was important but limited as it was not always easy or possible. He did note "many murids travel overseas for various periods of time to study with the Sheikh." He summed up the private and public dimensions of his spiritual life as follows, "I pray alone, and in groups. I sometimes eat alone, and sometimes in groups. Spiritual, religious life is much like other people's non-religious life, which includes social, work, entertainment, etc., except with the intention to try and obey Allah and remember Him at all times."

The Rifai-Qadiri Order : Amanda

Amanda has been a Sufi for nine years. She is currently finishing a graduate degree in religion in Boston. While she calls herself Sufi her husband does not. Amanda, a Caucasian-American mother of a one-year-old boy, is the only member of her Sufi Order in Boston proper. Her situation, however, is not completely one of isolation. Two other members, a married couple, are in North Hampton and a third resides within driving distance to them. These four members comprise the New England members of the Rifai-Qadiri Order. Aside from the Sufi group Amanda also has connections with the various Muslim communities in the area. The Rifai-Qadiri Order, coming from Turkey to the United States in the late 1960's and 70's, has been clear in maintaining its Islamic identity while it has carried its teachings over to the American context.

Shaykh Taner Ansari is the Order's current leader. He was born in Tarsus, Turkey and pursued a university education in the United States in Michigan. His mother was herself a Sufi from the Naqshbandi line, but Taner Ansari took up Sufism along a different route. He encountered the Rifai-Qadiri Order in Turkey, which he eventually joined. After sometime he was instructed by his Shaykh to start a *tariqah*, or order of his own, and in the late 1960s he did so after receiving invitations from students in California to come over and teach. Since that time, Shaykh Taner Ansari has maintained his Order's presence in Nappa, California. During his stay in California, his master passed away. As a consequence he and another disciple were made the new Pirs of the Order overall.

The community in California, Amanda informed me, has a strong presence in the greater Nappa and greater San Francisco area. There are roughly thirty students, of which fifteen compromise a core group. Internationally there are members in South America, South Africa,

Turkey, Italy, and Australia. The order keeps in contact through an active email group and the Order in California has a publication division.[8] Lessons and contemplative questions are sent out through mailings and discussed online. The order's strong internet presence has been one of the primary ways in which Amanda has remained involved with the group. The website of the Order at http://www.qadiri-rifai.org/index.htm has extensive internet vehicles to facilitate access to the Shaykh and other members.

Amanda also calls the Shaykh once a week in addition to directly emailing him. The Shaykh emphasizes developing a close relationship with his students. As a result gathering large numbers is not as important. He would rather have students who are sincere in their pursuit of the Sufi path. Amanda notes that the Shaykh admits that he has made mistakes while leading his Order in California. Handling students rooted in American culture and the American religious heritage has been a trial. Cultural conflicts have arisen between the Shaykh's Turkish background and the background of his students, despite his university years in Michigan. But furthermore, he faced the inherent difficulties a leader faces in gathering a new community. He must balance the needs of each individual student against the collective needs of the community. Hence, bringing Sufism to America has been a learning experience for him just as much as his guidance is a learning experience for his followers. His approach is "extremely down to earth." Amanda also describes him as "traditional, innovative, [and] radical" all in one. Like Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, Shaykh Taner Ansari stresses primarily the inner dimensions of spiritual life. Nevertheless he is a teacher of the details. Not only is he concerned with details such as modest clothing and ritual prayer, he focuses on the individual character of his students in order to properly guide them.

[8] Further research on the Rifai-Qadiri Order can be found in Appendix B, a supplementary paper studying the web presence of this Sufi Order.

One particular practice exemplifies the deep relationship between student and teacher. Rabitah or "heart connection" is practiced with the Shaykh. Through this practice one connects directly with the master regardless of distance. One is able to communicate through a heart to heart transmission. It is not present with every member as it is a connection that takes gradual and dedicated cultivation. Through Rabitah, Amanda states that one feels guided by not only Shaykh Taner Ansari but all the teachers who came before him.

In addition to personal instruction group gatherings are also scheduled. In California weekly Shaykh Taner Ansari leads weekly dhikr sessions on Friday nights while Saturday nights are reserved for a cyberchat session with the Shaykh. I was able to attend an ad hoc dhikr session two years ago. In it we were lined in rows. The Shaykh leads the chant while the disciples repeat. Bodily motions are also repeated that reflect rhythmic movements found in nature. Once the disciples fall into a pattern of movement and chanting the Shaykh accompanies them with a song. Amanda informed me that usually instruments are also played. This musical worship leaves a deep impact on many of the followers. One member in the New England area produced a private CD recording in which several of these Sufi songs are performed in both Arabic and English.

