

## Healing the City: Sufi Prayers in Berlin's Towers

Datum : 26. Mai 2015

### *Sufism in Berlin and Material Healing*

When little spots of roadside space are claimed, memorials constructed and maintained, mourning rituals performed, the separated space defended and protected, the secular made sacred, and public space privatized, then a place is made known and given dimension. Place is space with meaning added. (Clark 2008, 165)

Religious/spiritual healing happens in the realm of individual and collective experience: either felt in the body or as an inner dimension of the mind. Healing is understood as 'Healing' of 'problems of living' perceived in 'relation to a highest reality', or as 'healing', when it 'addresses the particularities of individual episodes of suffering' (Barnes 2011). However, healing has also a material and spatial aspect that is often overlooked. The word 'healing' triggers knee-jerk reactions surrounding the human body, mind and at best a collective of people engaged in rituals geared towards their health and wellbeing. As 'material practice' (Meyer 2012) the creative imagination of healing is not necessarily restricted to human beings but extended to human history, non-animate objects, artefacts and architecture. In that respect, contemporary healing practices constitute the processes of 're-sacralization and re-enchantment' of the world (Csordas 2007). During a 15-month-long fieldwork on Sufism and healing in Berlin in 2013 and 2014, I came across certain practices that illustrate such material and spatial aspects of healing in particular ways.

The global history of Sufism goes back more than a thousand years to the Early Medieval Period (850-1000 C.E.). Within a few centuries, the movement spread from the region of present day Iraq and Iran to North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula in Europe and different regions of Asia (Green 2012). Although there is evidence of early European contacts with Sufism, arrival of Sufi practices widely in the 'West' and specifically in contemporary Western Europe and Germany, is a more recent phenomenon (Geaves 2015; Klinkhammer 2009). In 1910, a little known *Bektashi* (A Sufi order originating in 13<sup>th</sup> century Turkish Anatolia) group was formed in Berlin by its German followers. In 1925, *Sufi Bewegung* (Sufi Movement), the first German 'Universal Sufi' network was established as an association (*eingetragener Verein*) by the local *Murids* (disciples/students) of Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882-1927). Inayat Khan was a classical musician and Sufi *Murshid* (teacher) from the *Chishti* order in West India (A Sufi order originating in Afghanistan and South Asia between 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century C.E.). Inayat Khan founded the first Universal Sufi orders in North America and Western Europe in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Klinkhammer 2009; Schießmann 2003). There are currently three different streams of the transnational *Inayati* Universal Sufi networks active in Berlin.

Based on her research on 'Muslim religious life' in Berlin during 1997 and 1998, Jonker (2006) stated that, about twenty-seven Berlin '*tekkes* [traditional Sufi centres], *madrasas* [education

centres] and prayer halls' were engaged in some 'forms of Sufic devotion' at that time (p. 74). Jonker (2006) also mentioned that she did not include the private prayer circles linked to therapy sessions. This estimate would probably be higher now if it includes the smaller, non-registered Sufi friend circles and groups engaged in practices derived from Sufism. While many Sufi networks identify themselves exclusively with 'Sufi Islam' (e.g., *Haqqani-Naqshbandi* and *Tariqa Burhania*), others adhere to more 'universal' definitions of Sufism beyond the regulatory practices of Islam (e.g., the Inayati Sufis, the Sufi Tradition of Omar Ali Shah, and Reshad Feild's Chalice). There are also 'therapeutic' Sufis who offer music therapy (*Tümata* Berlin) and a number of Sufi/non-Sufi networks in the city who are engaged in healing and aesthetic practices and performances (e.g., Rumi Project, Whirling Berlin) drawn from multiple Sufi traditions.

During my fieldwork, I accompanied one of the three Inayati Sufi networks in the city, who selected several Berlin towers to perform *dhikr* (remembering). Dhikr is a specific form of Sufi prayer, done aloud or in silence, alone or in the presence of others. This particular Sufi group performed silent dhikr on these towers with the *niyat* (intention) to turn the wounded urban landscape into an 'enchanted'/re-enchanting' (Saniotis 2008; Baptist 2013), and healing/'therapeutic landscape' (Foley 2010). The chosen buildings included the *Fernsehturm* (Television tower) *Siegessäule* (Victory column), and *Reichstag* (Parliament building) in the central district of Mitte and the *Funkturm* (Radio tower) in the western district of Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf. These are some of the tallest buildings in Berlin that offer an 'eagle-eyed' overview of the city. Owing to their monumental architecture, they are considered national symbols of Germany and distinctive markers of the historical and spatial landscape of Berlin. As preparation for the prayers in the first tower, the leader of this particular group evoked briefly certain 'wounds' of the city, referring to the Second World War and the Nazi period, the Holocaust, and the *Stasi* (Secret police) repression in former East Germany. The prayers were to be addressed not only to the people living in Berlin but to its past and present injuries, its buildings and green spaces, its animals and eco-systems. Berlin was perceived as an actor who needed to be healed in all its dimensions, human and non-human, temporally and spatially.

