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Journey to Union: Exploring Ibn Arabi's Nomadic Philosophy and Imaginal Spaces in Sufism

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Abstract: This paper sheds light on Ibn Arabi's philosophy of journey, which takes place in an empty space where mystical characters, noble saints, Prophets and Messengers of God are given a chance to communicate and interact peacefully. Considering the hermeneutics' approach to Sufi discourse and Gilles Deleuze's concept of nomad thought, we aim to showcase that Ibn Arabi regards the Sufi wayfarers as "nomadic subjects" as long as they can journey to the inward and outward realms. The intersection of these two antagonistic realms— the realm of Seen (*al-hiss*) and Unseen (*al-ghayb*)— liberates the Sufi practitioners from spatio-temporal stagnation and transfers them to endless states and multiple becomings that later evolve into spiritual stations (*maqāmāt*) of stability and certainty.

Contribution: This article highlights the breadth of Ibn Arabi's nomadic style of thought in shaping the spiritual journey, arguing that the need to unite with God is expressed through a new style of spiritual movement that occurs in an imaginal space where the Sufi is enabled to communicate via his/her heart with other absentees, including noble saints, Messengers of God and Prophets.

Keywords: Nomad thought; journey; hermeneutic approach; Sufism; Ibn Arabi; empty space.

Introduction

The Sufi journey is a spiritual journey par excellence; its major aim is attaining perfection and unification with the Beloved God. It is an esoteric voyage that starts from the heart and entails perpetual struggles in the quest for the transcendent reality or *ma'rifah* (lit. knowledge) that has kept baffling and bewildering Sufi travellers since immemorial. The great business of the Sufi traveller is to exert himself and strive to reach that perfect knowledge diffused through all things (Hughes, 1885).¹

Through this mystical travel, the Sufi discover the world and widen their horizon by making acquaintance with other cultures and religions. It is an opportunity for such a human to engage in self-discovery and realisation (*tahaqquq*), achieved through meditative techniques and sincere devotion to God and His creations. According to Liotta (2013),

The Sufi journey takes on a circular mirror form, between the soul and God, separated and striving for an attainable union along a meandering way from one place and stage to another, sometimes clearly predetermined and guided by the master.²

At the beginning of their journey to God, the Sufi becomes an abode of multiple becomings, which puts them in a state of inconstancy "because [s]he continues to rise from one state to another and ... leaves one place for another, but once [s]he has arrived, [s]he becomes stable."³

In truth, this movement from inconstancy to stability is occasioned by what Deleuze⁴ defines as a nomad thought, which can be described as a philosophical process of thinking outside and across institutional boundaries, the decodification and recodification of thought.⁵ This nomadic subjectivity is the root cause of Sufi illumination, and it, therefore, warrants meticulous investigation.

In *Journey to the Lord of Power*, Ibn Arabi states, "The journey is based upon toil and the hardships of life, on afflictions and tests and the acceptance of

¹ Thomas Patick Hughes, *A Dictionary of Islam* (London: Oxford University Press, 1885), 609.

² Elena Liotta, *On Soul and Earth: The Psychic Value Of Place*, trans. Erika Pauli (London: Routledge, 2013), 137.

³ Abu al-Qasim Al-Qushayri, *Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism*, trans. Alexander Knysh (United Kingdom: Garnet Publishing Limited, 2007), 100.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Nomad Thought*, trans. David Allison (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999).

⁵ Michael Starr, *Wells Meets Deleuze: The Scientific Romances Reconsidered* (United States: MacFarland & Company, Inc., 2017), 29.

dangers and very great terrors," for it is not a straightforward and hassle-free journey in which stations are achieved through idle experiences. Put differently, the journey to the upper realms allows Ibn Arabi to inherit 'ilm (lit. Science) about the secrets of this earth and the heavens. In the meantime, it paves the ground for him to fathom the objective of his existence and to realise his oneness with every particle of it.

The rationale behind investigating the notion of nomadic subjectivity in Ibn Arabi's works is to disclose that the Sufi, in general, and Ibn Arabi in particular, is in a constant state of metamorphisms and becomings which he experiences not only in his physical travels but also in his heavenly ascent. According to Deleuze, nomadism does not merely mean the movement from one space to another, but more importantly, the movement from one state to another, which Deleuze described in his ABC Primer⁶ as an 'immobile voyage'.

The spiritual journey Ibn Arabi had accomplished is a form of the immobile voyage where the body is not the object of movement, but the heart is. Ibn Arabi's journey is marked by a different form of movement in an empty space, in which he savours different states and multiple stations. The idea of 'empty space' is inherent in Antonio Giddens's⁷ writings, and it helps prove that the vacated space into which Ibn Arabi headed in his ascensional journey is not only noetic but also heavenly and imaginary in a sense since it leads him to encounter some invisible characters and spiritual entities. The following questions are fully discussed: 1) How does Ibn Arabi perceive the mystical journey in his quest for the divine? 2) What assets does this journey yield, and how do they impact the life of the Sufi traveller?

Literature Review

Nomad thought is a repeatedly prevalent theme in Sufi discourse, and it enjoys a deterritorialising language capable of providing possibilities for multiple forms of subjectivity in a never-ending state of ongoingness. Gilles Deleuze coined the concept of the nomadic subject based on his reading of Ibn Khaldun's *Prolegomenon*, where a nomadic civilisation thrives in the context of *Asabiyyah*⁸, a strong sense of belonging or group feeling. Deleuze puts emphasis on the non-

⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, "Gilles Deleuze: The ABC Primer / Recording 1 - A to F," The Deleuze Seminars, 1988, <https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/seminars/gilles-deleuze-abc-primer/lecture-recording-1-f>.

