

6 Symbolic embodied practice

The Sufi ‘mystical body’ and women’s religious identity

Before man expresses his experience of life through materials, he does so with his own body.

(Wosien 1974: 8)

Introduction

In the book entitled *Sacred Dance* (1975), dance scholar Maria-Gabriele Wosien¹ maintains that religious rituals and body movement forms are intrinsic types of human performance that connect people with divine essences. Wosien opens her book with an interesting suggestion that a person encountering a divine being is ‘a self-revelation of god; and yet, because of the limitation and fragmentation inherent in matter, is also his veiling’ (Wosien 1974: 10). With Wosien’s idea in mind, I question in which ways are Sufi women in Cape Town connecting with the divine matter through a symbolic meaning and how does this connection grant them embodied self-expression? How do Sufi women interpret symbolically what they embodied through practice, and how is *hadra* being constructed and imagined by women? If Sufi women agree that the body and body movement can be used to symbolically represent religious identity and self-expression, do they also acknowledge the body as a site of knowledge? If not, how can they possibly negotiate symbolic religious practice and embodied selfhood? Does self-reflexivity play a role in cultural behaviour? This chapter seeks to answer these and other questions by analysing Sufi women’s ideas about their bodies in relation to *hadra* and its symbolism.

In dance anthropology studies, some scholars show how rituals are connected to symbolic attachment as tools for embodied cultural identity, self-expression, and communal religious belonging (Singer 2014). Also in cultural anthropology, Thomas Csordas claims that ritual embodiment is a relationship between body and culture and ‘experience insofar as these can be understood from the standpoint of bodily being-in-the-world’ (Csordas 1993: 143). Following this idea, dance scholar Allison J. Singer (2014) also suggests that the embodiment of symbolism ‘can be used as part of a process

of symbolic and personal transformation' (Singer 2014: 135). This chapter draws from anthropological ideas on symbolic or interpretative anthropology to analyse *hadra* practice as 'cultural artifacts' (Kaeppler 1999: 310) that can shape the Sufi individual or communal body movement expression.

Data collected in Cape Town reveals that Sufi women perceive *hadra* as the symbolic platform through which they can relate and speak of their bodies. This symbolic attribute helps women to perpetuate Sufi values, and to connect with the community through a collective process that embodies religious beliefs and moral values as shared and learned knowledge. Embodied action is conceived as women's individual ability to express their sense of self through body movement and in relation to the symbolic meaning. Data also opens further discussions on the relation of ritual experience as part of a somatic experience. While this chapter addresses these topics in relation to interpretative symbolism, the following chapter analyses *hadra* in its several stages and contextualises the practice as part of a somatic process and method of embodied ritual form.

Data collected identify four predominant symbolic meanings that are described by women in reference to *hadra* as: (i) circles of remembrance; (ii) love for *Allah* and the encounter with God and the Prophet Muhammad; (iii) spiritual cleansing; and (iv) religious communal practice. These features will be addressed next followed by a discussion of these attributes in relation to ideas of the mystical body, embodied religious identity, and bodily practice.

The symbolic attributes of *hadra*: circles of remembrance

Sufism teaches about the world with exterior (*zahir*) and interior (*batin*) aspects. For the devotee, the interior aspect is most relevant and only achieved through practice (Bashir 2011). Sufi women in Cape Town understand that *hadra* is the way in which the exterior, which they regard as the body, allows for the interior, which they refer to as the spirit, to reach the goal of intimacy with God. In this context, a young Sufi girl named Aida explained her way of understanding the symbolic meaning of *hadra*.

So, basically the *hadra* is about praising the creator, and praying. *Hadra* is just another form of praying, of praising the creator, a remembrance.
(Aida 2013)

Nadia uses the expression of 'circle of remembrance', often learned in Sufi teaching as the act of praying to God. Nadia understands that the circle form is a symbolic form to remember God and to induce movement to happen. In her words, 'Ok, *hadra* is, basically, circles of remembrance of God, and that is where the all movement comes from' (Nadia 2013). The previous chapter already explained that one of the external features of this ritual is that it is performed in a circle figuration. The circle shape is part of

the symbolic method of prayer and signifies God's love towards the human being. In another interview, Tania explains that to perform in this circle is to be remembered by God.

Allah remembers you, and that is why you remember *Allah*. It's not me remembering *Allah*, you see, we always say, "I am remembering *Allah*, I am doing *dhikr*", or "I am going to *hadra*, I am thinking about *Allah*", its not right. It's *Allah* remembering us, and because *Allah* wants us to remember *Allah*, *Allah* will touch us.

The idealised notion of an encounter with and remembrance of God creates the opportunity for women like Nadia and Tania's body movement to happen. The ritual not only creates the occasion for the Sufi to be remembered by God, but it is also the symbol of embodied love for the divine essence.

Love for *Allah*

Zita describes *hadra* as the platform for the expression of love.

This is one of the rituals that maybe ... we try to reach *Allah* in all ways you know? Maybe this is the physical means of us getting closer to *Allah*. I think it's an expression of love, but the physical expression of that.

Zita understands the practice as an embodied action of love towards God. She understands this action as bodily expression, or 'the physical expression of love', which carries the Sufi across the line that divides the exterior and interior categories. To show that love, the follower is required to enact a certain physical performance of ritualistic actions. I notice that the symbolic embodied meaning that Zita carries through her body movement becomes her 'actions of love'. At a later stage of the interview, Zita reflects again on this idea of love and admits she is not entirely sure of the real Sufi meaning. In her words, *my understanding, well, my experience why we do hadra is to feel love, but to strengthen our love, but I don't know the true meaning of it*.

