

# **The Sufi zikr: Intentions and incantation of pious space**

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## Introduction

I sit with legs crossed on top of a Persian rug, the soft but firm sustain of its countless threads pushes against my legs from below, as do the folded legs of the two men sitting on either side of me, pushing lightly towards the core of my body. If I move to reposition my legs for a moment, the persons on my sides readjust their legs to maintain the contact. I am nested, through subtle but constant bodily contact we form a semicircle, I am part of something bigger than myself. I open and close my eyes intermittently; I keep them closed for a few minutes, concentrate on what I am feeling. Then I open them, and note what is around me. The room is small for the amount of people in it, it feels tightly packed and cozy. It has robust concrete walls and low ceilings, and since it is underground without direct windows to the outside, the air feels damp and stale. I cannot perceive color, but I can distinguish shapes by their contour: the light that wraps golden around the shoulders of things comes from two identical laps situated symmetrically on one side of the room, above

eye-level for the average person.

I look up and focus my attention to the inside of the semicircle, where a man gyrates on a shifting horizontal axis that is the averaged by the position of his feet, smooth shoe-less sinusoids that trace the rug with determinate delicacy. The lower body's rhythms contrast the upper's fixation: arms in obtuse complementary angles point the openness of the hand upwards and downwards. The head tilts in an acute angle rightwards. The man's robe, extended outwards by his gyroscopics, circles around him like a cosmic satellite, a trail that follows one step behind him. He moves to the rhythms of the chants we are chanting. His name is Abdul Latif and he is the only man who whirls during this ceremony. Outside of the semicircle of men, next to the wall with the two weak, yellow lights there is a smaller circle of women. Two, sometimes three women usually whirl inside of the circle.

The intensity of the chanting increases. The repetition is faster, the rate more constant. In unison the group repeats the same phrase: “La ilaha illallah.” “There is no god but Allah” in Arabic. The collective sound reverberates on and on, until led by a voice, singled out by a higher tone and pitch, commands it to stop. The voice comes from the epicenter of the semicircle, guided by the architecture of the place towards a direction, the direction of the Mecca. In that point sits the man who commands this voice. In his later forties / early fifties, he still has large swags of black hair in his long and curly beard. Abdul Wadud Sabate<sup>1</sup>, sheikh of the Naqshbandi Sufi community of Barcelona, Spain. The group

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1 Most of the members of this Sufi community are converts to Islam, most are from Spain and within that most are from Catalunya. This means that they were not born with Islamic names, but adopted later on in their life the Islamic name the moment they recited the *shahada* and officially converted into the faith. They do not change the last names, as in the example of “Abdul Wadud Sabate”, composed of a Sufi first name with a traditional Catalan last name. The process of acquiring the Muslim name in the Sufi Naqshbandi order is performed through the grand master, the grand Sheikh. I was able to meet the grand Sheikh through a trip that I was invited to attend along with other Sufi community members, that I talk about more in detail in the later sections of the thesis. The grand sheikh summons someone who is ready to convert and the rest of the community members gather around him, and all place their arms on the right shoulder of the person in front of them. This creates a super structure composed of all the members emanating outwards from the center, where the new member and the grand master stand. After the *Shahada* is performed, the grand master chooses a name for the newcomer. The Sufis say that the grand master has the power to look into the person's soul and chose a name that fits with his

culminates the chant, and Abdul Latif slows down his rotations to a stop. He bows in salute to the sheikh, holding the position for a few seconds, and returns to his spot in the semicircle. I take the opportunity to look the either side of me, and I see men from many diverse backgrounds, some with beards and some without it, some dressed with traditional Islamic robes, some wearing western, modern clothing, some have their hands places about ten centimeters from their face, absorbing the spiritual energy of the chant, some rock back and forth in place, some shake their head from side to side, some look down in concentration. All of them have their eyes closed, deep into their thoughts, a moment of both immense personal intimacy as well as joyous rejoinder with the others. I close my eyes again and try to get back into the rhythm, into the zone. I take a few long breaths. By way of Abdul Wadud's signal the next chant commences.