### *From the Fernsehturm to the Funkturm: 'Eagle-eyed' Prayers for Berlin*

In Berlin's towers, the healing practices of this particular group of Universal Sufis were directed towards the real and imagined historical wounds of the place but they also led to remembrances of different kinds. Dhikr literally means remembering. In Sufi lore, it is the remembering of Allah through repetition of *wazifa*, the evocation of the 99 'beautiful names' (*Asma ul Husna*). Each of these divine names refers to a certain attribute or quality and a Sufi Murid must incorporate these attributes in everyday life by remembering them, reciting them aloud or in silence. The series of such Sufi prayers in Berlin's towers began with one of its most well known landmark, *der Fernsehturm* (the television tower). On a clear spring night in 2013, I accompanied a small group assembled by the leader of the group (Amir, his Sufi name) for the first time [Amir is a pseudonym. I use pseudonyms for all my Sufi interlocutors throughout this text]. Amir had earlier emailed us the specific wazifa for silent utterance, as we would reach the

top of the tower: *Ya Shafi, Ya Kafi*. His instructions to us on that night were simple:

Since there are some people who are not so much aware of Sufis. Let me say. We say the Wazifa – Ya Shafi – the divine healing energy (*Göttliche Heilenergie*) while breathing in and then we say Ya Kafi – the divine healing material (*Heilmittel*). We choose a spot and focus on one part of the history. Or, we choose a particular place in Berlin. We can think of any time or place. There are so many points of injury and wounds in Berlin. The Nazi period – the killing of the Jews – the DDR [former East Germany] Stasi History. We will go up to the top floor. We will do the meditation... We will do it silently because we do not want all the people around us to look at as if we are strange creatures. [*Fieldnotes May 21, 2013*]

A silent dhikr on the television tower leads to a surplus of its etymology and becomes 'remembering' on many levels. Not only religious/spiritual acts of remembering Allah and the divine attributes as they send out 'healing energy' to the city but also the active remembering of a collective past. These healing prayers can therefore be conceptualised as imagined, symbolic healing of the contemporary urban landscape and across time, materialized and spatialized within the contours of possibilities. These practices are also techniques of familiarization with the city. Berlin is a place of mobile actors. Amir, the leader of this Sufi group, was a relative newcomer to the city but most members of this particular group were not quite the so-called *Urberliner* or *Alt-Berliner* (natives of Berlin). Only one of them was born in the city. Three of them were long-term members who had moved to Berlin at various points of their lives and have been engaged for years with the transnational Universal Sufi network: an elderly physician, a social worker, and a spiritual healer engaged in contemplative therapies. The two newcomers in the group were friends of the group, interested in 'alternative healing'.

As I accompanied this particular group to these towers, I was fulfilling my role as part tourist, part anthropologist. Coming back to the Sufis in that spring night on the television tower, more than remembrance of the past a contemporary imagination of the city seemed to be occurring. Although Amir talked about past wounds, history came surprisingly as a marginal reference in the conversations that followed among the group. After the silent prayers around 10.45 p.m., we met at the top lobby of the television tower and came down to the first floor lobby for a chat:

*Patricia [friend of Amir]:* Berlin is new and there is not much nature. I miss that!

*Joachim [Long-term member]:* I could not concentrate. There was so much restlessness. I felt it was a mix of positive and negative energy. I could not focus on a particular place in Berlin but did it overall. I also have a slight anxiety for height. It was a mixed experience.

*Norbert [Joachim's friend]:* I was thinking. Where is water in this city? Only *Baustellen* (building sites), only buildings. *Unheimliche* (strange) energy. Restless energy. As if, it was epileptic. Nervous energy. Here and there pieces [of building materials]. Why build so much? Let it be!

*Nasima [The author]:* I was caught in the tourist mode and started to take pictures. I forgot that I was also here to meditate. Later I stopped taking pictures to look at the Berlin lights and concentrated on Ya Shafi Ya Kafi. It helped.