When Zita continues to reflect on the symbolic action, she realises that her association with love is partly based upon her embodied experience and partly as a reflection on the Sufi teaching. Here I am reminded of Geertz's ideas that the combining of features in ritual practice 'transcends its logical meaning' (Geertz 1973: 91). For Geertz, symbols are ways of instilling knowledge and how people communicate about their perspectives of the world. When applied to *hadra*, I note that the metaphysical and secretive association that the Sufi gives to ritual also 'serves as a vehicle for a conception – the conception is the symbol's meaning' (Geertz 1973: 91). Body movement in *hadra* praxis becomes one of these features

or part of a context that follows patterns of cultural systems. For now, we continue to explore what other symbolic meanings are being carried by Sufi women.

Encountering God and the Prophet

Riana explains that the symbolic idea of love is to project an image and love towards the Prophet Muhammad.

It means, it's a way of expression of love for the Prophet Muhammad, that's ultimately ... It's a special time, when you are doing or having *hadra*. They say that the Prophet enters the *hadra*, so, for me it's a way of showing your love, and you want the lover, in other words, you want to be with your beloved. In other words, you want your Lord *Allah* to take you in [pause] ... his arms, are you with me? So, it's like the lover and the beloved.

(Riana 2013)

Riana explains her practice in a metaphorical expression of love that connects with God and the Prophet Muhammad. However, unlike Zita's idea that love is a physical act of worship performed through the body, Riana describes this expression as the metaphorical idea of a 'lover and the beloved'. In this way, Riana suggests a symbolic love relationship between the Sufi and God as intimate lovers.

Riana's articulation might seem spontaneous and her way of imagining it. However, her discourse is moulded through Sufi theological thinking. Notions of God as 'lover and beloved' have long been expressed in Sufism during early medieval times. In Islamic feminism, scholar Laury Silvers notes that 'Sufi sayings on divine love are expressed as deeply personal revelations of intimate experiences with the object of their attachment' (Silvers 2010: 35). Silvers analysed early medieval texts that mention Sufi women's notions of divine love and collected by the Sufi Abu al-Faraj ibn al-Jawzi (d.597/1201). Silvers draws from the work of others in Islamic feminism studies such as Maria Dakake to argue that during this formative period Sufi women 'expressed love as confidence that their protector would accept their works and return to intimacy with them during their time spent alone in worship' (Silvers 2010: 36).

The devotional attitudes of Sufi women during the early periods of the emergence of Sufism are similar to those reported by women in Cape Town in the present day. The attributed symbolic meaning of love suggests that women are learning through Sufism how to imagine the divine essence as the lover and the beloved and metaphorically conceptualised as their object of belonging. Zita and Riana's discourse appeals to Silver's idea of how women 'imagined their souls as faithful lovers who enjoyed regular or event constant states of intimacy with God' (Silvers 2010: 38).

Hoffman's (1999) ethnographic work amidst Sufi women in Egypt also notes that the remembrance of God and the image of the Prophet Muhammad is key in Sufi practice. She shares that

Muhammad's perfection often went beyond the standard affirmation of his immunity from error, and sometimes went so far as the assertions of the Spanish Arab Qadi Iyad (d. 1149/50) that Muhammad had assumed all the qualities embodied in the Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God.

(Hoffman 1999: 351)

Hoffman explains that popular devotion to the Prophet Muhammad is found in the forms of prayer like *dhikr* and rituals like *hadra*. Sufi masters such as Ibn Arabi (560/1165) have taught that the Prophet Muhammad is the perfect link between God and humanity. Symbolic representations, such as the ones explained by Hoffman are similar to the ones described by women in Cape Town, as learned ways of celebrating the Prophet's honour which is essential to Sufi piety. Yolanda explains she was taught about the meaning of *hadra* as an encounter between herself, God, and the Prophet Muhammad.

They would be in a circle, and it's also like a group coming together, and you put yourself around the Prophet and *Allah* Almighty. That is why you bow ... [pause] ... and this is like ... this is how I understand it. I will stand in front of my Almighty and in the presence of *Muhammadun Rasulu-Llah, sall-Allahu ta' ala' alayhi wa salaam*.²

(Yolanda 2013)

Yolanda's description of standing in front of the Prophet calls back to the teachings of the Sufi Master Ibn Arabi (d. 1240) who said, 'place him before you like the mirror in which you see your form' (Corbin 1970: 261). To Yolanda this implies a kind of visualisation practice that is explained as a symbolic embodied act, referring to the ritual meaning as something learned. Thus, *hadra* becomes the platform where she learns how to perform to and in relation to God. In Yolanda's words,

I am in the presence of *Allah*, and this is my way of presenting myself to him, this is my creator, you take what *Allah* gives.

(Yolanda 2013)

Yolanda's way of expressing her embodied practice agrees with Hoffman's idea that visual images which induce God and the Prophet Muhammad appear to the Sufi, and this results in a total inner immersion (Hoffman 1999). To honour and to be able to achieve a so-called closeness to God, women must attend to the aspects of the inner, or interior self. I note that *hadra* is the symbolic medium, and the body and body movement are

the axes through which the Sufi shows love and encounters God and the Prophet Muhammad. However, I also notice that the symbolic aspects of which women speak go beyond Sufi thinking, and also call to women's subjectivity, as I will present next.