Amanda lived with the California community for a year and a half. However after consulting with her Shaykh she traveled to Turkey and eventually Boston where she was advised by her Shaykh to study Islam and religions in general. When she first came to the area, she acted as the regional *Wakil*. In the Rifai-Qadiri Order *Wakils* are appointed to serve as the contact person for a particular area. Eventually the position of New England *Wakil* was passed from Amanda to one of her colleagues in North Hampton. Currently the New England *Wakil* of the Rifai-Qadiri Order holds a weekly dhikr session. In addition he provides information to those

interested in Sufism. Unfortunately Amanda is unable to regularly attend the dhikrs given her busy schedule and the distance. Hence the core group that attends these dhikrs are the three other previously mentioned members in the area.

In response to her situation, Amanda attempted to arrange weekly dhikr sessions in her own area about two years ago. She wanted to be able to share and live an important part of her spiritual life in her spiritual remote home city. Not being a member of her Order was not a restriction to attendants. She wanted her dhikr to be accessible to anyone open enough to the idea. She did conduct her dhikrs according to her tradition. What began as an off campus project developed into a field education project for her graduate studies. She advertised the event on her campus and held regular weekly meetings at the Cambridge Adult Learning Center. Those who attended were Muslims or those already familiar with Sufism. As she describes the experience the meetings "did not end up very successful" as attendants spent more time questioning the practice than actually participating. Some attendants labeled Amanda's form of dhikr as "bida" or an "innovation". In the Islamic tradition, the term bida is reserved for practices that represent deviations from the original practices of the Prophet Muhammad and his early community. As such, the category carries a pejorative connotation with many Muslims. Looking back, Amanda had wanted to attract more people who were new to Islam and Sufism. She was seeking people who were sincerely searching their religious paths. She herself had come to Sufism and Islam in this manner.

Amanda first met her Shaykh at a University lecture while getting her undergraduate degree. After a few more meetings with Shaykh Taner Ansari he informed her that "you'll be back in a year." As predicted she eventually did join the Order in Nappa to begin her "Sufi basic training," which lasted for a year and half. The center in Nappa, where she trained was a

pizzeria. The Shaykh uses the commonplace restaurant environment to instill humility among other Sufi principles on his disciples. It was within this environment that Amanda converted. Her introduction to Islam was thus Sufism. For a long while the two were synonymous for her. Only after interacting with Muslims away from California did she develop a sense for Islam's diversity. Through this however, being Muslim and being Sufi synonymously is still very much how she approaches her religious identity. As she describes the foundation of the Rifai-Qadiri Order is the tradition of the Prophet, the Qur'_n, and the spiritual disciplines passed down through the Sufi lineages. Clearly the Order in bringing Sufism to the American landscape intends to present it as a living tradition firmly rooted in Islamic principles.

The Naqshdbandi Order : Zainab

The interviews with Zainab were conducted over a period of several months in small segments. Her interview was placed at the end as her story continues where Amanda's leaves off. Furthermore, I was told at the beginning of the interviews that there are aspects of the Sufi path that she could not elucidate as I was not ready to hear them. As a result the summation of her interviews may appear incomplete in segments in comparison to the above interviews. Nevertheless the primary focus of this segment, as in all the others, is to illustrate her Order's connection to Islam and the activities in which she participates as a Sufi. One note however, is that, similar to what Nora states above, Zainab also does not call herself a Sufi. That title is reserved for one who has advanced far on the Sufi path. At best she can call herself one who is on the path.

Zainab is Egyptian, but was born and raised in Senegal. She later moved back to Egypt with her family for her university education. After college she traveled back and forth between Egypt, England, and Canada where she worked towards several graduate degrees in the history of science and political science. She eventually married an American Muslim convert and moved to Boston where she continues to pursue her graduate studies now directed towards religion, namely Islamic studies.

Zainab first encountered Sufism at an early age while in Senegal. Her milk mother, or wet nurse, was allowed by her parents to raise her in the Sufi tradition, the Naqshbandi line. Hence from childhood Zainab was instructed through a living example of Sufism's primary principles and practices. Her understanding of Sufism is explicitly Islamic. Raised Muslim by her Sufi milk mother, Zainab, like Amanda, sees the essence of Islam embodied in Sufism. Interestingly, the language of her story emphasizes two themes, presence and spiritual power. Presence came up in a number of contexts. The presences of her Shaykh, her milk mother, and of a divine nature could be felt at a number of instances in her life. Spiritual power on the other hand was used to describe a force or ability that unfolded in response to events in her life.