I have just partaken in a Zikr. The Zikr is the repetitive utterance of a phrase or one of the names that are attributes of god said in remembrance of god. It is a practice common in all denominations of Islam but takes center stage in the lives of Sufis (Popovic, 1996), as it is the central action of Sufism. The utterances can be said out loud, or in silence, and this has not been a trivial manner throughout the intellectual history of Sufism, the question playing a central role in the differentiation between the different *tariqas*, or Sufi orders, and at times the source of conflict and violence (Papas, 2014; Popovic, 1996). The silent Zikr became a distinguishing feature of the Naqshbandi tariqa after Baha-ud-Din Naqshband

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personality, a character trait or a defining feature. After observing a few I believe that the master chooses name that have alliteration or consonance similarity with the persons previous Christian name. If this is not possible then a totally different name is given.

Not all Sufis chose to go by their new Sufi name. A young man from Nantes, France but settled in Barcelona for five years, the youngest member of the community at twenty five years of age, was given the name Hussein by the grand master but chooses to go by his previous name, Charlie. Being younger and having more friends around that age, it is possible that Charlie does not feel comfortable using his Muslim name in every day life. Inside of community life, at the community center and during the ceremonies, he goes by the name Hussein. Sufis tend to get names with a specific format, a composite named that starts with the Arabic “Abdul” which translates as servant or slave. The second name is one of the names of Allah that are also his attributes or defining elements. Some of these are “wadud” that means the lover, “fatah” is the opener, “Latif” is the kind, “Jalil” means the superb, and so on. Many members of the community are called Abdul Wadud, Abdul Fatah, Abdul Latif and so on, meaning “the servant of love”, “the servant of openings”, “the servant of kindness” etc.

Bukhari (1318-1389), the namesake of the order, is said to have chosen the silent method over the loud one (“The Naqshbandi Islamic Spiritual Path/Way,” n.d.). In the community of Barcelona a loud Zikr is performed in communion every Thursday evening. I attended these once-a-week gatherings from December 2017 to May 2018. I use these descriptions and observations also as ways to open up discussions and provide my contribution to ongoing conversations about anthropological and ethnographic theory.

My involvement with the Sufi community is serendipitous: In August 2017 when I had first arrived to Barcelona to study Anthropology, I was trying to secure a more permanent housing situation. I headed to Raval, an interesting neighborhood because it combines the cultural capital of institutions like the University of Barcelona and the Contemporary Culture Center of Barcelona (CCCB) with a high percentage of immigrants, particularly Pakistani immigrants. I wanted to find a room in this part of the city, for it was close to my university and it offered many experiences for a newcomer. I sat one afternoon in the Ramblas de Raval, a main thoroughfare right in the middle of the Immigrant side of the neighborhood, after failing to find a room and feeling stressed about it, and I read a book as distraction. A Pakistani man, donning the traditional Islamic robe, or *Jubbah*, sat besides me. After a few moments, I interrupted my reading and looked up to meet the man's gaze. He asked me in a broken Spanish if I wanted to feel tension-free and forget about all my problems. I agreed, being an anthropologist this was an opportunity I could not pass. Besides, we were in the middle of a busy street, in an area of the city where I had personally seen various times police conduct drug-related searches, and where more established tourists were told to be careful at night. If he could achieve to dissolve the tension of not being able to find a room in that setting, I would have been very impressed. He then asked me to recite something in Arabic, and I recognized the Shahada immediately - *lā `ilāha `illā llāh muḥammadun rasūlu llāh* - “There is no god but God. Muhammad is the messenger of God.” I did, and then he asked me to recite it again, and again, and I did. Then he asked me to recite parts of it, broken down into semantic parts that alone made no sense, and I did. At first I felt awkward, I did not know how people in a European cosmopolis, who had recently suffered an attack of Islamic terrorism, would react to public

and visible performances of Islam.