Spiritual cleansing

During informal conversations, I observed that women's dialogue is articulated through religious thinking and personal constructions. These notions represent women's moral values or attitudes about *hadra* that are not necessarily all fundamental to Sufism. An example is when women speak of *hadra* as the place to 'clean the soul' (Riana 2013). The so-called cleansing of the soul is explained as an embodied experience. Another woman Salome tells me how *hadra* represents the place to empty herself before God. In her opinion *hadra* is not only the place where God draws closer to the individual, but it is the individual's ultimate choice to become closer to God. She explains that during the ritual she can detach herself from her body.

Cleansing ... [long pause] ... I think that is what *hadra* means to me. I need to be cleansed, so it means to me my path to *Allah*. Is that the correct answer? I don't know. I think that we all struggle to be there for *Allah*, for His love, just to be with Him, that is what we need, that is what we want, its your detachment from this place and knowing this reality out there.

(Salome 2013)

This necessity to release inner tension and her sense of being beyond the body as a way of self-cleansing is shared by another Sufi woman, Bianca, who explains *hadra* as the place to release pessimism or negative emotions that she accumulates throughout the day. In her words,

one needs to sweat in the *hadra*, one needs to sweat the negativities out in the *hadra*, like ... [pause] ... you have shed the negativities of the day.

(Bianca 2013)

These women's ideas bring an interesting layer to the meaning of *hadra*, suggesting that despite their understanding of the praxis, they also attach their personal views and needs to what they learn. Their explanations suggest a personal motivation or a necessity for the inner release of the emotional and physical tension, which naturally accumulates throughout people's daily life.

Expressions such as 'cleansing' or 'sweat' and 'shed off' are used by women to refer to a sense of release that is ultimately associated with the

concept of detachment of the body that Sufis must go through to encounter God.

James Peacock (1984) anthropological work on religious healing experiences in American Pentecostal churches also contends that the kind of healing processes are deeply personal sources of embodied experience. He notes,

How one is moved to radically transcend a sinful mode of being, an alchemy which is part of being healed. The testimony itself is a miracle of transformation, for one is moved ("by the spirit") to take the radical step of leaving the pew to stand and speak of one's experience, thus claiming and therefore creating the experience.

(Peacock 1984: 41)

I suggest that by acting out their inner experiences, Sufi women gain clarity about their sense of selfhood, which they physically represent in the ritual. Women understand the release of inner tensions during the ritual as Peacock proposes a 'miracle of transformation' (1984: 42) that comes with the practice and the body movement action. I suggest that Sufi women are creating an embodied experience that speaks in terms of both symbolic meaning and subjective values. In this way, Sufi women's dialogues agree with the notion that to learn ritual 'and its symbolic forms lead us toward construction of the believer's world' (Peacock 1984: 42).

Further, data also shows that women chose how to discuss and represent for themselves this symbolic embodiment that goes beyond theological teaching. Salome and Bianca's ideas suggest that, in some cases, women are able to relate to an embodied 'feeling good' sensation through the practice, or as Wanda, expresses, 'that feeling of happiness is more important for me to feel than to imagine' (Wanda 2014). This complex idea shows that for instance Wanda's 'feeling good' sensation is partly constructed through her imagination, and truly appreciated and meaningful when this is felt through her body. Women's allusion to a bodily felt sensation reinforces my argument that ritual practice can indeed be seen as embodied self-knowledge.

Speaking of self and religion, Csordas mentions the notion of 'sacred self' and *alterity* as interlinked ideas. He suggests that this state of being other is the 'kernel of religion' (2004: 163). The scholar proposes that *alterity* (or the state of being other) is part of the construction of the self being-in-the-world, and religion is inevitably a part of human existence. In other words, Csordas means that for the ritual to accomplish its purpose, it must always be a symbolic statement of an 'ultimate reality' (Csordas 2004: 164). Csordas investigated the notions of intimacy with God within a community of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal group in North America. He notes that the evocation of images of Jesus or the Virgin Mary is also used in healing prayer and 'take the form of visualization in which one of these divine presences would speak and engage the affiliated person in a healing embrace' (Csordas 2004: 169).

Csordas claims that these religious presences are not only to be seen as internal in-between objects in a psychoanalytic notion but that they serve as examples of intimacy, as a feature of the sacred self. He explains,

this experience is a genuine intimacy with a primordial aspect of the self that is the existential ground for both its fundamental indeterminacy and the possibility of an intersubjective relationship – its own inherent otherness. In other words, the imaginal Jesus is the alterity of the self.

(Csordas 2004: 57)

Similar experiences are happening to Sufi women when they refer to the symbolic meaning *hadra*. They see a strong connection with self and self-imagination as a condition for connecting to God, and with others. Just as Csordas maintains that Catholic Christians evoke images of Jesus or the Virgin Mary so do Sufi women evoke images of God and the Prophet Muhammad. This embodied practice carries a performative aspect that is referred to by Csordas as ‘sacred self’ (Csordas 2004: 57). In this way, Sufi women’s discussions about the symbolism of *hadra* and the expression of intimacy with one self can be seen as the ability for intimacy experience to come in terms with the ‘alterity of the self’ (Csordas 2004: 57). In other words, the dialogues that women maintain with the outward realm begin with the reliability of the physical self while simultaneously the outward context shapes the self and identity (Csordas 2004).

What is more, embodied religious experience and practice are ‘constituted in the bodily synthesis of projective self-processes’ (Csordas 1994: 169), and this can be regarded as a cultural phenomenon, which ‘is an objectification of embodiment itself’ (Csordas 2004: 58). If this is the case, I propose that Sufi religious subjectivity is shaped by the manners women project towards the world, as well as by cultural conditions that inform the individual’s and communal values, conventions, morals, and patterns embedded within it. The next example explores this idea and analyses *hadra* as a collective religious practice.