When Zainab was young she could discern things about other people just by looking at them. They possessed an aura that matched their character and at times she could foresee what would happen to certain individuals. Her milk mother detected this ability in Zainab and instructed her to suppress it. Ironically, according to Zainab, her milk mother possessed the same ability and perhaps because of it, she speculates, her milk mother knew it was better for Zainab not to develop this power. Her milk mother told her that this visionary foresight was un-Islamic and was dangerous. In one of her anecdotes Zainab mentioned that her aunt also possessed this ability, which while proven true, eventually led to her aunt's insanity. At one

point in her life, she did cultivate this spiritual power. While in England let her ability develop along its own course. However, through her own introspection decided to suppress it again, certain that what she saw was not meant to be public knowledge. Such knowledge, she hinted at, could be dangerous. So while she continues to see things with people she chooses not to disclose what she sees to them. When asked further about the clarity of vision associated with this ability, she said it is not always clear what will happen. At best, what she has is an impression. Having spoken with those close to her, it is clear that her friends see her at least as a particularly insightful person. Though not all of these individuals are aware of Zainab's ability.

Another spiritual power that she associates with her Sufi upbringing is the power of dreams. Within the Islamic tradition certain schools of thought have acknowledged the semi-prophetic power of dreams. For Zainab, dreams can be interpreted, if one has the proper knowledge to do so, to understand the circumstances and trials of one's own inner life. Dreams can also be a site of premonition. When I asked her how she had met her Shaykh she could not completely disclose the story. She did mention however that she dreamed of him several times before meeting him. This degree of spiritual connection implies a level of master-student intimacy that cuts across time. Zainab noted that she often has dreams of those around her and on several occasions her Shaykh and her deceased milk mother have visited her in her dreams. Through this medium, her former teachers continue to guide her.

When Zainab first came to Boston two years ago she knew of no other Sufis in the area. She looked for other members of her order but was unable to locate any. The Order does not have an organized presence in the city. Instead Zainab sought other groups with which to perform dhikr. For her it was more important to join others in remembering God than it was for her to do dhikr according to her tradition's practice. During the course of her searching she

attended one evening of Amanda's dhikr sessions. Amanda remembers her, noting that she was one of the few people who participated sincerely. However, Zainab herself was unable to find a satisfactory group or place for dhikr. Amanda's dhikrs were not comfortable enough an environment given the debates and wary eyes at the sessions.

After a year, Zainab decided to take the initiative and begin her own gatherings. Her approached differed from Amanda's. Where Amanda's efforts had sought newcomers and was directed towards the public through her field education project, Zainab began her gatherings at a private level. She invited fellow students and colleagues whom she had met and felt were open to dhikr. Furthermore, if someone asked to come to her dhikr after hearing about it Zainab would always welcome him or her. According to her tradition, no one can be denied access. She also relates that she "received permission" from her Shaykh to lead the session. Usually women are not allowed to lead dhikr. However the Shaykh, somehow aware of her future situation, granted her the right to do so. On several occasions she stressed how she had received permission from her Shaykh to proceed.

During the first year of the dhikrs, the gatherings have been semi-regular (Zainab ideally would like weekly meetings) with a core group of four to seven members including Zainab. Amanda, after a year of her unsuccessful sessions, was invited to the first of Zainab's dhikrs and has since visited regularly. Of the regular attendants, most have all developed a close relationship with Zainab. Speaking with them, many consider her a Shaykha (a woman master), though they are fully aware that she would reject such a title as inappropriate and unsuitable. In addition to these participants, many others, between twenty and thirty different people, have come for one or two sessions. Not all of these attendants are Muslim, much less Sufi. Zainab has typically invited people based on her judgment of their spiritual proclivities. Several

attendants have in fact found the sessions uncomfortable and no longer attend. Others have expressed appreciation afterwards but do not believe this form of dhikr suits them and no longer attend them. Zainab still invites these individuals to come over after dhikr to share in the dinner.

The dhikr is performed in Zainab's home in her living room in the evening. People are typically invited to come around the time for Maghrib prayer, which is the sunset prayer. The participants, when all together, sit either on sofas or the floor in a circle. The lights are turned off to eliminate distraction and to minimize people's self-consciousness. Zainab begins with a short praise of the Prophet and proceeds to lead the group through a series of Arabic chants. Everyone is led to either chant the names of God or traditional stock phrase of belief and praise. A session lasts between one and two hours and ends with a talk by Zainab. Zainab never knows what she will speak on until everyone is gathered. She tries to get a feel for where everyone is in order to formulate her talk. Before the dinner she prepares a communal dinner. During its preparation she begins to think over the sermon. But it is only during the dhikr, with everyone present, that the topic or topics are determined. This brief sermon addresses life issues and articulates a clearly Sufi and Islamic approach to life.

At the end of each dhikr Zainab serves dinner as mentioned earlier. She comments that it has been a tradition within her Order to have food served after dhikr. Dhikr itself is exhausting and the accompanying dinner serves as a refresher. The types of food are important too as there is a connection between the chanted remembrance of God and the meal. On several occasions she will serve a vegetarian meal if she knows there will be vegetarians present. She has a deep interest exploring the interplay of food, ritual, and devotion in the Sufi context and has indicated that she may conduct her own research into Sufi cooking in the future.