⁷ Antonio Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (California: Polity Press, 1990).

⁸ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 2005).

sedentary nature of the nomad, whose way of being always pertains to journey and resistance.

Because the nomad experiences a continuum and spasmodic flux of multiple becomings,⁹ they oppose sedentary thinking that produces fixed views on subjectivity. On the contrary, the nomad adopts a non-sedentary mode of thinking, which falls under the maxim "to think is to voyage."¹⁰ Because of this, the meditative journey that the Sufi accomplish in their solitude is a non-physical journey resulting in love—a detachment from the lower world and a solid attachment to the heavenly one.

Marks (2010) alluded to the critical affinities between Sufi discourse and the Deleuzian notion of the nomadic subject, as both entail a subject constantly undergoing permanent transformations towards an ultimate end, which is God in the case of Sufism, for “the two processes, one mystical, one epistemological, are strikingly similar.”¹¹ In Islamic mysticism, God is viewed as a supreme power—the only thing real; the universe consequently suffers in illusion and non-reality.¹² Indeed, the task of the Sufi is to do away with illusion and return to reality to be emblematic of virtue and divine traits.

Rosenthal (1988) probed into the controversy hovering over Ibn Arabi's thinking, which seems to alternate between philosophy and mysticism. He claimed that modern scholarship has referred to him as Ibn Aflatun, "Son of Plato", presumably to indicate high praise. Yet, he was proudly content with proclaiming himself a “reviver” and “Muhammad” and the one and concrete essence of his time.¹³

Similarly, Lalla (2023) examined the concept of unity and multiplicity, expressed as the many in the phenomenal world, in Ibn Arabi's *Fusus al-ḥikam (Ringstones of Wisdom)*. Through a close textual reading of the chapters of Adam (Adam) and Ibrahim (Abraham) and their various commentaries by the most famous followers of Ibn Arabi, she found out that the representation of

⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Nomad Thought*, 146.

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 480.

¹¹ Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 17.

¹² Marks, 18.

¹³ Franz Rosenthal, “Ibn 'Arabī between ‘Philosophy’ and ‘Mysticism’: ‘Sūfism and Philosophy Are Neighbors and Visit Each Other’”. Fa-Inna at-Taṣawwuf Wa-t-Tafalsuf Yatajāwarāni Wa-Yatazāwarāni,” *Oriens* 31 (1988): 1–35, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1580724>.

'oneness of being' (*wahdat al-wujūd*), which was extensively taught by Fansuri in Aceh, as an erasure of the God-Man divide, is undefendable.

Moreover, Barghouti (2022) cited the works of Ibn Arabi while examining the constitution of knowledge from an Islamic Sufi perspective and its acquisition through embodied practice. She has revealed the intellectual value of indigenous Sufi traditions like the *hadra* ritual and the contribution of Islamic epistemology and understandings of embodiment to theatrical practice in the North African region.¹⁴

Halligan (2001), in turn, scrutinised the creative imagination of Ibn Arabi. He stated that the mystic opens himself to receive theophanies, resulting in a life lived perpetually in the consciousness of Divine Presence. Unification with the Divine is the mystic's goal, and through the esoteric journey, Ibn Arabi provides a detailed account of how that life is experienced. The mystical experience undertaken by the Sufi is fraught with many unintelligible and incomprehensible wonders to the layman.

Bouchoir (2023) confirmed that the Sufi experience, and by implication, the mystical journey—either mobile or immobile—is a mechanism through which Sufis gain immunity during crises and epidemics.¹⁵ Since it prompts them to remain steadfast in their devotional acts and beliefs, Sufi believers adopt a nomadic attitude during their journey to God. This empowers them to withstand all setbacks in the hope of realisation and attaining the highest spiritual ranks.

Despite the abundance of writings on Ibn Arabi, there is still a scarcity of research regarding his perception of travel and philosophy of the journey to encounter the Divine. This paper is interested in nomad thought conceived by Ibn Arabi and, more particularly, in the nomadic subject, which, we argue, can "be taken as a new metaphor for the [*Sufi*] condition."¹⁶ The research's contribution resides in its unique journey treatment within Ibn Arabi's corpus and the unprecedented methodological tools employed to unravel the multifaceted notion of spiritual travel.

¹⁴ Dia Barghouti, "Ibn 'Arabi and the Shadhiliya of Tunisia," *Performance Research* 26, no. 4 (May 19, 2021): 11–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2021.2005942>.

¹⁵ Tayeb Bouchoir, "The Strategies of Sufi Discourse in Fostering Communal Immunity: The Sufi as a Nomadic Subject," *Insaniyat : Journal of Islam and Humanities* 7, no. 2 (May 31, 2023): 157–67, <https://doi.org/10.15408/insaniyat.v7i2.29111>.

¹⁶ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 176.

Method

Using insights from the hermeneutics' approach as well as the Deleuzian-poststructuralist notion of nomadic subjectivity, we seek to underscore the importance of journey in Ibn Arabi's discursive legacy, and we posit that mystical journey is a nomadic style of thinking capable of shaping different worlds, stations and possibilities for new forms of voyage. To this end, the purposive sampling method was deployed as it helps us select and explicate specific quotes from Ibn Arabi's groundbreaking works, such as *The Journey to the Lord of Power*, *The Interpreter of Desires*, and *The Secrets of Voyaging*.