Communal practice: ‘all of us for the sake of *Allah*’

Hadra is conceptualised in Sufism as a communal spiritual gathering and a means of collective ‘wholeness’. This sort of collective embodied demonstration helps Sufis to ascertain their status as part of the religious community. From an anthropological perspective, I see that the experience of religious collective practice is one way for women to embody what they imagine and learn. In religious studies, for example, scholar Rebecca Sachs Norris (2001, 2003) also discusses notions of embodiment and community within folk dance traditions. She states that ritual bodily forms involve the assimilation of symbolic meanings as embodied knowledge learned through the ritual performance.

To understand how bodily practices such as folk dance encourage or create community, we must examine the processes that underlie the formation of community feeling and participation (Norris 2001: 111).

Similarly, the symbolic action that gives meaning to the ritual brings Sufi women together while it reinforces and supports their individual emotional and spiritual needs. When I observed Sufi women after the ritual practice, I noticed how they greet one another by kissing each other and wishing each other *baraka* (spiritual blessings). This action means appreciation for both the practice and the gathering. The ritual itself not only presents the opportunity for spiritual practice but also means social interaction. As Nadia explains, ‘it is nice to see the same faces every Monday night and say “hey salaam”, and “how are you?” and off you go ...’ (Nadia 2013). Sufi women understand *hadra* to be a gathering where spiritual benefits are shared.

Nevertheless, spiritual practices lead to other activities, such as the ordinary social gathering, as I previously explained in Chapter 2. During my fieldwork, I noticed that Sufi women and men (in their respectively allocated rooms of the house) share a meal after the ritual before returning to their homes. During this time, women engage in daily conversation with one another outside of their religious context. They share stories about their daily life and tell others about their issues or troubles often related to work, families, lovers, and friends. Other times, I noticed they comment about other members of the community and question family or friends of those regular Sufis who might be missing. I experienced a similar attitude when I was absent due to sickness. The following week I too was questioned by some of the women about my non-attendance. I began to realise that the women regarded my presence at the ritual as that of a regular attendee. They would be concerned about my travelling alone late at night, and sometimes they would call or send me a text message to make sure I arrived home safely. This behaviour shows how women make sense of their religious community by caring for one another. Sharing a religious belief keeps the community together.

Following this idea, Grau maintains that in Tiwi tradition, dance practices are part of the everyday communal involvement, and ‘everyone needs to participate at one time or another’ (Grau 2011: 17). She maintains that dance becomes a social and spiritual duty that acts upon every member of the Tiwi. In the same way, Sufi *hadra* is the social, cultural, and spiritual platform that acts upon the devotee. The embodiment of the practice in relation to its social and cultural context allows Sufis to teach and share with one another values, ideologies, and relationships to places and people. To embody *hadra* is to negotiate individual and collective identity. This negotiation is represented through the body movement, which processes these ‘states of being’ where belief systems are being symbolised. In one interview, a woman named Filipa explains how

hadra means a place where men and women gather on the same spiritual level.

It represents oneness. It represents ... [pause] ... whenever everyone is doing the *hadra* at the same time, in rhythm, the same direction that men are going in, the women are also going in, and out, the same thing ...[pause] ... then it kind of feels like there's no separation between us and the men, on a spiritual level. It's just like ...[pause] ... so hard to explain ... [long pause] ... a whirling energy that is taking force. That is what is in the middle.

(Filipa 2013)

Filipa's way of thinking links with the sense of collective 'wholeness', which she relates to the rhythm and time of the ritual. She also mentions 'spiritual wholeness' as a means to represent gender sameness. This leads me to question: Is *hadra* the only place for gender empowerment in Sufi praxis? How do Sufi women negotiate this in relation to Muslim men? Can gender in Sufism be discussed outside ritual practice? These thought-provoking questions are perhaps territory for future discussions that are beyond the scope of this book. Here, I am using Filipa's description to analyse *hadra* as a collective ritualistic movement and a way of achieving a collective religious identity.

For example, historian William McNeill uses the term 'muscular bonding' when referring to a group or individual religious rhythmic manifestation as, 'an important way of creating emotionally vibrant primary groups within which human lives found meaning and direction' (McNeill 1995: 5). McNeill's work discusses religious group movements including the Mormons, the Pentecostals, or the Sufi Dervishes. He analyses how religious ritualistic dances can induce 'muscular bonding', which emotionally ties people together. When referring to dance movement in ritual practice, McNeill argues that dance,

may relieve tension and impress or challenge others, but its distinctive capability of enhancing group solidarity probable depends on keeping time together for a prolonged period, thus, translating individual discharge of anxiety into a collective catharsis.

(McNeill 1995: 17)

Similar kinds of release sensations through a group activity are present in Nadia's speech. She speaks of *hadra* as communal ritual participation and explains,

Hadra is a collective everyone influences, as a collective everyone ... we all have influence, as a group, the sounds, the group movement influences, how fast we move ... [pause] ...

(Nadia 2013)

Nadia's explanation suggests that group unison, or group dynamic, helps to create a subjective reality in which the principle of reverence is shared. Thus, Nadia understands that she participates in the collective creation of the movement itself. Another woman named Judina discusses her sense of individual performance, which sits against this background.

So, if you are in your own rhythm, but we will all come together, it's like when you take any musical instrument, it's the guitar, the strings, and every string will give you a different note. That is us, is it not a symphony of love? A symphony of ... [pause] Isn't that why we are all coming together?