Aside from the dhikr Zainab also practices qiyam, night prayer often. The night prayers are conducted late in the night, typically after midnight, and are not considered obligatory. Rather these are supererogatory prayers. During these long and intense prayer sessions, which she performs individually, she prays for those who are close to her. On some nights she says she can feel that the "night is open" and her prayers are being heard. On such occasions Zainab says she receives a strong feeling in response to her prayer that indicates to her whether things will be well or not for the one for whom she prays. Other nights lack this openness. Regardless the practice itself is more important than the response for the intention is always an expression of appreciation and praise of God.

Zainab often expressed her longing to return to Egypt, in particular to see her Shaykh. While living in America she has been unable to visit her Shaykh. Whereas other interviewees where able to correspond with their respective teachers through the internet or phone, Zainab's master is inaccessible via these means. Instead, Zainab's spiritual life has centered on her ground up effort to start and maintain regular dhikr sessions. Where support from other Naqshbandi members was lacking, Zainab took it upon herself to gather spiritual kin with whom to practice, even if these individuals were not Sufi or Muslim. She however did not compromise her perception of Islam's and Sufism's integrity as her lessons are rooted in Islamic principles. It is her belief, however, that these Islamic principles are universally applicable.

Conclusion

In comparison to Mosque, Church, and Synagogue communities, Sufi Orders in Boston are significantly smaller. The cohesion of an Order hinges upon the active involvement of its relatively few adherents, even if that involvement is that which is found between master and

student. As evidenced by the statements of the interviewees, the Sufi Orders in Boston are not directly centered on religious sites. The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, Sufi Order International, and Qadiri-Rifai Orders do have centers outside of Boston to which its members can turn for guidance, however the centerpoint for activity within Boston is more based upon interpersonal connections and/or a strong and stable communication network. Dhikr, dances, and lessons serve as physical gathering points, but the respective Sufis who perform these do not have ownership in the sites at which these activities are held. Zainab uses her own home for her gatherings, but she does not attach any sort of Naqshbandi or Sufi claim to the house. Rather, she states that certain homes, when you enter them, have an openness and presence in which one can do dhikr. Her home, happens to be one of these places. But she does not regard her home, in an official capacity affiliated with her Sufi Order, as a religious site.

The Sufi communities in Boston instead draw their cohesion from the communication instead of location. Physical numbers have forced many of these groups to seek connection and guidance through distance mediums. The internet in particular has become a forum for discussion and sharing, in addition to one of direct guidance, as is the case in the Qadiri-Rifai Order. Nevertheless, both Amanda and Jeremy also use the telephone to maintain their personal connection with his teachers. And referenced in both Amanda's and Zainab's interviews is a more direct, yet distant, form of connection with a Shaykh, where master and student share an intimate link through a heart connection, visions, or dreams.

This cohesive emphasis on communication, instead of location, has also consequentially stressed the one on one master-disciple relationship for many of the interviewed Sufis. For Jeremy, Amanda, and Zainab being removed from their familiar Sufi environment has allowed them to appreciate more greatly the personal guidance they received from their master. This is

not to exclude this appreciation from the Shadhili Order or the Fellowship. Listening to the lessons of the Shaykh remains a fundamental aspect of their respective Sufi observances. For the Fellowship in particular it is the primary, if not only, way for many of its members to draw guidance from their Guru. This shift of communication over location applies also to Sufi Order International, to a certain degree, as members begin to physically move away from one another. But the Shaykh does not necessarily need to be the centerpoint of the communication network. Sandy commented that members often look to one another for direction and clarification, as teaching is a highly regarded principle. And given the longevity of the organization in total, a refined system of education is in place. Nevertheless meeting Pir Zia Khan remains a powerful influence for current members and a strong attraction for potential new ones. His guidance continues to be the guiding beacon for the Order. Institutionally, this focus on communication over location indicates a means by which comparatively smaller religious communities sustain themselves. Where physical numbers are lacking, resources are limited, and a central location is impractical or inhibited, a communication net is cast to first keep members in contact with the master, but also with each other.

Culturally all the Sufi Shaykhs mentioned, with the exception of one, was aware and/or familiar with the cultural difficulties of bringing Sufism, in whatever its form, together with American culture, whatever its form. All of these Shaykhs lived in the United States and faced for themselves the challenges their followers faced. In fact Shaykh Keller is an Amerinca convert to Islam. Only in the case of Zainab, is the picture unclear concerning her Shaykh. The sense that I had was that her Shaykh was not familiar with the American environment and had never been to the United States before. Zainab's interaction with the American religious landscape took place then almost entirely through her own intuition.