The hermeneutic approach, grounded in Schütz's phenomenological theory, underscores the intertwining of present and past experiences through human communication (Schütz, 1972). This approach becomes particularly relevant when interpreting Ibn Arabi's philosophy of journeying. Ibn Arabi's ability to communicate with absent others in his journeys aligns with the hermeneutic emphasis on the interconnectedness of experiences, suggesting that his spiritual journeys are deeply embedded in the shared knowledge and collective understanding formed through human interaction (Vettori, 2018).

Results and Discussion

From Sedentary to Nomadism

Ibn Arabi's journey can be understood within the sedentary/nomadic theme framework, which may refer to his contradictory states during his path to God. In his early youth, he adopted a sedentary mode of thinking by clinging to his native Andalusia, for he had visited his friends and "attended the funeral rites of the philosopher Averroes, whom he had met as a young boy."¹⁷ This form of sedentary mode of thinking characterises his early initiation into Sufism and accounts for his hasty judgments or sceptical comportment about rational philosophy, critically composing two lines over Averroes' tomb: "This is the Imam and these his works; would that I knew whether his hopes were realised."¹⁸ However, after Ibn Arabi had journeyed from Andalusia to North Africa and from North Africa to Egypt and Mecca, he became "capable of every form"¹⁹, including the form shaping the pattern of Averroes doctrine.

¹⁷ See Austen in the introduction to: Ibn Al-'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R.W.J. Austin (Michigan: Paulist Press, 1980), 6.

¹⁸ Al-'Arabī, 7.

¹⁹ Ibn Al-'Arabī, *Tarjuman Al-Ashwaq*, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1911), 67.

Accordingly, one can say that the more Ibn Arabi “travels along the path, [the more] he experiences inconstancy... but once he has arrived²⁰, he becomes stable.”²¹ This is because inconstancy is an effect of adopting a sedentary mode of thinking, while stability results from a nomad thought, in which the nomad experiences a continuum flux of multiple becomings towards his final telos.²² In explicating his poetic verses, Ibn Arabi elucidates his cryptic expression, “They journeyed continuously”²³ in an everlasting and iterative process. His interpretation hinges on the idea that since “the object sought is infinite, the return from it is also a journey towards it”²⁴. This is because a mystical journey is not a one-time event but a persistently ongoing effort to draw near God, and his idea of a return from the Divine underscores the cyclical nature of the Sufi journey. Within this framework, seeking and returning emerge as two essential facets shaping the essence of the mystical journey. The return becomes a transformative phase where spiritual wisdom is shared for the benefit of a broader audience. The line “there is no migration except from one Divine Name to another.”²⁵ This mystic proposition suggests a dynamic/nomadic understanding of the Divine, emphasising the continuous exploration within the framework of divine attributes.

Ibn Arabi's doctrine on journey stipulates movement—either by the body or by the heart— as an inevitable step into the ladder of spiritual progression. In so far as Deleuze and Guattari are concerned, the maxim “to think is to voyage”²⁶ is indicative of a new postmodern style of journeying, in which the notion of place is superseded by an abstract space, the new forms of journey verge on the intellectual, speculative and imaginal. Voyage is no longer a movement from one place to another, but rather a mental activity that may take place in the state of seclusion: Al-Qushayri spoke of the sedentary Sufi masters who preferred not to travel because in their seclusion (*khalwa*) they come to experience a spiritual journey.²⁷ The latter is a form of noetic journey that replaces the complexities of traditional travel by causing the self to be immersed into multiple stations

²⁰ In Sufism, there is no end point at which the Sufi stops because he/she is always searching for Divine knowledge.

²¹ Al-Qushayri, *Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism*, 100.

²² Deleuze and Guattari, *Nomad Thought*, 146.

²³ Al-‘Arabī, *Tarjuman Al-Ashwaq*, 73.

²⁴ Al-‘Arabī, 70.

²⁵ Al-‘Arabī, 70.

²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 482.

²⁷ Al-Qushayri, *Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism*, 100.

(*maqāmāt*). The Sufi voyage is thus a nomadic style of thinking, operating in "a field without conduits and channels,"²⁸ a fact which allows them to escape the shackles of physical travel that is essential at the beginning of the path.

Journey through Dhikr

Ibn Arabi's philosophy of journey intrinsically relates to the ontological nature of human beings, whom he described as constant travellers; they are all involved in the process of travelling —an approach "based upon toil and the hardships of life, on afflictions and tests and the acceptance of dangers and very great terrors."²⁹ The Sufi body thus becomes an abode of multiple streams of continuous conversions, which harden his personality and broaden his horizon. Arguably, his voyage towards God is laden with dangers and troubles because the more his body suffers, the more his soul becomes purified. Ibn Arabi says:

Since God created human beings and brought them out of nothingness into existence, they have not stopped being travellers. They have no resting place from their journey except in the Garden or the Fire, and each Garden and Fire is in accordance with the measure of its people... It is not possible for the traveller to find unimpaired comfort, security, or bliss in this journey.³⁰

The philosophy of journey draws on the notion of affliction (*ibtīlā*), which explains the existence of good and evil in life. In the Sufi discourse, the theme of good and evil is related to the concept of travel, and it denotes that human freedom is expressed by the term *amana* (lit. trust), according to which human beings are held accountable by the Lord of judgment. This is why Ibn Arabi, in the above quote, states that the Sufi journey culminates "in the Garden or the Fire."³¹

In *Journey to the Lord of Power*, Ibn Arabi spoke of *dhikr* as a fundamental tool on the path to God, as it "moves [you] from the sensory to the imaginal level,"³² at which "the world of abstract meanings free of the matter is revealed to you"³³; it is a noetic journey in which the remembrance leads to the Remembered, who eventually manifests Himself to the seeker. In this state, Ibn Arabi continues; the seeker vanishes of *dhikr* itself and becomes immersed in the

²⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 371.