(Judina 2013)

The joy and engrossment that is required for a positive ritual performance outcome are caused by the embodied symbolic Sufi principles. Zulaika explains that *hadra* means spiritual binding. In her words, *It's like 'all of us for the sake of Allah'. Like our connection, the reason why we are all here, we gather here.* The group and the intimate experience people create for themselves are crucial for the embodied religious experience. In Sufi practice, rituals are not particularly aimed at an audience.

Rather, ritual participation is performed by a selective group of people. While attending *hadra* in Cape Town, I noticed that only members of the *Naqshbandi* community, and, occasionally, other Sufis, came to take part in the ritual. My presence at the ritual was justified to the community as that of a young academic interested in studying the ritual of *hadra*. I was invited by Maika's family to attend their *hadra* on a Monday night and received the consent of *Sheikh* Yusuf da Costa to take part in the ritual at Mahid's house on a Sunday night. This shows that *hadra* in Cape Town is a selective ritual performance, placed within a safe environment, close to the public eye, and special to the community. The particularity of the situation shows that rituals, as such, become both 'actual physical and physis states' (Rappaport 1998: 189) of communal expression. In this context, I suggest that during the practice the individual body and the body movement respond to the collective physical, physis, and spiritual group experience.

Riana speaks of *hadra* as the space to 'be there for *Allah*, for His love, just to be with Him' (Riana 2013). The idea of existing for God is described in relation to communal practice, as Riana maintains, 'that is what we need, that is what we want' (Riana 2013). Her way of thinking reinforces the idea that rituals are important domains of cultural identity, and how they are integrated in thought and action, social, and cultural

interaction. Whichever meanings are associated, they are given by the group, or the individual according to their frameworks of interpretative structure (Hall 1997). Culture incorporates a related and created meaning, or as Grau suggests, 'frameworks are often implicit and part of our tacit cultural knowledge, rather than explicit and fully thought through' (Grau 2011: 6).

Sufi women's ideas reinforce my notion that people share cultural knowledge in understanding the kinds of cultural habits and behaviours that are expected from one's societal group. Sufism is a way of living and inextricably linked to culture. Wanda's example supports this idea. She explains the difference between her experience of practicing *hadra* in Cape Town and in Cyprus.

For me it was like ... [pause] ... you can feel the bidding, you can feel that you are connecting with a different type of people there, because they are Spanish, people from the UK, from India ... because you are so different, but you are united because of the *hadra*, so you can feel that unity, you know? Whereas here in Cape Town, I know these people, I get along with them, so ... [pause] ... being at the *hadra*, is still ... [pause] ... is still, I don't feel anything special because I already, I am already close to them, you understand?

(Wanda 2013)

Wanda's opinion suggests that the embodied ritual experience changes according to the group environment in which she is involved. When Wanda reflects on the meaning of *hadra*, she compares the performative experience of a cross-cultural Sufi group in Cyprus and her local community in Cape Town. She admits to feeling a deeper sense of spiritual 'unity' during *hadra* ceremonies in Cyprus, whereas she feels 'nothing special' in her local community. Here I question what sort of cultural values Wanda is evoking in this particular context, and what communal behaviour seems to be different in Cyprus from her local community. Does *hadra* practice change from its place in Cape Town to that in Cyprus, or is it Wanda's attitude towards the people that act upon her embodied experience? Why does Wanda feel more capable to sense unity with a group of strangers, although they are Sufis, than with her local community?

My understanding is that although Wanda regards herself as a dedicated Sufi, ultimately, her personal cultural values and notions of group contribute to the embodied experience. Thus, despite what Sufis have learned about *hadra* and its practice, the values and attitudes of each individual influence his or her view of concepts such as the one discussed by Wanda of a religious community. Thus, in the way that culture 'provides the means to satisfying lives' (Erchak 1992: 6), *hadra* functions as a space where people's thoughts and actions encounter and operate through the body movement in ritual practice.

Following this line of thought, dance, and ethnography studies, also discussed the religious embodied experience in the context of Christian communities who take part in the Fiesta or Tortugas in New Mexico. Sklar claims that ‘the body does not hold experience; rather, it *is* experience, a process rather than an object’. Just as Sklar notes, I observed how Sufi women’s body is placed in a complex relationship between symbolic and learned cultural behaviour, which I see as intertwined factors. From a dance anthropology perspective, my interest here is in the interlaced patterns that are translated through the body into movement. Therefore, I questioned, when women describe the symbolism of the ritual, are they aware of implying a notion that gives primacy and knowledge to the body? If not, what kind of paradoxical roles is the body potentially subjected to in relation to *hadra*? With this in mind, the following section analyses women’s complex ideas in relation to the body as marks of religious piety.

Embodied representations: the Sufi ‘mystical body’

I have previously discussed Sufi theological notions about the human body and analysed the many ways women have of referring to the body as a carrier between the exterior and interior. Kugles informs that Sufi thinking places the body beyond its materiality, ‘beneath the skin of the human existence, beneath its routine and rules’ (Kugle 2007: 13). In this way, Sufi practice is the ultimate way women in Cape Town used to justify speaking of their bodies in relation to the soul. They understand that in *hadra* the body is a secondary form, separated from the spirit that sets them free to experience an intimate moment with God. I suggest that body and its subjectivity can be seen as in constant meaningful shifts. Therefore, it is useful to consider some notions of Sufi practice and mystical body.