The individuals I interviewed also tended to be very active in maintaining their spiritual lives. Jeremy, while not a participant in the larger Order, maintains a strong relationship with his teachers as that, in his description, is the defining means of his Sufism. Both Amanda and Zainab also took the initiative to begin their own gatherings for dhikr, despite logistical difficulties and religious challenges. Amanda, for her part, continued to hold her dhikr sessions, for the duration of the year, despite her evaluation of its unsuccessfulness. Ben and Sandy likewise are part of the community leadership in their respective orders. The activism of the interviewees is even more significant given the numbers found in each Sufi Order in Boston. The fragility in numbers is counterbalanced by the energy and enthusiasm exhibited by each Order's few members.

Finally, none of the Shaykhs of any of the Orders under study live in Boston. The life of these Sufi Orders in Boston depends primarily on the efforts of the followers. The Shaykh may provide guidance through his personal instruction or didactic legacy, but the execution of his particular Sufi vision must be taken up by the individual disciple. Ultimately, the spiritual life of an adherent of Sufism requires personal dedication. The grassroots Sufi presences that I located and studied owe their existence to the energy of individuals who express their devotion to Sufism in sincere and enthusiastic terms. Each interviewee, despite occasional hesitations over anonymity, was eager to share his/her experiences, if not also the teachings of their respective Orders. Sufism in Boston, hence is the product of personal piety and activism combined. Though the masters of the Orders are absent, their influence and principles is made manifest by their dedicated disciples.

In general, the Sufi Orders in Boston that I was able to find and investigate, are small communities, in some cases a community of one, that survives through communication networks

that extend beyond Boston and through the energies of dedicated students. The former means has a somewhat longer longevity insured as the network encompasses more people outside of Boston. However it is the latter means that is more tenuous. In years to come, it will be a test for these Sufi Orders to continue as members either move away or enthusiasm wanes with the coming of future generations. Also the guidance of the Shaykh becomes a potential difficulty with shifts in leadership or vision occurring. In the case of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship there is the test of time, as the charisma of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen becomes restricted to his recorded teachings. However speculation on what will transpire is premature, if not inappropriate and impossible. How each Sufi Order faces these challenges will be an extension of the process evident now. As shown by the interviews, the Sufi adherents in Boston have constantly been engaged in a process of adaptation. Dealing with a periphery master-disciple situation, small numbers, and distance, among many formative elements, the Sufi Orders of Boston have responded hence far resiliently and dynamically. The continuation of this process will depend heavily upon individual, grassroots activism and adaptive distance communication mediums.

Appendix A
Interview Methodology

Ben, Khadijah, Sandy, Jeremy, Yusuf, Amanda, and Zainab were interviewed according to the following method. Each interviewee was contacted for an initial interview where the following questions were asked. The main subject questions were not necessarily asked in this order as I deferred to letting each interview proceed as organically as possible. However I continued until each question listed below was asked and answered as thoroughly as each interviewee desired. Follow up questions were appended either during the first interview or asked in a subsequent meetings. In the case of Jeremy and Yusuf, I offered email correspondence as it was more difficult to meet with them. It also provided them with an opportunity to clarify their answers.

Interview Framework

-About yourself (Please specify here the level of anonymity you desire if any. You may skip or specify questions that you would not like answered and recorded as such)
- -Name
- -Age
- -Ethnic background
- -Career
- -Where were you born?
- -Where were you raised?
- -Where were you before Boston? How long have you been here?
- -Do you live exclusively in Boston presently?
- -Religious history/background

-What can you tell me about your Sufi order?
- -What activities do you or your order do?
- -How is your order organized?
- -Is there a leader? Does he/she live nearby?
- -How does your order maintain contact?
- -Is your group connected to a larger order?

-How did you come to be part of this group?
    -How would you describe your participation in the order?
    -How would you describe your Sufi community?

-What is your order's relationship to Islam?
    -What is your relationship to Islam?
    -What is your order's relationship to other Sufi groups?
    -What is your order's relationship to other faith communities?

-How would you describe your spiritual/religious identity?
    -How has the order shaped that identity?
    -Can you describe the group and private dimensions of your spiritual/religious life?