After thirty minutes of reciting different combinations and permutations of the same phrase, then man got up. He gave me a small strip of paper where the *Shahada* was written, and he left. I did not see him again. This sparked a curiosity in me, that connected with my previous experiences in places with large Muslims populations like India and Turkey, encouraged me to seek more knowledge about Sufism. I did an online search for Sufism in Spain and in Barcelona and I found the website of the Naqshbandi community. I sent an email and was given the email address and phone number of Sheikh Abdul Wadud. In November of 2017 I gave him a call and introduced myself as a masters student in the Anthropology and Ethnography masters at the University of Barcelona. He was welcoming and kind and invited me see the zikr ceremony. From the beginning I was honest and clear with the community members that my interest in Sufism stemmed from two sources: The intellectual and academic one, with the goal of realizing this final masters thesis work, and the more spiritual and personal one. I tried to have a balance between these two during my involvement with the Sufi community, integrating them as a much as possible to have a synergistic experience that was as relaxed as possible; I did not want to be seen as a “researcher” only, for fear of being rejected. During a conversation with one of the Sufis I was told that another Sufi community in Barcelona had had a negative experience with an anthropologist who had gone “to study them.” They rightly felt objectivized and since then the Sufi communities felt a slight distrust towards social scientists coming to study them. For this reason I wanted to emphasize that I was first a person genuinely interested in Sufism, personally, and that secondarily I was doing an academic study on Sufism. My approach was always that of seeing the informant on a equal footing as mine, being active participants in the knowledge-producing enterprise that is anthropology, and I wanted that approach to show and come through in my interactions.

### ***Sufism in Barcelona***

The zikrs have been performed in Barcelona almost every week for more than twenty years. The history of the Naqshbandi *tariqa* in Barcelona starts in the year 1997,

when the last Sufi grand *Sheikh* Mehmet Nazım Adil, who passed away in May 2014, visited Spain. At the time there were very few Naqshbandi Sufis in Spain, and one of them was Abdul Wadud Sabate. A year later in 1998 the grand *Sheikh* told Abdul Wadud to found a *tariqah* in Spain on a mountain, near a source of water, and accessible to people. In 1999 the right place was found in the location where the *dergah* still remains, in the valleys of the neighborhood of *El Carmel*, approximately four and a half kilometers from the center of Barcelona. The amount of people attending the *dergah* has remained relatively constant at a low number: on an average Thursday twenty to twenty five people come. On a more noteworthy occasion thirty to fifty people, and on very special days over fifty people. Most of the community members are converts to Islam, and most are Spanish (the majority Catalan with some people from Andalusia in the South of Spain) with some other Europeans, notably French. There are a few Muslims from birth, all non-European natives, from Morocco, Pakistan, Iraq and Senegal.

How to describe the Zikr? What is it and what does it do in the context of Sufi faith? What concepts to use and in what kind of relationship to place them to produce an anthropological account that does justice to what the Sufi community members say it is and how they live it? The Zikr as is performed by the Naqshbandi community in Barcelona is two things at the same time, roughly corresponding the what *they do* and *what they say this means*: On some level it is a materially grounded, situationally-bound acoustic practice. That is, it is an event where people come together and create sounds in specific patterns, rhythms and tones. These chants are performed in very meticulous manners and involve a high degree of ceremonious attention to protocol. A protocol that dictates specific ways of arranging the physical space and the way the participants of the zikr interact with it: It has a specific seating order and shape, the lighting of the room where it takes place must be dimmed to a certain point, and so on. Although not central to the daily practice of zikr, the whirling is an important component of the zikrs that take place on Thursdays as well as a practice done for special occasions, events open to the public, inter-religious dialogue events, and so on, because of its strong visual appeal and high degree of recognition in the wider public. In fact, many people understand Sufism through the whirling dervishes, a fact

that countries like Turkey have adopted as part of the cultural capital for tourism reasons for example. But the whirling remains a specific way of doing the zikr limited to a small minority of Sufis in the community in Barcelona, and also in the wider Sufi community worldwide. I include references to it in the thesis because it presents a concrete and tangible example of what the zikr aims to accomplish, albeit in a less extravagant manner.

On another level, the zikr has specific meanings within the Sufi theology and philosophy. There are specific reasons why Sufis perform them. The zikr are the ways a pious live is lived according to the Sufis, through the constant reminded of god, Allah, that they achieve through their doing.