*Amir:* I also have a bit of height anxiety. I had fast, strong heartbeats. But as soon as I did Shafi Kafi, it calmed me down. All the history was going through my mind. The Nazi time and all that! Then I saw an *S-Bahn* (city rail) running and I said Ya Shafi Ya Kafi again. I felt the S-Bahn was running through Berlin with the *Heilenergie* (Healing energy) of Ya Shafi Ya Kafi. That gave me a lot of peace. Maybe it spreads from one place to everywhere. And heals! [*Fieldnotes May 21, 2013*]

This first visit to the television tower was followed by a few other visits, to the Siegessäule, Reichstag and Funkturm. Although most visits in these historical buildings evoked reference to wounds and injuries and the necessity of healing, the Siegessäule was an exception. As a monument, Siegessäule symbolised the national pride of Germany, materialized as a huge structure announcing the Prussian victory in the so-called 'wars of unification' against their neighbours back in the 1860s and 1871 (Berlin.de 2015). Selecting Siegessäule had more to do with its prominent, central presence in the urban landscape offering a comprehensive view of the city. Apart from the historical references, the architectural designs and the spatial possibilities offered by these towers underscored the reasons why they were selected for these 'urban prayers'.

### *Therapeutic Landscaping, Sacralising the Secular*

[Reenchantment is a temporal condition of] transformation and destabilization of the very mundanity of materially ordered space. (*Holloway and Kneale 2008, p. 303; Baptist 2013*)

Sufi practices are not limited to human healing, i.e., alleviation of human suffering. Sacralizing landscapes as a practice plays a vital role in the Sufi healing repertoire. The references are in fact too many to summarize in this short text (see Kasmani 2015; Saniotis 2008 for details). In a North Indian city, contemporary Sufis engage in sensuous participation with the shrine (*dargah*) complex of the 13<sup>th</sup> century saint Nizamuddin Awliya (Saniotis 2008). In his recent ethnography in *Sehwan*, a small town of Pakistan famous for its Sufi/Fakir connections, Kasmani (2015) illustrates 'charismatic spatiality': how Sehwan is 'experienced and articulated in its inter- and intra-spatial relationships involving sites and places within and also beyond its confines' (p. 249).

In contrast, Germany and its capital are not conventional Sufi places charged with sacred meaning. But Berlin Sufis are engaged with the limited 'sacred geography' that are available to them as well as deliberate practices of sacralization that includes but is not limited to material/spatial healing. I have observed other Sufis (*Haqqani-Naqshbandi*) saying a particular prayer with Quranic verses (*Al-Fatiha*) as they drive past the Muslim cemetery in

*Columbiadamm*, Neukölln, 'remembering' a Sufi who was buried there (Fieldnotes April 16, 2014). During one evening in the month of fasting (*Ramadan*), the same network turned an open square in Wedding (*Leopoldplatz*) into a make-shift place of Sufi dancing and communal eating (Fieldnotes July 31, 2013). The Universal Sufi group who visited the towers, also occasionally organized 'Sufi Walks' in collaboration with another Inayati branch in the city. Their 'walks' constructed a 'sacred geography' along Tiergarten and other locations in the city where Hazrat Inayat Khan had literally walked and stayed almost one hundred years ago (Fieldnotes May 4, 2013). These are only a few of the many different pathways and practices through which the Sufis are experiencing and articulating multiple spaces and localities in Berlin. I argue that such contemporary Sufi practices are engagements with the city in a particular fashion, in order to redefine its otherwise secular landscapes. It is not possible to enumerate and illustrate them all. In this text, I elaborate only one set of such 'place-making' practices that constitutes a specific, definitive intervention in sacralizing Berlin through material and spatial healing.

*Therapeutic landscapes* have been defined as 'places that have achieved lasting reputations for providing physical, mental and spiritual healing' (Kearns & Gesler 1998, 8). Berlin, in spite of its injuries and because of its resilience throughout its successive histories of destruction and regeneration, is a place of 'remembering' in the double sense. The city becomes an 'enchanted landscape' by such Sufi interventions and even stretched as far as designating it as 'the spiritual capital [of Europe]' (Hildebrandt 2014). In this illustrative configuration of the Sufi prayers in the towers, *healing* becomes simultaneously a bodily-sensory, emplaced, historicized practice directed at traces of collective suffering and contemporary imagination.