Appendix B
The Internet Presence of the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order

Recite what is sent of the Book by inspiration to you, and establish regular prayer: for prayer restrains from shameful and evil deeds;
And remembrance of Allah is the greatest thing in life without doubt, And Allah knows the deeds that you do.
Qur'_n 29:45

This verse is found at the top of the index page of the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order website at http://www.qadiri-rifai.org/index.htm. A Qur'_nic verse is situated in the top left corner of each page of the site. A connection is clearly being made between the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order and Islam, in general, as well as the fundamental source text of the religion, the Qur'_n, in particular. The purpose of this segment is to read how this particular Sufi Order represents itself through its website. The entire website attempts to balance a number of dynamics. First, the site focuses on bringing forth the Qur'_nic and prophetic precedence alongside the teachings of past Sufi masters that form the foundation of the order's philosophy and practice. Furthermore, the website situates its particular identity against the practice of other Sufi orders and even other religious traditions. In both these respects, of authenticity and identity, the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order wants to present an image of openness and acceptance parallel to an image of longstanding historical legacy and spiritual legitimacy. Finally, the last and third balancing act is played out in how the Order represents its relevance in respect to American culture and modern technology.

Throughout the site, we are presented with a number of representative voices and associating images. The written elements include Qur'_n, hadith, and Sufi quotations. The first two serve as indicators that the Order is grounded in a longstanding Islamic tradition. The scriptural and prophetic precedence that these verses or passages offer serve as legitimizing signposts. Sufism, throughout its history, has had to chronically address the criticisms leveled against its authenticity. For many orthodox Muslims, Sufism represents an innovative deviation

from the original model of Islam found in the Prophet Muhammad's time. The citation of Qur'_n and hadith, both of which are (nearly) universally recognized within Muslim communities as fundamental to the religion, are arguments for Sufism's, and this particular Order's, claim to be Islamic.

The verses are not solely marks of legitimation. The content of their message is also important to the image constructed by the website of the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order. Many of the verses describe the relationship of the believer to God or characterize God's attributes and actions. For example verse 3:126, cited on the "Path of Sufism" page, describes the purpose of revelation as the deliverance of hope. Verse 8:63, on the "Mission Statement" page, describes God in His loving capacity as well as in His might and wisdom. Others describe ways to express devotion or detail moral codes. On the "Make Donation" page, verse 2:261 talks about the spiritual reward involved in charity. In general these verses offer newcomers a glimpse of what the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order sees as the essence of Islam, Sufism, as well as their own order.

The verse cited at the beginning of the paper brings us to the issue of practice. Verse 29:45 invokes two important practices of the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order, prayer and dhikr, or the recollection of God. While the former is an element present in all Islamic traditions, the latter has special significance and associations with Sufism. In the Sufi tradition, dhikr is typically a collective activity in which the members can use music, song, dance, and movement to draw closer to God. The manner in which dhikr is performed depends upon the tradition of the specific Order.

This points brings us to the visual dimensions of the website. The Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order site uses a number of pictures along the top of their pages. In several instances Sufis doing dhikr are shown. But rather than restricting them only to Qadiri-Rifai practices we are

shown images of Mevlevi dhikr alongside Rifai practices. And aside from images of dhikr are pictures of a Bektashi dervish and several unidentified Sufis that are labeled as "historic images." In this pluralistic array of Sufi images, the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order is emphasizing its kinship to other Orders. In fact, many of the Sufi sayings quoted on the site are likewise drawn from different Sufi traditions. For example, on the front page, Rumi, one of the most famous Sufis to both Islamic and Western audiences, is cited. The image constructed by the page attempts to draw together all of the dynamics. The pages themselves are green themed, the color traditionally associated with Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, and contain Islamic geometric designs. We are shown visually and textually the connection between Islam and Sufism, we are reminded of the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order's relationship to other Orders, and all of the material presented is made accessible to the Western audience through short, representative verses, images, and common associations (i.e. Rumi).

However all these elements do not constitute the core intention of the maintainers of the website. The imagery, verses, and texts looked at thus far are all peripheral. The content of the website is divided into four subsections, each of which is described in brief on the index page. The first section, "Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order" provides "information on our purpose, our history and our teachers." And the first page of this section is the Order's "Mission Statement." On this page is the most concise self-image of the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order available on the site. The statement begins with the traditional invocation of "In the name of God…" transliterated from the Arabic into English. And right away we encounter their purpose: "The primary mission of the Qadiri Rifai Sufi Order is to be available as a guide to Seekers of Allah." In the statement the Order is asserting its qualifications for spiritual guidance but at the same time clarifying that their purpose is one of invitation rather than compulsion.

The rest of the "Mission Statement" is systematic in its self-representation. The first paragraph is explicit in the delineating the origins of the Order. They are based clearly on the Qur'_n and the prophetic model of Muhammad. But they are also part of a spiritual lineage of the Prophet's "followers" as well as his predecessors that go back to Abraham. A kinship is called to mind between Islam and its Abrahamic brethren, Judaism and Christianity. Next the Order unpackages its Sufi identity by laying out its conception of the path. In the case of the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order the path is fourfold and involves a great deal of discipline that entails intellectual, devotional, and social activity and instruction. The third paragraph interestingly returns to the Qur'_n and prophetic tradition as the foundation of their practice. Whereas other orders are more liberal in their association with Islam, it is of paramount importance to the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order to establish its Islamic identity.