As I continued attending the zikr ceremonies for my study something remarkable happened: The grand Sufi master, who currently lives in Istanbul, Turkey, visited Spain for the second time in his life. This was an event of magnanimous proportions, drawing in people from the surrounding countries of the Iberian peninsula (Portugal, Italy, France as well as Morocco) and as far as England and Germany. The point of collusion was Orjiva, a small village in the south of Spain near Granada that is home to the biggest Sufi community of Spain. I decided to join in on the trip and four Sufi community members as well as sheikh Abdul Wadud drove three thousand five hundred kilometers in total and visited five cities in the south of Spain. We joined the grand Sheikh Mehmet Al-Haqqani as he went around visiting tombs of Sufi saints that are said to hold *baraka*<sup>2</sup>, pious energy, that date

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2 The community members use both Spanish and Arabic terms and interchange between them seamlessly depending on the context. Some terms they always refer to in Arabic, like *sheikh* for leader, *baraka* for blessing and *dergah* for community center. Others, that will prove central to the study, they always use the Spanish, even though there is a corresponding Arabic word that fits, perhaps better, within the Sufi ethics. Some examples of this are “intention” (intencion), “heart” (corazon)” and phrases like “understanding with experience, not with the mind” (entender con la experiencia, no con la mente). With the aim of keeping with the emic terminology of the community, I aim to use the same words used by the community members, whenever possible. When discussing my findings in relation to the bibliography, I make reference to the term used by the author in the original.

The role of Arabic in the community is complex and deserves its own study. If one considers that the Islamic liturgy and the vast majority of the important texts on and about Sufism have been written in Arabic, we can conclude that speaking and understanding Arabic ought to be an integral part of being a Sufi. And yet, the vast majority of the Naqshbandi community members do not speak it and cannot read it. The sheikh Abdul Wadud, has memorized the liturgical phrases and repeats them without difficulty, and he can read Arabic, and understand, at a basic level. No one else, from the European converts, knows Arabic

from the *Al-Andalus* period of Islamic presence in what is now Spain, performed zikr together, and saw some historical and cultural sights in the cities we visited. The trip of the Sheikh was also an opportunity for the wider Sufi community to come together and make quality communal life – eating, chatting, and spending leisure time together. This experience allowed me to see that there was a physical, corporeal and habitual side to the Sufi ethical subjectivity: By living with the Sufis all day for seven days I was able to observe their habits outside of the time spent in the *dergah*, the community center. I realized I must try to understand what it meant to be Sufi, and its relation to the practice of the zikr, understood as well not in isolation as an event, but in context to the complete set of bodily habits of the community, and not just those ceremonial aspects that are officially made reference to in either the official sermons of Abdul Wadud, nor in conversation with specific community members.

The following text is a narrative of the intellectual process I went through on my ethnographic engagement with the Sufis in Barcelona. I start by proposing an anthropological framework to understand what the zikr is, and what it entails, both materially and discursive. That is to say, taken from my participant observation of the rituals, and my ethnographic interviews with my informants. Through the process of presenting my findings, I realize that there an element present in the field that is hardly discussed given the required attention in the literature. I recount my own self-ethnographic process of engaging with this element, the concept of space. The way I experienced the zikr was as a practice that needed to be understood with and through a very strong spatial sense in mind. Both through the sounds, the chants, and the whirling of the zikr, as well as the habits of bodily disposition that were present in them, I thought that an anthropological approach that was situated and grounded in material action as it takes place *in space* would be useful; An understanding of the human body and its relations to the environments that surround it. I elaborate on my quest to introduce 'space' into the analysis in an intellectually

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to any degree. There are a couple of community members from Morroco, Iraq and Egypt, who speak and read it fluently. In fact, there are times when the Sheikh asks one of these members to either help him with the Arabic reading, or to recite something, or to help him translated an important phrase. These are the only times when the leader differs some of his authority to the other community members.

honest and culturally respectful way, through an idiom of anthropological reflexivity. I then analyze what this exercise of reflexivity allows me to say about the field I encountered, thought an idiom of recursivity, meaning that the concepts I use, in this case the concept of space, ends up being informed by my ethnographic encounter. I conclude with an example of how the resulting spatial analysis of the Sufi zikr can produce novel and creative anthropological insights.