²⁹ Ibn Al-‘Arabī, *Journey to the Lord of Power: A Sufi Manual on Retreat*, trans. Rabia Terri Harris (Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1981), 27.

³⁰ Al-‘Arabī, *Journey to the Lord of Power: A Sufi Manual on Retreat*.

³¹ Al-‘Arabī.

³² Al-‘Arabī, 35.

³³ Al-‘Arabī, 36.

Remembered.³⁴ The mystical journey symbolises the movement from the state of *khawf* (lit. fear) to that of love because in the first state, "unhappiness and the threat of punishment...linger in the memory."³⁵, while in the second state, "memory is effaced in the actual recollection of Him."³⁶ If Marcus harnesses the power of remembrance for collective revolutionary goals, Ibn Arabi preaches remembrance (*dhikr*) for personal revolutionary purposes. In his words: "If you persevere in the *dhikr*, disaster will not overcome you."³⁷ He has also believed that *dhikr* is not only a necessary means whereby God is reached, but more importantly, it is a becoming obtained through the different stations offered by such mystical practice. *Dhikr* enables the seekers a kind of non-physical journey which takes place in the heart, and it permits them to experience "the different aspects of the Divine Names (*al-asma' al-ilahiyya*) 'the Manifest' and 'The Hidden.'"³⁸

The Encounter with the Noble Servant

All journeys Ibn Arabi accomplished in his lifetime make him a nomadic subject capable of every shape and form. In this respect, Corbin pointed out that although Ibn Arabi's "numerous journeys and peregrinations brought him into contact with almost all the Sufi masters of his day", he was "the disciple of an invisible master."³⁹ Through his creative imagination, Ibn Arabi has chosen Khadir⁴⁰ to be his spiritual guru and master, who provides both guidance and enlightenment to him. Choosing the invisible teacher reflects the archetypal image that Ibn Arabi constantly aspires to because the true master is the one who takes his knowledge from the Hidden (*batin*). The distinction between Moses and Khadir relates to the two central different states of God: The Manifest and the Hidden. Moses' knowledge draws from the Manifest, while Khadir's draws from the Hidden.⁴¹ Therefore, Ibn Arabi's physical journeys resulted in adopting a

³⁴ Al-'Arabī, *Journey to the Lord of Power: A Sufi Manual on Retreat*.

³⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 212.

³⁶ Al-'Arabī, *Journey to the Lord of Power: A Sufi Manual on Retreat*, 36.

³⁷ Al-'Arabī, 40.

³⁸ Al-'Arabī, *Journey to the Lord of Power: A Sufi Manual on Retreat*.

³⁹ Henry Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), 32.

⁴⁰ In the Holy Qur'an, he is described as a noble servant who instructed Prophet Moses on Divine knowledge.

⁴¹ For more details, see the story of Moses and his encounter with Khadir in the Sura of the Cave (Surat al-Kahf).

nomad thought, which never clings to a visible master or a specific place. This nomadic subjectivity transcends the physical to the non-physical, where Ibn Arabi's power of creative imagination enables him to meet and get inspired by invisible characters who function as his teachers and masters. Corbin says:

In any event, such a relationship with a hidden spiritual master lends the disciple an essentially "transhistorical" dimension. It presupposes an ability to experience events enacted in reality other than the physical reality of daily life, events which spontaneously transmute themselves into symbols.⁴²

The mystical journey is doubtlessly a more comprehensive term; it is an admixture of both the physical and the spiritual: the former marks the beginning, whereas the latter marks the end. Concerning the physical journey, it does not serve as a conclusion by itself; instead, it is a means whereby the heart of the Sufi gets purified, becomes capable of setting off into the ocean of spirituality, and therefore receives illuminations. Accordingly, Ibn Arabi has purified his heart to mirror God's Beauty and be receptive to divine realities. This purification results from multiple states and stations occasioned by a constant motion from his native Andalusia through different parts of the Eastern Islamic flank, including his final destination, Mecca. In this holy city, Ibn Arabi encountered "Abu Shaja Zahir b. Rustam, whose beautiful and gifted daughter would inspire Ibn Arabi to write a fine collection of mystical poetry entitled *The Interpreter of Desires*, which later led to accusations that he had written sensual love poetry."⁴³ The end of Ibn Arabi's journeys culminates in union and annihilation, expressed in his amorous lyrical odes via creative metaphors and imagination.⁴⁴

The Sufi expedition serves as a catalyst for fostering amicable relationships, extending beyond immediate surroundings to encompass a global perspective. The spiritual journey, far from merely acquainting the seeker with others, entails a profound immersion in the essence of the Other. This immersive engagement transcends the limited confines of the self, thereby expanding the horizon to incorporate the collective, starkly contrasting to a delineated "Us". The Sufi's transformative journey, grounded in spiritual pursuits, thus transcends individual boundaries, nurturing a holistic connection with the entirety of humanity and the broader global community. Indeed, Ibn Arabi's engagement

⁴² Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, 32.