I have discussed Pinto’s idea of Sufism as a mystical practice. The so-called ‘mystical body’ is explained by Pinto to be one of the many forms of embodiment subjectivity that constitute the Sufi religious universe of Islam in Syria. He suggests the ‘mystic body’ as a physical, emotional, and moral capacity that is embedded through the devotee’s body informed by bodily mechanisms that help frame their sense of self. Thus, referring to a ‘mystical body’ in Sufism can be used to refer to a scriptural body or pious body. I observe that the pious female body is represented through a series of actions, which are mastered during the practice of *hadra* aiming to achieve higher levels of spirituality. In Syria, Pinto analysed the practice *darb al-shish* (piercing the body with spears), which is practised by some communities of the *Rifa’iyya* Sufi group in Aleppo. Similar ‘mystical bodies’ are being constructed and exposed in the embodiment of *hadra* in the Sufi communities in Cape Town. Thus, Pinto’s notion of ‘mystical body’ is here re-used in this context.

When Sufi women in Cape Town address their bodily-lived experience, they understand the body to be the material component. However, their

discourse also reveals their ability to recognise and describe the body as an embodied construction and representation of mystical practice and pious integrity. Within this apparent complexity, Sufi women's bodily ideas are detached from the physicality of the subject's nature and become symbols of mystical practice and self-religious attainment. The following section discusses and analyses how mystical practices and notions of 'mystical body' can be seen as embodied ways of Sufi women's pious commitment.

Sufism teaches that the body becomes the embodiment of beauty in the material world, and on the inward dimension, the body converts into a form of the manifestation of God's names and qualities, or as Kugle suggests, 'the body is matter that acts as the locus for the manifestation of the divine spirit in the world' (Kugle 2007: 30). Women's notions encounter a similar tension, and it proves difficult to achieve a concrete answer. My data reveal that women seem to understand the codified body movement language. However, they also juxtapose ideas about this meaning. I argue that their ideas go beyond Sufism's theological thinking, as I will present. Nevertheless, I am aware that the female body can be subject to many sources of analytic expression. These sources attribute different meanings to the body, depending on what women consider the most significant aspects of their socio-cultural sphere, or daily life, in which the body operates. This discussion will be assisted by the anthropological case study of Saniotis (2012) who demonstrates how Sufi notions of the mystical body are being expressed in other parts of the world and compare to the set of predispositions that women's 'mystical body' accepts in order to embody religious identity as articulated by Sufis in Cape Town.

Saniotis' work amongst Sufi communities at the Nizamuddin Auliya shrine in Delhi, India, analysed the ways in which devotees regard mystical practices in relation to their bodies. His case study demonstrates how Sufis around the world can and are re-authoring their sense of self and their autonomy through a discourse focused on Sufism and the embodiment of mystical practice. Saniotis informs us that the Nizamuddin shrine is a place of worship for the Sufi saint Nizamuddin, and it is a well-known hajj for many Sufis in India. Thus, it is a sacred place for worship and conceptualised by visitors as a holy space. Saniotis notes that the group of Sufis who gathered around this shrine differ from other Muslims in India, and in this context, he explains that differences between Sufis are visually marked by the way they carry their bodies. He describes,

Sufis also differ from other Muslims at the Nizamuddin shrine because of their mystical paraphernalia. These include rosary (tasbeeh) and staff (asa). Sufi rosaries are very long, sometimes consisting of several hundred beads. Their inordinate length can be understood in relation to Sufis' incessant practice of chanting, a practice that often requires a Sufi to recite a certain Divine Attribute or spell tens of thousands of times over the course of days or weeks.

(Saniotis 2012: 71)

He notes that Sufis who gather at Nizamuddin shrine are usually characterised by the untamed hairstyle look, while others are known to use turbans. Some wear sackcloth, which relates to their renunciation of the domestic lifestyle (Saniotis 2012). Other Sufi Muslims like the Nizamuddin' descendants called *Chisti pir* prefer to be socially engaged and follow Islamic laws, such as marrying, working, and enjoying the family lifestyle. The non-*Chisti pir* Sufis practice celibacy and regard women as 'sexually dangerous' (Saniotis 2012: 70). He notes how in this case Sufis' distinct social behaviour is also marked by the way devotees embody their mystical practices in relation to the self, or the *naf*. 'Sufis believe that mystical practices, such as ritual fasting, chanting, prayer and seclusion, allow them to gain control of the nafs' (Saniotis 2012: 72).

To reach mystical mastery, the devotee needs to attend to the way Sufism regards the body and how this enables Sufis to realise the aspects of their psyche, or 'new ways of thinking and experiencing the body' (Saniotis 2012: 73). In this regard, Saniotis explains that mystical mastery not only permits a Sufi to enter into different 'domains of experience' but allows him to develop a personalised repertoire for understanding his practices, experiences, and the sensations invoked by them (Saniotis 2012: 74).

Speaking of his fieldwork research in India, Saniotis notices how Sufis focus on particular body members assisted by bodily techniques as a way to symbolically represent an inter-relationship between mystical mastery and sensorial awareness (Saniotis 2012). He describes the mystical practice of Wazifa, chanting *Allah's* names, as a common practice that Sufis practice in the Nizamuddin shrine. Saniotis notes how Sufis sit in a determinate posture while using their rosary in their hand to assist with the prayer. Their specific gestural poses assist the devotee in order to perform this particular prayer. He describes Sufi's corporeal attitudes,

Wazifa is performed while a Sufi is sitting on the ground, either in a cross-legged position or sitting on their heels. The rosary is usually manipulated between the forefinger and thumb of the right hand. The left hand is not used; if it is, it is to commit sorcery. Wazifa is conducted silently, with the eyes usually closed. The Sufi's rosary (*tasbih*) is central to the practice and is used in the process of counting the number of repetitions of a specific name or mystical formulae.