I decided to focus on this work on the material practices and the philosophical postulates that support them and are in turn supported by them. In this sense this is a work of *philosophical anthropology*, or conceptual anthropology, concerned with the exercise of studying *metaphysics* in relation to knowledge practices that are culturally-bound and socially organized and legitimized. The result I aim to accomplish is to weave them to propose at the end an approach to understand Sufi ethics that is inspired ethnographically by the acoustic and spatial practices of the zikr. That is what the title refers to: The incantations (chants) and the intentions (ethics) brought together into a productive dialogue that produces both a) an understanding of ethics that is informed by the material practices that constitute it, and b) a description of the material practices that fits within the ideological and semantic system where they take place and also make sense.

By aiming to do what I aim to do, I am choosing a post-constructivist approach, one influenced by material semiotics (Law, 2009) and other similar approaches to social theory in the past twenty years, including the much discussed articulations of these similar thoughts into anthropology, under the title of ontological anthropology and the ontological<sup>3</sup> turn (Holbraad & Pedersen, 2017). This move is, historically speaking, a response to the fact that “sociocultural anthropology, founded in the footsteps of a broad humanist “linguistic” turn, a field that takes social construction as the special kind of human reality

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3 This term now carries a big conceptual baggage. One that many have tried sorting (Pedersen 2012). See for example “A reader’s guide to the “ontological turn”, a 4-part series of blogposts hosted at somatosphere: <http://somatosphere.net/2014/01/a-readers-guide-to-the-ontology-turn-part-1.html> Considering all of this baggage, I do not intend to mean anything by the adjective “ontological.” To me it is simply an identification to a particular kind of ethnographic writing that took, and is taking place, in a particular time period and geographical context.

that frames its inquiries, is not fully capable of grappling with the kinds of problems that are confronting us in the so-called Anthropocene—an epoch in which human and nonhuman kinds and futures have become so increasingly entangled that ethical and political problems can no longer be treated as exclusively human problems” (Kohn, 2015 p. 311). Therefore the attempt to frame and understand the Sufi zikr as an ethical practice in this manner responds to contemporary theoretical developments and also political realities that anthropology is very much concerned with, can help to understand, and hopefully address.

Sufism, like many other spiritual paths, is one understood by its followers as leading towards a more true, just or authentic life, as they say “getting closer to the divine”. Therefore the first in this study is to define what it means to be a Sufi in ethical terms. This means that the overall scheme of understanding what Sufism is and what it does, is in terms of ethical choices of living based on some established and well-defined principles or ways of assessing how one ought to behave in different situations. In the following section I describe what the Sufi ethics is and how it is constructed, to be able to see its relationship with sound and acoustic actions in the section after<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup>A note on the theoretical approach that connects with the methodology: I decided to focus on the relationship between ethics and sounds for this work. This does not mean that this is the only meaningful or important aspect that one can study about the Sufi community. I identified as very important also the gender aspect. It is very marked in the ethnographic encounter: gender permeates everything about the Sufi community, including the sound and sonic practices. I do not explore the gender aspect in this thesis because of two reasons: Constraints on time and space for the proper development of such complex and very interesting aspects, but also because my own situation as a male restricted me severely. The ethnographic process, as I go into more in depth in the next section, is a full involvement with myself as an anthropologist, and a central aspect of this involvement is being reflexive about the kind of limitations, biases and constraints one has. I go into depth about the *conceptual* underpinnings of my identity as a western educated person, as they relate into the concept of space, and I recognize that my situation as a male put me in a situation where a lot of the ethnographic encounters and situations that relate to the women's perspective and experience of Sufism and Sufi zikr were restricted. I explain more about these restrictions in the following section, with the intention to express that the gender aspect of sound practices of the zikr is fascinating and should be taken up in the future as an important and meaningful area of anthropological research.

