



Preface

The Ethnographer Breathes

Healing the suffering of fellow humans is a question that has preoccupied me for most of my adult life. I spent fourteen years (1991–2005) as a medical student and practicing physician, learning and practicing biomedicine as the mechanics and repair of the human body (and mind) in Bangladesh. In the following years, as a public health researcher and medical anthropologist, I studied and taught anthropological approaches to health and healing in South Asia and transnational practices of healing across Asia and Europe. I was born in a Sunni Muslim family in Bangladesh, then a newly independent country fraught with religious and secular tensions. Sufism was interwoven in the fabric of the Muslim-majority society where I grew up. My biography and lifelong interest in healing across diverse traditions, formations, and geographies shape the book you are about to read.

Breathing Hearts portrays the practices and politics of Sufi healing in a place far from my first home, in a city that has become my current home. This book draws mostly from my doctoral research (Selim 2019), with additional fieldwork materials collected in 2013–2015 and 2020–2021. As years went by, my Sufi companions navigated newer realities that may not be represented here. Yet, I hope readers will find it useful to read this ethnographic (and Sufi) journey in a postsecular city of Western Europe.

While writing this book, I recalled my first theological discussion as a six-year-old with my then fifty-five-year-old grandmother about Allah:

Nasima: *Nanu* [Grandma], if Allah created everyone, who made Allah?
Who is Allah?

Nanu: Well! You see that madman who goes around the neighborhood? . . .
He was asking such questions. *Allah-r waaste* [For God's sake], stop asking these questions!

It was a scary thought to see myself in the company of these so-called madmen on the streets looking for Allah. But I did not stop asking these questions. And I decided to enter a discipline (anthropology) that, rather, welcomes difficult questions. To the bewilderment of my mother and grandmother, I often raged in my early youth against the patriarchal image of the Divine. Neither my grandmother nor my mother understood why, then, after so many years of militant atheism and unquestionable devotion to my secular (note: native German speaker) prophet Karl Marx, I was eager to explore an Islamic tradition in a Muslim-minority German city. I did not fully realize it until that long moment when I sensed how I had followed my desire line¹ to breathe away from the prescriptive authority of Islam toward a practice deeply entangled with the Islamic tradition and expansive enough to breathe along the lines of other, non-Islamic traditions.

Sufism is commonly defined as Islamic mysticism. *Breathing Hearts* takes this definition as a point of departure to explore what it means to “breathe well” along the Sufi path in a place where public expression of certain religiosity is constrained, and Islam is increasingly marginalized. How is Sufi healing practiced and experienced here and now? This book presents a theoretically informed account of Sufism, healing, and anthropology in Berlin, as lived and recounted by the ethnographer, as a dual apprentice of anthropology and Sufi practice.

I recall an early lesson in Sufi breathing as I embarked as a breather-wayfarer on the “path of the Heart” (*Weg des Herzens*) in the spring of 2013: *Hush dar dam* (awareness of breathing). *Hush dar dam* is about silently or loudly breathing in and out. It is the first of the eleven Naqshbandi “rules” or breathing practices that Khidr,² a postmigrant Sufi healer in Berlin, taught his students (the ethnographer among them). He repeated the rule often to remind his audience how central breath and breathing are in Sufi practice.

Life depends on breathing, and in all authentic traditions, it is vital to pay attention to correct breathing without an obsession with it! Find your inner rhythm of breathing for your daily activities, as well as the hopefully more relaxed spiritual exercises. Allow the body and the breathing to organically reach their correct rhythm, no matter what the activity—be flexible and adjust to what it is you are doing. Stress and tension must be avoided to correctly perform in 3D [three-dimensional] reality as well as when doing an exercise . . . Please don't worry about your breathing. Just

allow it to settle naturally and give it some attention in the beginning. Once you are relaxed and engaged in the correct breathing, surrender to it, and focus on merging with the exercise or activity you are engaged with. For loudly chanted dhikr [the Sufi breathing practice of recollection and repeated recitation of the names of Allah and sacred healing words or phrases], there are definite breathing techniques you can learn from the teacher and/or when engaged in a group exercise of this nature. Listen, observe, and harmonize with what the group and the teacher are doing. But even for silent dhikr alone or in a group, correct breathing and an awareness of breathing are required to maximize the effort of the exercise. When in doubt, or [if you are] not sure, please feel free to ask. *Hush dar dam* can be used as a dhikr to calm down breathing and relax the physical body before doing any other exercises. You breathe in *hush*, then you breathe out *dar*, then you breathe in *dam*, then you breathe out *hush*, and so forth. This rule and dhikr are also helpful when someone decides to stop smoking. I'm speaking from my personal experience doing it, and it worked wonders! (9 April 2014)

A few weeks after receiving her first Sufi breathing lesson, the ethnographer dreams³ that she is standing on the balcony of a house where she grew up in central Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. She smells fire and jumps off the balcony. To her relief, she did not crash on the street. The street had turned into a lake. Immersed in cold water and shivering, she saw a raft decorated with colorful light bulbs floating a few meters away. She heard familiar voices reciting the names of Allah and stretched out her hand. A friend, Sophia,⁴ pulled her up. The smell of wet wood, smoke, and incense filled up and calmed her troubled senses. In this dream, the ethnographer sits down on the raft, dipping both feet in the water, listening to the dhikr, with her eyes following a pair of clouds turning into a sinister giant. She feared that something terrible was about to happen. Suddenly she saw Khidr coming toward the raft. She cried out to everyone, "Look! He is walking on water. What a miracle!" (The connection to the legendary miracles of Khidr—the green prophet, the guide of the prophet Musa or Moses, and teacher of all Sufis—should not escape our attention here). At that moment, Khidr whispered into her ears, "What miracle? The lake just turned into ice. Wake up!" I woke up breathless in my apartment in Kreuzberg Berlin and jotted down the dream in a field diary.