(Sanitois 2012: 77)

I observed that similar bodily movements or actions are also visibly represented and described by females in Cape Town. I noticed how women carry this correlation between the praxis, which intends to master and codify the exercise in its symbolic meanings, and a sensuous awareness of the physical. They allude to particular parts of their bodies as embodied symbolic and mystical marks of religious commitment. Ana explained an exercise during *hadra* that consists of envisioning *Allah's* name being carved in her physical heart.

I capture my heart, because the *Naqshbandi* says *Allah*, the name of *Allah*, should be engraved in your heart ... [pause] ... So, I engrave the name of *Allah* in my heart ... [pause] ... I physically close the eyes and I see the ventricles, and I see the veins, and I see the blood, and that's what I capture, that I see God's name in that you know? I physically try to write it out, the picture of my heart, the light that emanates even more, and the darkness of my heart, I try to see the darkness going, the name of God is now in my heart.

(Ana 2013)

This exercise, which can be called visual imagination, brings Ana into a state of self-satisfaction, because it works not only as a spiritual cleansing process but also as her embodied way to get closer to the divine essence. In this way, the body and the body movement are going through an inner process, where the Sufi woman gradually removes undesirable aspects of herself, such as thoughts, feelings, or emotional states.

This transformative process, which she refers later to as 'cleansing of the heart', is clearly marked through her body movement while performing the ritual. The embodied representation of an improved attribute is symbolically represented as a sense of moral and pious integrity, which a Sufi following the mystical pathway is expected to attain. I note here for clarity that the next chapter also discusses imagery processing, but in the context of somatic practice and method of embodying ritual practice. It will analyse the embodied ritual experience through the several stages that are part of the ritual performance.

Another woman named Caridad stood up and asked me to fix my gaze at her navel and chin, and analyse her standing posture. Caridad's body is out of alignment due to a car accident. She explained that although the car accident has physically changed her life, it is also the reason why she embraced Sufism, and consequently why she attends *hadra*.

It was in 2007, I was involved in a major car accident, I never used to wear hijab,³ I was ... [pause] ... very modern, very image conscious ... and then I was in a car accident and ... [pause] ... and I was supposed to die, and I was ... [pause] All of a sudden, I said, oh my word, oh my God, *Allah* gave me another chance to start living my life properly.

(Caridad 2013)

Caridad believes that the car accident experience was the opportunity to reassess her lifestyle according to Sufism. Through this experience, she believes she regained a new sense of pious and moral conduct and feels blessed by this traumatic episode. The heart being clean, the scars on the left shoulder, or the body out of alignment are all features, which help women to speak and to give meaning to their bodies as embodied ritual involvement. In this manner, the so-called 'mystical body' becomes a symbol of

women's religious pledge. Embodied mystical exercises, such as the cleansing of the heart are used to represent women's spiritual gain, creating a sense of self-satisfaction and closeness to God.

Saniotis recalls a similar experience during his fieldwork with an unusual introduction to an Indian Sufi, named Shah Alam. The Sufi, who did not engage in conversation due to an oath (*manat*) never to speak, introduced himself to the researcher by exposing his penis, grabbing the researcher's head, and 'violently pulled it towards his chest' (Saniotis 2012: 74). Saniotis explains that Shah Alam's apparently 'awkward' actions were genuine reflections of his embodied notion of Sufi piety.

The exposure of his penis to my gaze, an act that had flummoxed me, was doubtless a way of showing me his rectitude (in this case, an allusion to his moral uprightness via celibacy), as was his urge to focus my attention on his 'reinvented' body itself – a body pulsating with the name of God.

(Saniotis 2012: 75)

Saniotis is of the opinion that such an engaging experience proved that for this Sufi, the embodied action was a means of sensing 'his attainment of the mystical body that had been transformed into a plenum for the name of God' (Saniotis 2012: 75). Although I never had such an overwhelming experience during fieldwork, I was also asked to contemplate some women's bodies. This voluntary action of exposing their bodies reinforced my idea that bodies can become not only containers of past life experiences, but also embodiments of newly established relationships, and a way of commitment to the Sufi lifestyle and Sufi practice. Caridad further explains the meaning of her car accident,

So, it is like ... a life changing episode, right? But we are here, right? Because I made fine, but my bones didn't make it that fine ... but a lot of things happened, and a good thing that happened was that I became closer to God, and became more aware of ... how I need to live my life and to ... connect, you know?

(Caridad 2013)

Caridad believes that traumatic experiences, such as the car accident, are the result of her inner renovation process. In other words, to recreate the self is to live a life of Sufi pious conduct. This attitude shows how embodied mystical practices can affect women's way of thinking about their bodies and allows them to speak and expose body safely in a way that they would not normally do in their secular environment. Their selfhood attends and relates to the environment of the ritual, and this generates a co-creation of their embodied self. Elements of the body, such as the heart which is symbolically used as a mediator of spiritual purity, 'endows the body with life and makes

it into a divine agent active in the material sphere' (Bashir 2011: 37). Yet, I still question why the body is only used in a symbolical way, and why Sufi women do not recognise that their dialogue speaks of a tangible and somatic experience. It is for this reason that Bashir's suggestion is relevant,

Although attached to a particular body, each spirit connects to God via the interior realm on one side and to other human beings through what it can induce into the heart and tongue in the exterior realm on the other (Bashir 2011:27).

Certainly, I agree that Sufi mystical practices can offer an insight into the richness of the Sufi religious imagination. However, I see *nafs*, or material wishes, and *ruh*, as the spirit, all interlaced with the body's landscape. I suggest that through a Sufi way of thinking, the female body resists opening to other types of dialogue and I found it problematic that Sufi women's discussions about their bodies might seem to be merely justified and articulated through a Sufi theological discourse. Nevertheless, their dialogue generates considerable respect not only for the woman and her construction of selfhood but also for the meaning she gives to the forms of Sufi piety.