⁴³ Al-'Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, 7.

⁴⁴ Rachid Acim, "The Foreign and Imaginal In Ibn 'Arabī' s Turjuman Al-Ashwaq," *Üsküdar Üniversitesi Tasavvuf Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi* 2023, no. 3 (May 2023): 11–25, <https://doi.org/10.32739/ustad.2023.3.36>.

with Nizam can be likened to the encounter between Moses and Khadir, representing crucial junctures in their spiritual journeys. These encounters challenge the individuals' established knowledge of their paths to God and involve a meeting with others possessing distinct properties and traits. This interaction poses a profound questioning of one's knowledge and mystic attainments, prompting a reassessment and expansion of understanding in the face of the Other's unique attributes.

Journey as a Form of Detachment

The notion of journey, in *Sufi* discourse, relates to undoing all forms of "immers[ions] in attachments."⁴⁵ Travelling teaches Sufis not to cling to anything save God, including places, people and worldly images; it is the spiritual detachment that liberates humans from the illusions of happiness. The exoteric aspect of happiness always fades away; it is a doorway to boredom and a path towards self-downfall. The Sufi constantly travel in search of a transcendent form of joy; they are never bound to a place until their journeys bear fruit.

During Ibn Arabi's peregrinations, he had never associated himself with a place or with a Sufi master: he travelled everywhere. He chose an imaginary Sufi teacher whom he refers to as Khadir, so, as Qushayri puts it, "the more [Sufis] travel, the greater the detachment of their hearts is."⁴⁶ Ibn Arabi's journey symbolises a field in which he practised estrangement in the hope of unification with the Real:

Sufism is viewed as a terrain for exercising estrangement by adhering to movement as a freeing agent from all forms of attachment (*ta'alluq*) ... the practice of separation is then achieved through the voyage of the body and heart as well as through—to use Al-Hallaj's terminology—the eclipse of intermediaries (*isqat al-wasa'it*).⁴⁷

The notion of estrangement does not mean isolation from people and the world, but rather a cambial seclusion which entails an active participation in the affairs of society with no hope of getting worldly gains from this immersion. Detachment enables the Sufi to be entirely engrossed in the events, states or stations happening to him. It is a temporary abandonment of the world; it causes the Sufi to drink from the water of wisdom until he gets intoxicated.⁴⁸ Upon

⁴⁵ Frank Griffel, *Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 44.

⁴⁶ Al-Qushayri, *Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism*, 401.

⁴⁷ Bouchoir, "The Strategies of Sufi Discourse in Fostering Communal Immunity: The Sufi as a Nomadic Subject."

⁴⁸ Al-'Arabī, *Journey to the Lord of Power: A Sufi Manual on Retreat*, 27.

wakefulness, the Sufi becomes aware of the stages he has gone through and can express his spiritual travel through poetic language that symbolises his ascension. Because mystical poetry results from a temporary detachment and an abandonment of the sensory world, it becomes prone to misunderstanding; the mystical language of the traveller moves beyond the standard linguistic conventions that account for meaning production. The language of laymen is shaped by attachments, which is to say, a linguistic system where signifieds and signifiers are respectively attached. By contrast, the language of Sufism is the one that happens at the moment of detachment, annihilation, and total absorption in God's presence (*ḥadara*).

Toil, Departure and Stability

Ibn Arabi spoke of the four primary duties incumbent upon initiates to Sufism to gain spiritual results: exoteric knowledge, “then work; then moral heedfulness; then asceticism; then trust”⁴⁹. The first step in the journey to God is “to search for the knowledge which establishes your ablution and prayer, your fasting and reverence. You are not obliged to seek out more than this. This is the first doorway of the journey”⁵⁰. This knowledge stems from the Manifest; it signals the exoteric face of *shari'a*, the Muhammadan version of Islam. This stage is primordial, as it has to do with the spiritual “training of character, abandonment of heedlessness, and endurance of indignities.”⁵¹ The second step in the journey towards God passes through the factor of work because observances without the positive participation in the lives of people draw a blank. Moral heedfulness is another stage where the seeker carefully pays attention to his deeds, constantly accusing himself of becoming the best version of himself. Then, the Sufi is granted access to asceticism, which is— contrary to the first stage, in which the Sufi is not permitted to do more than what is required of him— not an end in and of itself; this stage is but a means through which the Sufi climbs the ladder of the final stage, which is trust. Finally, the first degree of trust is recognised through several symbolic significations that distinguish the Sufi journey, Ibn Arabi argues, from mere asceticism:

These are signs and evidence of attaining the first degree of trust. These signs are crossing the earth, walking on water, traversing the air, and being fed by the universe.

⁴⁹ Al-‘Arabī, *Journey to the Lord of Power: A Sufi Manual on Retreat*.

⁵⁰ Al-‘Arabī.

⁵¹ Al-‘Arabī.

And that is the reality within this door. After that, stations, states, miracles, and revelations come to you continuously until death.⁵²

When these miracles happen to the Sufi on his way to God, revelatory illuminations come to him incessantly. The quote above entails that miracles and illuminations signify stability after inconstancy. One can deduce that when the Sufi, through his journey to the Lord, reached the state of trust—equivalent to reaching the stage of prophethood—he attained a state of stability.