The specific Sufi healing rituals usually address specific episodes and forms of suffering, be it illness events or problems of living. I have argued elsewhere (Selim 2015) how such rituals can be conceived as innovative assemblages of practices drawn from multiple sources. Often what hangs together as 'Sufi', generates hybrid formations, such as Sufi Yoga, Heart Chakra meditation (the link to Yoga, a much more popular practice of 'family resemblance', is self-evident) or in this case, a *Stadt-Meditation* (city-meditation) combining the human, the transcendent Real and the urban. The 'religious' and the 'medical' fields are made porous by the Sufi interventions as different elements come together in such fusions, as performative practices and urban landscaping. Sufi healing is constitutive of these confluence-flows among the religious, the medical, the performance arts and contemporary urbanity. In Sufi practice, Islamic prayer (*namaz/salat*) evolves into Sufi Yoga, Music becomes music therapy, and healing prayer in this case is an 'urban prayer'. Such urban prayers make it possible to turn the wounded landscape into a 'therapeutic landscape' (Foley 2010), where, according to Amir, the S-Bahn is running through the city distributing the healing energy of collective prayer. The city's past and present could thus be healed and contribute to the accessible energy of healing made possible by the interventions of the human actors and their healing acts as much as the specific urban architecture ('eagle-eyed' towers) and city wide infrastructure (the S-Bahn).

Recent scholarly works around the thematic complex of religion, space and environment argue for exploring religion 'not in relation but as a part of the spatiality and movement within the environment from which it arises and is nurtured' (Bergmann 2014, 3). Bergman continues to explore religion 'as a skill [that] reaches beyond a simple combination of essential and

functional aspects; ... [begging] an understanding of religion as a cultural capacity that is nurtured by place and an all-embracing space'. In his view, place and space are in 'a dialectical reciprocity of static and dynamic, fast and fluent, local and global' (p. 3). Following Ingold's (2011) definition of *skills*, as 'not...techniques of the body, but the capabilities of action and perception of the whole organic being (indissolubly mind and body) situated in a richly structured environment' (p. 5), Sufism in Berlin seems to provide certain sets of *skills* in terms of enacting a 'capability of action' in perceiving Berlin as a 'whole organic being' that make an *healing-the-city* intervention possible.

### *Concluding Remarks*

As mentioned earlier, Sufi prayers on the television and radio towers, or victory columns and parliament buildings are acts of double 'remembering' and to familiarize unfamiliar objects (the buildings and the aerial city). Through these acts and prayers a secularized city (Berlin) *space*, which is usually oblivious of the Sufi presence, is temporarily turned into a sacralized *place*, where healing could happen. Mobilizing the now-familiar utterances of Ya Shafi-Ya Kafi in the Fernsehturm (and repeating in the selected towers) one Universal Sufi healer and his network engages in such 'place-making' practices. Such practices are also always history-making acts. Berlin is no longer abstract, but made concrete and specific in its concrete-and-steel towers, by the grey and the green of its diverse landscapes, re-enacting the *Wiedervereinigung* (reunification) in contemplating the television tower of the former East tower with the older radio tower of the former West. 'Whichever way you turn, there is the Face of Allah' (Sura 2:115), is a Quranic verse popular among the Sufis. In Berlin, this phrase literally comes down to facing the inescapable television tower, the central 'urban deity' visible from whichever tower you climb in the city, be it the radio tower in the far west or the victory column and the parliament building in its central district.

Historian Brian Ladd called Berlin 'a haunted city' (Ladd 1998, 1). The city and its 'urban morphology' have been marked by five political regimes and their ruins (Blockmans 2003, 15-16). One could perhaps connect the Berliner Sufis' insistence on 'healing the city' to the historians' contemporary description of the post-wall Berlin – as 'a city that never forgets' (Ladd 1998, 38). The Universal Sufi healing meditation in this instance draws our attention to the persistence of 'remembrance' in a city charged with 'material history', expressing the need not only to heal the collective body and its traumas but also creating an extended, heightened perception of the landscape evoking past and present injuries. Whereas the given materiality of architectures standing as History enables them to become objects mobilized in transforming the apparent profanity of the *touristic* secular to a sacred geography enacted by the healing prayers.

### **Acknowledgments**

I thank Amir and the Universal Sufi group for making it possible to accompany them to the Berlin towers. I shared an earlier draft of this text with Amir and incorporated his comments in the final

text. I also thank the other Sufi networks who allowed me to take part in their practices to reach a wider understanding of Sufism in Berlin. I thank my supervisors and the reviewers of this text for their helpful comments. An earlier version of this text, titled 'Healing the City: Sufi Healing at Berlin's Fernsehturm', was presented at the 'Prayer, Architecture, History' workshop held on November 4-5, 2013 at the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) in Berlin. Thanks to DAAD, the German Academic Exchange Service, for funding the doctoral project.