## **Theoretical framework: Sound and acoustic practices of ethics in Islam**

### ***Naqshbandi Sufi Ethical Subjectivity***

Through my encounter with the Sufis there was a constant reminder that Sufi ethics are about intentions. When the Sufis talk about ethics and ethical life, they almost always make specific reference to intentions. Sometimes they make explicit contrast to consequences, that is to say, focusing on the intentions of a specific action and not its consequences when evaluating the ethical value or worth of it. But most of the time they do not; they just say that intentions are the way to evaluate and measure our actions in this world, and it is solely and entirely through our intentions that we will be judged by Allah. This ethical subjectivity is constructed around the concept of intentions. That is to say, the Sufi measure the ethics of an action based on its intentions, rather than on its consequences. The importance of intentions is something that is repeated in almost all of the *Sohbet*, or sermons of *Sheikh* Abdul Wadud that I listened. During a conversation with an Italian *Sheikh*, *Sheikh* Jalaluddin from Rome, I was explained the central importance of intentions to Sufi ethics: *Bahauddin Naqshband Bukhari*, the founder of the Naqshbandi order, said on his very first *hadith* that actions are judged by god solely through their intentions, and that the duty of Sufi *murids* was to put intentions into their every day actions. The focus entirely on the intentions behind an action and not on the consequences is interesting as there have been recent events on whether ethics should focus on intentions or on outcomes (Harris, 2015). Within Sufi theology the supremacy of intentions comes out of the work of Al-Ghazali, a very influential Sufi Persian philosopher from the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Without going into the specifics, it suffices to say there is a strong and rich intellectual tradition within Sufism of paying more attention to the intentions of an action rather than on its consequences when determining the ethical character of that action.

Let us dive in into the recent research literature about Islamic ethical subjectivity. The Muslim ethical subjectivity is one constructed in relation to the prophet Muhammad:

“The point I wish to emphasize is that within traditions of Muslim piety a devout Muslim’s relationship to Muhammed is predicated not so much upon a communicative or representational model as an assimilative one. Muhammed is not simply a proper noun referring to a particular historical figure but marks a relation of similitude. In this economy of signification, he is a figure of immanence in his constant exemplariness and is therefore not a referential sign that stands apart from an essence that it denotes. (Mahmood, 2009, p. 79)

Therefore we can qualify Islamic ethics as relational and not essentialist, the characteristics of its dynamic arising out of the relation between a believer's behavior and the figure of Muhammad, a human being with habits and ways of conducting himself, and not a set of divine principles or commandments. But this relationship is not representational, that is measured on the basis of correspondence between what is thought and an independent and transcendent ideal. It is mimetic, approximating piousness through habits and patterns of everyday behaviors. This means that the modality of the relation with Muhammad has a particular quality of intimate proximity and embodied habituation. In fact is it difficult to separate in the standardized Sunni cannon what are ethical commandments and what are descriptions of the personal habits of the prophet. The point is that these two blend and bleed into one another. Ethical piousness in Islam is about specific ways of inhabiting the world that aim to emulate how the prophet dressed, what he ate, how he spoke to his friends and adversaries, how he slept, walked, and so on (Mahmood, 2009, p.75).

Within Sufism the relationship to Muhammad takes one a more complex angle, because of the presence of powerful and important Sufi masters: In Sufism there is the concept of the Silsila (سلسلة) that means chain or link, and it signifies the passing down of spirituality, or khilfat, from one Sufi master towards his disciple. For Naqshbandi Sufis the chain begins with prophet Muhammad's father-in-law, Abu Bakr, and continues all the way down towards the current grand Sheikh, Mehmet Al-Haqqani. Through this direct and

unbroken chain, the current grand master embodies the sanctity and piousness of the prophet Muhammad. It is through this relation that authority and legitimacy is established as well. Therefore it is through the mimicry of his bodily comportment and habits that the Naqshbandi ethical subject is morphed into being. Indeed during his visit to Spain in March 2018, the trip was organized temporally and thematically around the cycles and rhythms of Sheikh Mehmet's persona: The group of devout Sufis would surrender their own bodies, collectively, to the schedule of the master. More than two hundred men and women from all over Spain and surrounding countries like France and Morocco came to the occasion. We all would wake up when the Sheikh Mehmet would wake up, eat when he ate, and prayed when he deemed timely. There was not set schedule for the week-long trip that took us from Madrid, where the Sheikh landed, through Sevilla, Cordoba and Granada, and ended in Orjiva, a small town in the mountains that is home to the largest Sufi community in Spain. The days were pre-organized in suggestive themes – places with historical significance, particularly to the Islamic history of the South of Spain, Mosques in important cities, places where Sufi saints were said to have been buried – but in the end it was the mood and will of the Sheikh that dictated action.