Human beings are liturgical animals.⁵ Whether in secular, religious, or spiritual terms,⁶ we cultivate the capacity to imagine alter-

natives and allow ourselves to be critically dis/re-encharmed. In doing so, we may find the existential resources necessary for daily struggle and heal everyday secular and religious suffering. In this regard, the beguiling diversity of Sufi practices in Berlin can teach anthropologists a few lessons about how breathing, wayfaring hearts seek and live otherwise. Perhaps there is no miracle, as Khidr pointed out in the dream. Yet Sufi breather-wayfarers are supposed to be awakening in the R/real⁷ and joining the struggle for something else.

Breathing Hearts describes the practices and politics of Sufi healing in a city with persistent inequalities yet filled with some conditions of possibility. *Breathing* in this book is an organizing principle, a corporal metaphor, entangled with the practice of *wayfaring* as a “perambulatory movement” (Ingold 2011, 148). If wayfaring and breathing are the fundamental modes by which “living beings inhabit the earth” (2011, 12), all humans are, in this sense, breather-wayfarers, living (and breathing) along lifelines. *Breathing Hearts* describes how Sufi healing practices are constitutive of the historical lines of transmitting breath, the desire lines of breathing-becoming Sufi, the subtle-material bodies transformed in dhikr and breathing otherwise, the quest for healing secular and religious suffering, and the (anti-)politics of these ways of breathing. Sufism and ethnographic research on Sufi healing may lead to different forms of knowledge. Anthropologists and Sufis may live different lives, yet, both traditions enable us to talk back to anti-Muslim racism⁸ and the trivialization of the postsecular imagination in German society.

Notes

1. *Desire line* is a pathway of longing and belonging that we may follow in life, analogous to an informal route that “pedestrians prefer to take to get from one location to another rather than using a sidewalk or other official route” (Shepherd and Murray 2007, 1).
2. Al-Khādir or al-Khidr, “the green one,” is a guiding (imaginal) figure for the Sufis (Franke 2000, 2; Wensinck 2012). The “Khidr” in this dream is a composite figure of the legendary al-Khidr and a writer, designer, multimedia artist, and Sufi teacher of Color whom I met in Berlin in the summer of 2013. The contemporary Khidr introduced me to Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), known as the al-Shaykh al-Akbar (the greatest master) in the Sufi tradition (Ateş 2012).

3. Dreams are alternate means of apprehending reality (Ingram 2015), whether articulated by the interlocutors or experienced by ethnographers in the field. Katherine Pratt Ewing (1994) discussed her dream of a Sufi saint in Pakistan to raise the problem of “anthropological atheism” and the ethnographer’s vulnerability toward the “temptation to believe” (1994, 571). See Amira Mittermaier (2011) for a detailed treatment of dream stories in contemporary Egypt.
4. Sophia is a fellow wayfarer, a white German social worker who grew up in (former) West Germany. In 2013, I met her in a Sufi meditation and reading group led by Khidr.
5. This statement follows James Smith’s (2012, 178) argument of “secular liturgy” against the distinction between the religious and the secular: while not every practice is religious, certain “secular” practices function religiously in that they value/worship and practice “formative rituals of ultimacy” (2012, 178).
6. My interlocutors often distinguished between organized religion and (individualized) spirituality. I am ambivalent about the ontological separation between the two terms. Like religion, spirituality lacks a specific definition. While *religion* indicates “communal identity and interactions, authority, and tradition,” the related term *spirituality* seems to underscore “individual experience, novelty, and anti-authoritarian impulses” (Bender 2012, 48).
7. The Real is the translation of *al-Haqq*, one of the ninety-nine names of Allah, the all-encompassing entity in the Islamic tradition (Chittick 1989, 132). I use “the Real” to encompass Allah’s existence as Sufis imagine it, and I use “the real” as an “epistemological field that creates (and delimits) the conditions of the possibility of knowledge” (Mittermaier 2011, 259). Waking up in the Real is a heightened recognition of the unsuccessful efforts to escape the material conditions of existence.
8. The term “Islamophobia” is often used to describe the persistent hostility toward Muslims and their experiences of discrimination. I prefer to use the term “anti-Muslim racism” following postmigrant scholars and antiracist activists in Germany (Attia 2007, 2009; Keskinilic 2019; Lewicki and Shooman 2020; Shooman 2014). “Anti-Muslim racism” takes into account the political, structural, and institutional dimensions of racializing Muslims, unlike the term “Islamophobia,” which semantically alludes to the supposed fears individuals *feel* against “Islam” and “the Muslims,” letting the questions of historical continuities and sociopolitical contexts recede into the background (Keskinilic 2019).