The act of departure signifies a transition from the realm of the Seen to that of the Unseen. In this context, toil is not merely a physical undertaking in the external world; instead, it takes on a more profound significance as a spiritual endurance occurring within the heart of the Sufi traveller who “bids farewell to patience and the mortal life, because he has quitted the sensible world”⁵³. This departure marks a profound shift in the Sufi's journey, emphasising the inner realm and spiritual dimensions of endurance and transition. In his commentary on the poem "VI," Ibn Arabi subtly elucidates that by the term ‘travellers’, he is referring to his *Shaykhs* (masters). Despite their physical departure, these revered figures remain within his heart, evoking a lingering sorrow. Ibn Arabi says:

When they departed, endurance and patience left. They departed, although they were dwelling in the core of my heart. I asked them where the travellers rested at noon, and I was answered, 'Their noonday resting place is where the *shih* and the *ban* trees diffuse a sweet scent.' Then I said to the wind, 'Go and overtake them, for they are biding in the shade of the grove, and bear to them a greeting from a sorrowful man whose heart is sorrowful because he is separated from his people.'⁵⁴

Ibn Arabi's poem “VI” is emblematic of the nature of travelling, which presents the journey as a metaphorical process, suggesting a separation that goes beyond the physical distance. The poem's lines indicate a profound emotional impact of departure and separation. The poet laments the beloved individuals' departure because the spiritual parting's endurance is way more unbearable than the ordinary one. The phrase “noonday resting place” depicts the destination as a symbolic goal in the spiritual journey, presenting a sought-after point of fulfilment and joy that the poet strives to reach. The poet's enquiry about the travellers' resting place and the directive to the wind to find them showcase an effortful quest. This act of seeking involves toil, reflecting the challenges inherent in the emotional journey to reconnect with the departed.

⁵² Al-‘Arabī.

⁵³ Al-‘Arabī, *Tarjuman Al-Ashwaq*, 59.

⁵⁴ Al-‘Arabī, 60.

Seclusion as a Journey to God

Seclusion (*khalwa*) is an essential stage in the journey to God. Ibn Arabi offers several plausible justifications for the importance and necessity of seclusion in the path towards God. For Him, seclusion is a practice that “the traveller needs to learn what is useful from [this] situation”⁵⁵; it is a form of noetic journey to God, where the Sufi and God are brought into a relation, which is to say a relation of communication; *khalwa* is spiritual dimension, from which the Sufi is given the access to communicate directly with God without intermediaries, shackles and veils. The Arabic word *khalwa* entails deeper meanings concerning emptying, purifying and isolating. Using Deleuze’s conception of a nomad, one can view seclusion as an ‘immobile voyage’, where the body is sedentary and the heart is in motion. This contradictory state between the sedentary and the nomadic is emblematic of the fact that Sufism is by excellence based on ‘the nomad thought’, which is a new style of movement—not necessarily physical, yet confirmed—that the Sufi undertakes by his heart rather than by his mere body. In the Sufi discourse, sedentary and nomadic styles of thinking are but different forms of the journey; it is in the sedentary state that the heart is in motion because “in none other than He that you progress and travel since there is naught to be known to save, He since He is Being Itself and therefore also the traveller himself.”⁵⁶

Ibn Arabi’s notion of seclusion relates to the significant telos every Sufi aspires to, namely closeness to God, the Omnipresent; retreat (*khalwa*) is a necessary transition in which the Sufi gets rid of everything for the sake of getting near the All-Encompassing, Immanent God, arguing that “seclusion from people will become inevitable for [the Sufi], and preference for retreat (*khalwa*), over human associations, for the extent of [his] distance from creation is the extent of [his] closeness to God-outwardly and inwardly”⁵⁷. This retreat enables the Sufi to be an abode of illuminations instead of being “a receptacle for the superfluous words [people] bring.”⁵⁸ A departure from people is not the real object of seclusion. Still, instead, the isolation of the self from thoughts saves Him because without emptying the self from the remnants of attachment, the Sufi will not be bestowed upon. Once the Sufi comes to God bereft of all attachments, stations of abstraction descend to him gradually: “to one travelling

⁵⁵ Al-‘Arabī, *Tarjuman Al-Ashwaq*.

⁵⁶ Al-‘Arabī, *Journey to the Lord of Power: A Sufi Manual on Retreat*, 30.

⁵⁷ Al-‘Arabī, 30.

⁵⁸ Al-‘Arabī, 31.

in the dark, i.e. to those who ascend and journey in the night (like the prophet). God is beyond the reach of mental effort. He is revealed by Divine favour to a heart empty of all thoughts.”⁵⁹

Rabia Terri Harris, the translator of Ibn Arabi's *Journey to the Lord of Power*, elucidates the significance of 'khalwa' or spiritual seclusion in the Sufi journey. She underscores the importance of seeking guidance from a Shaykh or spiritual mentor during this practice. This emphasises that engaging in *khalwa* is not a solitary pursuit but one that necessitates the wisdom and direction provided by an experienced spiritual guide. The guidance of a Shaykh becomes pivotal in navigating the complexities of spiritual seclusion and ensuring a meaningful and transformative Sufi journey. Ibn Arabi states:

Khalwa, spiritual retreat, [is] an advanced and dangerous Sufi practice for attaining the Presence of God through absolute abandonment of the world. *Khalwa* is by no means a technique for everyone. Ibn ' Arabi explicitly states that because of the deceptions of the imagination, it may be undertaken only at the order of a *Shaykh* or by one who has mastered himself. He further points out that to pursue the experiences of *khalwa* without thoroughly accomplishing the duties and practices of Islam is to invite spiritual destruction.⁶⁰

On the one hand, the role of the Shaykh is crucial before embarking on the journey of *khalwa*, as the Shaykh possesses the discernment to distinguish between authentic mystical insights and illusions stemming from the imagination. The Shaykh's guidance is instrumental in aiding the seeker to differentiate between genuine spiritual illuminations and mere personal fantasies. On the other hand, the spiritual guru contributes by offering context and interpretation of the novice's individual spiritual experiences, thereby averting potential misunderstandings.