I am reminded of Turner's notion that ritual and drama performances do not contain a 'self' but 'selves', in the sense that this variety of reflexivity 'allows free play to a greater variability of action' (Turner 1986: 26). The variety of action and understanding of one's self is conditioned by the religious experience, and by contact with the physical space, the objects, the visual and hearing conscious, or other people's presence. The reactions to these sensations, as Reed explains, 'creates new events or habits in the world' (Reed 2010) that are visibly embedded in the Sufi woman's ritual performance. Thus, a sensorial and somatic investigative approach is useful since it is this multi- and interdisciplinary world that deals with the substance, or the essence of human perception, and the ways the self constructs, lives, and experiences the world (Eddy 2009).

Conclusion

This chapter analysed Sufi women's notions about the symbolic mean of *hadra*. It suggested that symbolic attributes and their embodiment through practice are one way in which women have to carry and express their religious identity as Sufis. Analysis of my data collected in Cape Town during 2013/2014 identified four main symbolic concepts of *hadra*, described as being circles of remembrance, love towards God and the Prophet Muhammad, the space for cleansing the soul, and a means of communal spiritual effort and religious gathering. Data reveals that women's selfhood expression tends to be represented through an embodied religious identity, rather than bodily experience in itself. However, I noticed that the body carries the ritual experience through emotions, inner feelings, lived experiences,

or memories that are triggered by the symbolic attribute. Ritual activity is in some cases extremely codified for a particular group, or an individual, as Howe (2000) maintains,

An important aspect of the roles participants play, of the manipulation of objects, of the incantation of unintelligible words, of the songs and dances, is the enacting and consolidating of specific, often hierarchical, social relationships.

(Howe 2000: 66)

I am aware that while the researcher may emphasise some aspects of the ritual meaning, such as in its socio-cultural relationships and environments, women in Cape Town seem to care more about whether the doing is applicable to their life as Sufi devotees, through embodying an identity that is based in their religious choice. I suggest that this religious choice is present during the ritual action and engraved in their bodily movements, patterns, memories, and personal experiences made visible in *hadra*. I recall Csordas' discussion that in terms of perception, 'it is not legitimate to distinguish between mind and body', and instead Csordas proposes to ask 'how our bodies may become objectified through processes of reflection' (Csordas 1990: 36).

Thus, reinforcing the idea of understanding the body in Sufi ritual practice not simply as a source of experience and activity that would be justified and/or controlled by the mind, but being itself a source of knowledge. Consequently, it becomes an embodied manifestation of religious piety and selfhood expression. Findings show that although the body and body movement are recognised by Sufi women as a part of the ritual process it is still regarded as the 'doorway' and consistently articulated as mere material that facilitates this passage of the existence of the interior. This chapter also analysed women's ideas of mystical practices in relation to their bodies as embodied evidence of religious identity. Saniotis's (2012) work was referred to relate how Sufis in other parts of the world are also claiming a sense of piety through embodying and carrying out mystical tradition.

From the Islamic perspective, there are two basic ways of understanding knowledge. It is known that Prophet Muhammad said in the *Hadith* (sayings of the Prophet): 'knowledge is two – knowledge of the body, and knowledge of the religion.' This can potentially explain the way a Sufi woman sees her body as a 'natural' kind of knowledge that is obtained through a spiritual process. It is knowledge that gives women a perception and orientation of their place in the world. The second sort of knowledge, religion, is the one that permits the Sufi to relate to God. It is the second knowledge that demands practice and benefits the devotee on a lasting basis, not temporarily like the first one. I observed that the

so-called 'mystical' action turns the body and its movement into a container for representations of spiritual devotion to the God. This manner of reaching the Sufi 'mystical body' requires certain levels of empirical mastery that are deeply connected to the symbolism of the ritual. Thus, the body, the symbol, and the mysticism of the intention of the practice are all related. This is apparent in the way women use their bodies through mystical practices, and how they chose to relate this experience as an embodied regaining of personal sovereignty. Women describe the symbolic attributes and the mystical practices not only through what they regard as subjectively meaningful but also in relation to what they have learned about the tradition.

Rituals actions are clearly part of a cultural system that patterns and shapes the way women connect to the practice. Although their discourse is considered significantly valuable, I still argue for the idea that the individual body's knowledge is equally as important and relevant to relations with other aspects of the practice. Sklar's notion that the meaning of movement in ritual practices depends on the identity and a fundamental association of the self with the other can well be applied here. I see that Sufi women who take part in *hadra* ceremonies in Cape Town also enter a process of 'doing and feeling' their sense of selfhood. Moreover, I see this practice, or this 'doing and feeling', as a somatic experience that could be translated as the body, mind, and spirit working together towards an 'intimacy state with *Allah*'. In this way, the female body movement becomes the main core, or the channel, that facilitates this transcending intimate moment and aids the connection embodied during the actual practice.

The following chapter analyses Sufi women's bodily experiences through a somatic approach. It argues that somatic methods of attention are valuable methods of practice through which women can connect and have an embodied self-knowing, self-transformative, and self-healing experience during the stages of ritual performance.

Notes

- 1 Maria-Gabriel Wosien (1974) studied Eastern and Western religious sacred traditions and investigated experiences of mythological images and symbols as part of the human healing experience.
- 2 A common Muslim expression which means 'Muhammad is the Emissary of Allah, May Allah bless him and grant him peace'.
- 3 A hijab is a head covering, which is part of the Islamic religious dress code for women.

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