The final section of the statement addresses the political character of the group. As stated, "The Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order has no political affiliations whatsoever. We are not *Sunni, Shia*, or *Wahabi*. Everyone is welcome in our circle if they come in peace." The Order distances itself from political association, not just in its secular or civil manifestation, but in its sectarian dimensions as well. The purpose of guidance, as a Sufi Order, is so important that any other form of identification that may prove divisive or intolerant, is avoided. The Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order's first and foremost concern is to maintain an atmosphere of openness and peace. Spiritual and social concerns outweigh and overwhelm political motivations.

These concerns are described on the next page, "What We Do." According to this page, the Order's "path is one of service." These services take the form of worship, spiritual guidance, and charity. The service is also focused on integration. As they state, the spiritual life is not meant to be compartmentalized. Rather, it must be a conscious, living, complete framework for

one's life. Furthermore, the student is not meant to dwell on the purely cognitive or psychological levels of Sufism. The body requires as much exercise as the heart and mind. Hence the page mentions "the Sacred Movement exercises" that each disciple learns. The guidance that the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order speaks of is for the human being in his/her totality.

Guidance however has a very specific form in the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order. Like with other Sufi orders, the Shaykh or Pir (both mean "teacher") provides leadership and individual instruction to the disciples of an order. The relationship between the Pir and the student is the essential structure of walking the Sufi path. For the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order the current Pir is Shaykh Taner Ansari. Not mentioned earlier, is the fact that in every picture array the rightmost picture has been a photograph of Shaykh Taner Ansari. From Turkey, the Pir studied both in Istanbul and Michigan. His education hence crossed the perceived divide between East and West. His role in the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order crosses likewise as he "accepted the leadership of the Islamic Sufi Order of Qadiri Rifai Tariqa of the Americas" from Shaykh Nuruddin Ozal. The website, while representing the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order in general is more specifically the work of the Order's Americas branch. And this Shaykh's visual presence indicates his integral role in leading the Order. His presence very much informs and defines the Order.

As hinted in the account of Shaykh Taner Ansari's acceptance of leadership, the spiritual heritage of the Order extends beyond him. The founders of the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order are listed as Abdul Qadir al Geylani, Ahmed Ar-Rifai, and Muhyiddin Ansari, the first two being the source of the present Order's name. The website is careful to trace the Order's lineage back to its founding Pirs to establish its historical significance and its longstanding tradition of guidance. These Pirs came from Iraq and Persia. However, if one looks at the "History of Our Order Page" one finds that the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order has a distinctly Turkish character. Nevertheless part of

their history is their missionary work beyond the Islamic world to places such as Germany, Yugoslavia, and now the Americas.

The website itself represents the latest move to transcend national boundaries in reaching spiritual seekers. While hosted on an American server and printed in English, the website is accessible to anyone in the world. And the language, English, is only a minor barrier given that English has assumed the internet role of lingua franca. However, this technological aspect we will return to when we examine the fourth subsection.

We must first look at the second one, titled "The Path to Sufism." This extensive section provides a general introduction to the tenants of Islam and Sufism. Each segment is dedicated to a particular element of Muslim life. The glossary page at the end gives the subsection the feel of a Sufi manual. Where Sufi manuals appeared to provide instruction in the absence of the Shaykh, this webpage provides a version of the Sufi manual that is even more portable then a bound text.

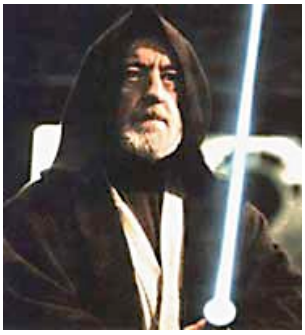
The third section "Guidance to the Path" is similar to its preceding section. This segment is an even better example of an online version of a Sufi manual as it describes specifically the types of exercises the Order follows or provides a Sufi interpretation of commonplace Muslim practice, such as daily prayer, fasting, and Hajj. What I term the more Sufi exercises include breathing exercises, means of meditative contemplation, and physical exercises. This last activity is practiced within the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order through the Indonesian martial art of Pencak Silat Gerakan Suci. Here is a prime example of the Order's growth. Extending beyond its originally Turkish character, the Order has adopted a Muslim practice from a far corner of the Islamic world. The Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order displays not only openness to spiritual seekers but

also an openness on its own part to develop and adapt to an increasingly smaller world, smaller through the advances in transportation and communication.