## Author

Nasima Selim (MBBS, MPH, MSc) studied medicine, public health and anthropology. She is currently a doctoral student at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Freie Universität Berlin and Senior Lecturer at the James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University Bangladesh. Her PhD project is a practice-centred ethnography of Sufism and healing in Berlin. Nasima Selim is a member of the working groups of Medical Anthropology and the Anthropology of Religion at the FU Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology.

## Bibliography

Baptist, Karen W. 2013. Reenchanting Memorial Landscapes: Lessons from the Roadside. In: *Landscape Journal* 32 (1), 35-50.

Barnes, Linda L. 2011. New Geographies of Religion and Healing: States of the Field. In: *Practical Matters* 4 (Spring), 1-82.

Bergmann, Sigurd. 2014. *Religion, Space and the Environment*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.

Berlin.de. 2015. Siegessäule.

<http://www.berlin.de/orte/sehenswuerdigkeiten/siegessauele/index.en.php>

Blockmans, Wim P. 2003. Reshaping Cities: The Staging of Political Transformation. In: *Journal of Urban History* 30 (1), 7-20.

Clark, Jennifer. 2008. 'Your Spot': Marking Place with Roadside Memorials. In: Evans, Fred & Lawlor, Leonard (Ed.). *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*. Canberra: National Museum of Australia Press, 165–173.

Csordas, Thomas J. 2007. Global Religion and the Re-enchantment of the World: The Case of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. In: *Anthropological Theory* 7(3), 295–314.

Foley, Ronan. 2010. *Healing Waters: Therapeutic Landscapes in Historic and Contemporary Ireland*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited.

Geaves, Ron. 2015. Sufism in the West. In: Ridgeon, Lloyd (Ed.). The Cambridge Companion to Sufism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 233-256.

Green, Nile. 2012. Sufism: A Global History. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Hildebrandt, Kordula. (Director). 2014. Spirit Berlin. Documentary Film. Berlin: Hildebrandt Films. <http://www.hildebrandt-film.de/>

Holloway, Julian & Kneale, James. 2008. Locating Haunting: A Ghost-hunter's Guide. In: Cultural Geographies 15 (3), 297–312.

Ingold, Tim. 2011. Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description. London and New York: Routledge.

Jonker, Gerdien. 2006. The Evolution of the Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi: Sulaymançis in Germany. In: Malik, Jamal & Hinnells, John (Eds.). Sufism in the West. London & New York: Routledge, 71-86.

Klinkhammer, Gritt. 2009. Sufismus im Westen. Entwicklungen, Strukturen, Organisationen. In: Meyer, Lidwina (Hg.): Die unbekannte Seite des Islam. Rollen und Positionen des Sufismus. Rehburg-Loccum: Evangelische Akademie Loccum, 105–131.

<https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/6258894/2009%20-%20Sufismus%20im%20Westen%20kom..pdf>

Kasmani, Omar. 2015. Of\_f the Lines: Fakir Orientations of Gender, Body and Space in Sehwan Shar?f, Pakistan. Unpublished Dissertation in Social and Cultural Anthropology. Department of Political and Social Sciences, Freie Universität Berlin.

Kearns, Robin A. & Gesler, Wilbert M. 1998. Putting Health into Place: Landscape, Identity and Well-being. New York: Syracuse University Press.

Ladd, Brian. 1998. The Ghosts of Berlin: Confronting German History in the Urban Landscape. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Meyer, Birgit. 2012. Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Towards a Material Approach to Religion. Uitgave: Faculteit Geesteswetenschappen, Universiteit Utrecht. [http://www2.hum.uu.nl/onderzoek/lezingenreeks/pdf/Meyer\\_Birgit\\_oratie.pdf](http://www2.hum.uu.nl/onderzoek/lezingenreeks/pdf/Meyer_Birgit_oratie.pdf)

Saniotis, Arthur. 2008. Enchanted Landscapes: Sensuous Awareness as Mystical Practice among Sufis in North India. The Australian Journal of Anthropology 19 (1), 17-26.

Schleißmann, Ludwig. 2003. Sufismus in Deutschland: Deutsche auf dem Weg des mystischen Islam. Köln, Weimar & Wien: Böhlau Verlag.

Selim, Nasima. 2015. Sufi Body Practices and Therapeutic Politics in Berlin. In: Klinkhammer,



Gritt & Tolksdorf, Eva (Hgs.). Somatisierung des Religiösen: Empirische Studien zum rezenten religiösen Heilungs- und Therapiemarkt. Bremen: Universität Bremen, 237-282.  
<http://elib.suub.uni-bremen.de/edocs/00104231-1.pdf>