Nomadic Prophetic Insights

The story of Moses is very relevant for developing the spiritual trajectory of every Sufi. Driven by his genuine desire to perceive God bodily, Moses' attempts went awry, and he, therefore, repented for his wrong action, for God is not perceived bodily or instantly; He is perceived within a sporadic temporality, where the Sufi continuously struggle for approaching God spiritually and by his great Names. In the Qur'an, it is stated:

And when Mūses (Moses) came at the time and place appointed by Us, and his Lord (Allah) spoke to him, he said, "My Lord! show me (Yourself) that I may look upon

⁵⁹ Al-'Arabī, *Tarjuman Al-Ashwaq*, 135.

⁶⁰ Al-'Arabī, *Journey to the Lord of Power: A Sufi Manual on Retreat*, 2.

You." Allāh said, "You cannot see Me, but look upon the mountain; if it stands still in its place, then you shall see Me." So when his Lord appeared on the mountain, He made it collapse to dust, and Mûses (Moses) fell unconscious. Then, when he senses it, he says: 'Glory be to You in repentance, and I am the first of the believers.'⁶¹

The prophet Moses is the most crucial figure in Sufi narratives, as through him, Sufis grasped the difference between *shari'a* and Sufism, both of which complete each other: The Sufi goes through the former to reach the latter; they are two distinct stages, reflecting respectively the two divine Names: the Manifest and the Hidden. Moses approaches God exoterically, whereas Khadir esoterically: two different states of the same station of servanthood. Moses did not draw from the knowledge of the Hidden, but from that of the Manifest, so he longed for God physically and instantly; however, following Khadir's rudiments, Ibn Arabi asked God, "Appear to me in the station of self-subsistence and lovingkindness gradually, not suddenly, lest I perish"⁶². This distinction symbolises the two contrasting images of the journey to God.

In Ibn Arabi's noetic ascension (*mi'raj*), he encountered Moses in the Sixed Heaven, "thanking him for ... reduc[ing] the number of daily prayers prescribed for his community."⁶³ They spoke of prayer, not only because it is the most critical pillar in Islam, which spiritually connects people to God, but because it is primordial for every beginner in the path of Sufism. Thus, this reduction is salient, as it offers the Sufis an extra-temporal domain in which they can take an interest in other forms of worshipping God. This reduction in the number of prayers constitutes the balance that the initiates to Sufism should abide by to receive illuminations that will never "lead to corrupt imaginings and long, delirious ravings."⁶⁴ Indeed, Sufis vary in rank, shaped by their spiritual encounters and outcomes from their continuous quest towards God. Consequently, there exist two primary phases: the phase of revelation, predominant among most Sufis, and the phase of concealment, characteristic of Muhammadan prophecy. Morris says:

⁶¹ Muhammad Taqi-ui-Din Al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, trans., *The Noble Quran* (Saudi Arabia: King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur'an, 2018), 7:143, 233.

⁶² Al-'Arabī, *Tarjuman Al-Ashwaq*, 135.

⁶³ Ibn Arabi quoted in James Winston Morris, "The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn 'Arabī and the Mi'raj Part II," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 108, no. 1 (January 1988): 63–77, <https://doi.org/10.2307/603246>.

⁶⁴ Al-'Arabī, *Journey to the Lord of Power: A Sufi Manual on Retreat*, 31.

The traveller's encounter with Moses in the *Kitab al-Isra'* (pp. 25-28), on the other hand, is devoted to entirely different subjects: Moses first stresses the differences between the *'arif* (the 'mystic' who publicly speaks of his spiritual discoveries), and the *wārith* (the Prophetic 'heir' or true 'Muhammadan' [al-muhammadi]), who 'conceals his secrets' and who "sees (God's) Essence in his essence, His Attributes in his (own) attributes, and His Names in his (own) acts."⁶⁵

Ibn Arabi's cognitive journey towards God unfolds through different phases, one of which is the Moses stage, which encapsulates the wisdom derived from Moses' illuminations in the Sixed Heaven. The intersection between Ibn Arabi—and Moses transpires in an empty space designed to "foster relations between absent others" who are "distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction."⁶⁶ The notion of place, which "refers to the physical settings of social activity as situated geographically,"⁶⁷ has been surpassed in Sufi discourse by the concept of space, which need not necessarily manifest in the physical settings. This Sufi dialogue, permeating the realm of the imaginal (not in the ordinary sense of imagination), symbolises the reconciliations between Sufis and prophets as they disseminate the message of God and delve into profound meanings of love and co-existence.