At times I asked various Sufis about the planing of the trip, whether we would visit a place at a certain time or not, and I was told that there is nothing to do but to wait and see where the Sheikh's path would lead us. The logistics of the trip were also stipulated in relation to the Sheikh's habits, stopping when he was tired for example. His everyday actions imbued ours in a very intimate and sensorial manner: We would all eat the same meals, but at times we would be offered by the volunteers some food from the plates where the master ate. This food, having been eaten by the master, or being in close contact with his body, contained a higher level of *Baraka*, or blessing, than the regular food we were eating. Ethical behavior was predicated upon and built through the subjugation of the body to a regime of dispositions and behaviors that emulates the prophet Muhammad's life manifested in the actions of Sheikh Mehmet during the trip, and to the Sheikh Abdul Wadud during communal life in Barcelona. To sum up, the theoretical approach is to follow Asad in understanding Islamic subjectivity not as a set of abstract beliefs, but as ethical

compartments, and to follow Mahmood in asserting that these ethical behaviors ought to be understood relationally to the image of Muhammad the prophet, and in the case of Sufism, to the behaviors and habits of the local sheikh in whose corporality exists this relationship.

The move towards materiality and not disembodied, abstract “beliefs” in the anthropology of Islam is thought to originate with anthropologist Talal Asad's seminal work on the Christian origins of bifurcated mind/body secular affect (2009): “Asad demonstrates how the construction and definition of religion as pertaining exclusively to the private domain of individual ‘belief’ is intrinsically linked to the specificity of the modern western vicissitudes of Church – State relations, and how a transhistorical conception of religion has functioned to bolster secular political ideals. The epistemological essentialization of religion as ‘belief’ not only reproduces the old – often western Christian – division of mind and body, but also lends support to the political effort at sustaining a public space that is supposed to be immune to the influence of faith. The discursive and sociological construction of the secular, according to Asad, is therefore co-constitutive with the essentialization of religion and its privatization as individual ‘belief’ ” (Ha, 2014, p.90).

The zikr, besides being an ethical doing, it is an acoustic action. The signification and meaning of the practice of chanting is its purpose towards making and remaking the Muslim, and in particularly the Sufi Muslim ethical subject. By remembering the ninety nine attributes of Allah through these small prayers and celebratory phrases towards god and his prophet, Muhammad, what it means to be a Sufi, ethically speaking, is made in practice. That is to say, how one leads “a good life”, a life of piety, is *through* the remembrance of god done by the singing, chanting, reciting and listening to these sounds. Therefore, the next step is to theoretically link the Islamic ethics with the production and consumption of sound.

### ***Sound and ethics in Islam***

The decision to study the zikr through this perspective these two very specific aspects of the Sufi zikr, the sonic and the ethical, is not arbitrary: My choice was made to reflect current trends and developments in anthropological theories. It is necessary to highlight the importance of the harmonious, melodic element of Qur'anic recitation: An influential perspective within studies of Islam states that the presence of Allah is manifested *through* the recitation of the Qur'an, not simply the reading, and this has had an impact on both the ritual practices as well as the scholarly approaches to understand them (Eisenlohr, 2018; Gade, 2008; Jouili & Moors, 2014; Nelson, 2001). In my own study I encountered this situation: I was recommended to read a chronological book on the life of the prophet Muhammad by sheikh Abdul Wadud as a primary introduction to Islam. On this book it is clear that the primary mode of engagement with the divine in Islam is through recitation: For example the first time the Angel Gabriel approaches Muhammad he commands him “Recite in the name of thy Lord who created!” (Lings, 1983 p. 44), when Abd'allah becomes one of the most trusted reciters of the Qur'an (p.44), the conversion of Abu Dharr by commanding someone to recite for him (p. 54), among many other literal examples where the verb of choice is always “to recite” and never “to read.”