Despite how similar to manuals some of these passages appear to be, they fall short of the characterization. What these pages offer are introductory glimpses into the aspects of the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi path. Those who seek guidance will have to contact the Order in person, preferably the Pir himself. However, two parts of the website help facilitate this step. Under "The Path to Sufism" subsection is a FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) page. Providing answers to commonly asked questions, the FAQ page is a pseudo-dialogue meant to engage the interested net surfer. An intriguing question is asked in the sixth question (excerpted below):

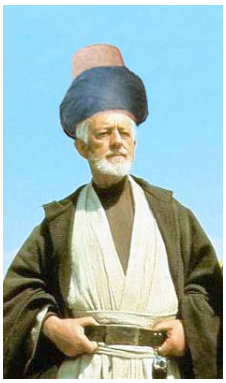
> **6. What is the difference between a Sufi and a Jedi?**
>
> Jedi are the ones with the really kewl [sic] light sabers, but Sufis have much nicer hats. Though there is evidence of a deeper connection between the two groups.

sufi



jedi

The underlined word above, "evidence", when clicked on linked to the following picture:



In the middle of a serious website and on a page addressing legitimate questions, the creators of the website include, somewhat randomly, elements of levity and pop culture. In a nod to the American cultural environment the maintainers of the site are appealing to a widespread American icon-world, namely Star Wars. While Star Wars is recognized and admired by several generations, its inclusion here can serve as an indicator of the approximate demographic of the site creators and intended audience. While admittedly speculative, Star Wars references usually target people from the late 1970s and the 1980s when the Star Wars pop culture phenomena was strongest. And given the movies' continuation and revival, the site is also appealing to a new generation of Americans.

The technological adaptability of the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order is best observed on the last of the four subsections, the "Virtual Dergah." This all-purpose contact page offers a variety of means to get involved with the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order, for both interested and current members. The website provides the usual fair of contacts and links. The "Contact Information" page provides the email addresses, mailing addresses, and/or phone numbers of Order leaders around the United States in addition to South Africa and Tanzania. The page provides convenient information for traveling members or interested newcomers. It is also on this page that we learn that the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order in America is based in Napa, California. The "Links" page extends the sense of Sufi kinship by offering links to a wide and diverse array of other Sufi groups, most of which are also in America.

Also among the common elements is a "Calendar of Events" page. Here readers can learn of upcoming events at which they are free to attend, the dhikr being the main form of communal activity. Central information pages such as the contact and events pages provide the means for distant members to remain in touch with the Order and the Shaykh and for newcomers

to join in on activities. Finally a monthly newsletter called "Call of the Divine" is also available in back issues on the website as PDF files. New issues are sent through e-mail or regular "snail" mail. Each newsletter contains messages and teachings from the pir. In the absence of the pir, one is able access his wisdom in this monthly publication. One back issue is even available in Spanish. The Shaykh-disciple relationship, which has traditionally been face to face, has had to adapt to the increasingly distant world in which we live. These alternative forms of contact have been the means of the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order for handling this problem.

The most technologically-savvy component of the website is the "CyberTariqa." Here readers can join the Shaykh in a live voice broadcast over the internet or in an internet chatroom. Perhaps the most personal form of contact possible, given the medium, these innovative forums indicate the ways in which the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order and its Shaykhs are advancing with modern technology. While the physical presence is absent, the instantaneous vocal rapport is possible through internet chat relay programs. There is also a larger internet email discussion group in which all the subscribed members can discuss topics with one another. Here spiritual discourse has extended to include student to student discussions and not just master-student ones.

Lastly, the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order's website engages in a limited degree of web commerce. Students can track down related readings or purchase required books through the "Online Bookstore." An onsite shopping cart is available for direct purchase of certain books, including the book of the current Pir Shaykh Taner Ansari. One can also make a spiritual "investment" by donating funds to support the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order. On the "Make Donation" page, a person can download a form to mail to the Order or he/she can use the PayPal system on the site to make a donation directly from a checking account or credit card. The act of charity has been facilitated by modern advanced in internet consumerism.

Making the most that the internet has to offer in terms of economics, communication, and dissemination, the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order has created a website that is both accessible to the newcomer and convenient for the distant member for remaining in contact. However, absent on the page was a way for a newcomer to join. Implied in this absence of material is the need for the interested individual to first make contact and then eventually meet the Shaykh in person. Potential student and teacher must meet. Ultimately the absolute importance of the Shaykh-disciple relationship for the path is maintained. However, the website does a well-balanced job of presenting its ideals and practices. The Order situates itself in an Islamic context without culturally alienating its mostly Western and more specifically American readers. The main thrust of the site is the Order's invitation to guidance, which is situated between its Islamic roots and its Sufi identity (not to imply the two are categorically separate). The language, images, and texts used are accessible and sufficiently introductory for this purpose. While the internet has redrawn how the Order may operate, it has not redefined the nature of the path. At the very least, the site's global reach has facilitated the Qadiri-Rifai Sufi Order's development into the technologically driven twenty-first century.

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