The esoteric comprehension of the Quran has garnered significant attention from scholars in recent times. This mystical interpretation, originating from Sufism, surpasses the confines of *fiqh*. It is satisfied with understanding the Quran from the context of its revelation and tends to neglect any endeavour towards allusive interpretation. Ibn Arabi stands out as the pioneering Sufi who approached the Quran from a mystical perspective, delving into the journey of Lot and providing it with an esoteric interpretation⁶⁸. According to Ibn Arabi, the name Lot signifies a profound "attachment to the Divine Presence"⁶⁹, an attachment that detaches him from the world of disbelief and heresy prevalent among his people, leading him towards the realm of the Unseen. Ibn Arabi offers an esoteric interpretation of verse 11 in Surah Hud, where Lot is exhorted to embark on a journey with his family, excluding his wife:

The angels said, "O Lot! We are the messengers of your Lord. They will never reach you. So travel with your family in the dark of night, and do not let any of you look

⁶⁵ Morris, "The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn 'Arabī and the Mi'rāj Part II."

⁶⁶ Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 18.

⁶⁷ Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*.

⁶⁸ Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi, *The Secrets of Voyaging*, trans. Angela Jaffray (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2015), 96.

⁶⁹ 'Arabi, *The Secrets of Voyaging*.

back except your wife. She will certainly suffer the fate of the others. Their appointed time is the morning. Is the morning not near?"

In the mentioned verse, the expression "travel with your family", as per Ibn Arabi, signifies that Lot was commanded to travel with "[his] entire essence,"⁷⁰ excluding his wife. This exclusion represents what hinders him from progressing and gives in to his malevolent inclinations.⁷¹ Lot's compliance with the Divine Command elevated him to the highest station referred to by Ibn Arabi as 'certainty', emphasising that Abraham attained this station through doubt. In an esoteric sense, the verse "their appointed time is the morning" points to illuminations that "provided certainty without doubt or equivocation"⁷². Lot's voyage is regarded as "only bridges and pontoons that are placed for us to 'cross over' to our essences and the states that are specific to us."⁷³

Ibn Arabi extensively contemplated the prophetic journeys of figures like Moses, Aaron, Lot, Jesus, and Mohammed, viewing them as quintessential nomads who traversed various stations and led them to undergo diverse states of becoming. These revered figures adopt a distinctive nomadic thinking style on their path to God, the ultimate telos. Take, for instance, the story of Abraham, a figure whose station Lot eventually reached. Abraham's spiritual odyssey led him through the crucial station of doubt, a phase Mohammed (PBUH) deemed essential for the entire human experience.⁷⁴ Abraham implored God to demonstrate "how You gave life to the dead"⁷⁵, prompting Him to inquire, "Do you not believe,"⁷⁶ Abraham responded, "Yes (I believe), but to be stronger in faith."⁷⁷ Therefore, the journeys undertaken by these Messengers serve as a poignant reminder of "what is within you and what I have called your attention to, so that you will know that you are everything, in everything and part of everything"⁷⁸. This symbolic journey signifies a profound union with the Transcendent, echoing the Sufi path where inspired by the example of Abraham,

⁷⁰ 'Arabi, 97.

⁷¹ 'Arabi, *The Secrets of Voyaging*.

⁷² 'Arabi.

⁷³ 'Arabi.

⁷⁴ Abul Husain Muslim, *Al-Sahih* (Cairo: Matba'a Muhammad 'Ali Sabih, 1915), 289. Abul Husain Muslim, *Al-Sahih* (Cairo: Matba'a Muhammad 'Ali Sabih, 1915), 289.

⁷⁵ Al-Hilali and Khan, *The Noble Quran*, 2: 260, 72.

⁷⁶ Al-Hilali and Khan, *The Noble Quran*.

⁷⁷ Al-Hilali and Khan.

⁷⁸ 'Arabi, *The Secrets of Voyaging*, 98.

the seeker learns to breathe life into moments of apparent demise, transforming them into opportunities for spiritual rebirth and transcendence.

Conclusion

The concept of nomad thought has recently found application in the interpretation of literary texts, shedding light on the distinct nature where themes of journey, travel and migration take centre stage. Drawing from Deleuze's conceptualisation of nomad thought, Ibn Arabi's mystical journeys have profoundly influenced his various states and stages, encompassing elements such as seclusion and *mi'raj*. Ibn Arabi eloquently articulated the spiritual trajectory of every Sufi, emphasising its initiation into Islamic observances, progression through asceticism and culmination in trust. *Mi'raj*, the pinnacle of trust, is a station attained by only a select few Sufis, including Ibn Arabi. In this prophetic realm, Ibn Arabi's heart embarks on a celestial journey, each heaven corresponding to a specific prophet with whom he engages in a dialogue on the importance of *dhikr*, prayer and union. Giddens' definition of 'an empty space' resonates perfectly with the interpretation of Ibn Arabi's noetic *mi'raj*. Here, he skilfully bridges the gap between himself and absent souls, the prophets. According to Ibn Arabi, the heart must not serve as a container of attachments that immerse the self in worldly affairs, distancing it from God. The arduous toil towards God—whether through the heart or the body—is fraught with dangers, yet ultimately leads to illuminations, a form of stability according to al-Qushayri. Ibn Arabi's spiritual journey renders him more tolerant, Other-accepting, and adaptable to various conditions. In conclusion, our exploration demonstrated that Ibn Arabi embodies a nomadic subject capable of traversing both vertical and horizontal realms throughout his journey. This nomadic thinking style has enabled him to undergo diverse transformations, embracing different becomings.

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