My informants also expressed this idea: A young Catalan man, short and skinny with a large beard and a friendly attitude named Tariq emphasized the melodic element of the Islamic listening experience, and particularly the zikr, noting that the Qur'an and its verses are never read, always recited. Tariq made sure to let me know that the stress being placed on the changing tonality, pitch and volumes produced and their impact on the phenomenology of participation in a Muslim ritual were not arbitrary, and instead were carefully chosen and incorporated into the liturgy as a way to produce emotional responses in the listeners. It seems so that both in literal sense, on sources important to my informants and in current academic publication, as well as through the testimony of my interviews, the sounds and the sonic aspects of a Muslim practice are an important perspective to consider.

Therefore I choose an approach that is further contextualized within broader current tendencies in the anthropology of sound (Schulze, 2016), the anthropology of voice, more specifically (Sowodniok, 2016) and the anthropology of sound and space in religious practice (Radermacher, 2016).

The decision to focus on the spatial and material practices and not on beliefs aims to connect with a wide turn in the study of religion towards the study of materiality (Bräunlein, 2016; Hazard, 2013; Reinhardt, 2016) and particularly Islam and the study of Islamic subjectivity (Hirschkind, 2006; Mahmood, 2001, 2009; Tayob, 2017). Having laid out a basic introduction to the approach we can see that the description of the zikr must contain reference to it as a material practice that makes explicit its sonic component and its ethical, religious character. I chose two important ethnographic works, one done in Egypt, the other done in the island of Mauritius, with two complementary but distinct approaches to the nexus between acoustic practices and ethical subjectivity in Islam. Through the comparison of these two, I am better able to situate my own work and frame my contribution to the field.

Let us start with the most widely recognized entry point into this discussion of sound in Islam, that is Charles Hirschkind's book *The ethical soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (Hirschkind, 2006). Using the practice of listening to prerecorded Islamic sermons in everyday scenarios like driving in buses or shopping in stores in Cairo, Egypt, Hirschkind, particularly in chapter three of the book, titled "The Ethics of Listening", proposes an approach to talk about Islamic ethics and the acts of listening together. Hirschkind makes use of Marcel Jousse's terminology of "gesticulations", that are the motor actions through which a body integrates itself to the world it inhabits. He asserts that these gestures cover a wide range: from the physiological and psychological -originating from the senses (ocular reflexes, auricular vibrations) - passing through the movements of the muscles and limbs, to the unfolding of thoughts (p.77).

All of these levels mentioned in the book can be identified in the Sufi Zikr.

Members of the community perform these gesticulations throughout the zikr: The sitting arrangement confers a sense of belonging and togetherness through sitting in a circle, with legs touching on either side. At times members raise their hands and place them in front of their faces, waiting to hear Sheikh Abdul Wadud recite a blessing, and upon its completion they run their hands subtly from top to bottom of their faces, incorporating the blessing into the body. At the mention of the name of the prophet Mohammad members raise their right hand to their heart in salutation and honor of the prophet. There are certain zikrs that are performed with an extended index finger of the right hand. Some members perform the more rhythmical of zikrs with a rotating motion of the head from side to side. Other community members rock back and forth while sitting down. All of the eyes are closed. Some look down in concentration and let the chants move their bodies at will. After the Sohbet, the sermon, a final chant is sung while members take turns walking in front of Abdul Wadud, shaking his hand and looking into his eyes for a moment, situating themselves next to the last person, creating a chain of salutations and hand shakes through which every member enters into bodily and spiritual contact with everyone else.

These chanting practices are entirely embodied through the series of gestures, touches, movements and placements. The ethical listening described by Hirschkind is composed of all of these: “The word of God demands a range of ethical performances from the reciter/listener. She must not only seek to understand God's message, in the cognitive sense; she must also make herself into an adequate "host" for the presence of divine words, by bodying forth the attitudes and expressions corresponding to the verses heard or recited through practice, she must make her body and heart into an instrument capable of resonating (re-sounding) the words she submits to” (Hirschkind, 2006 p.81).

The sum of all the small gestures, both vocal such as the repetition of the phrase “alayhi s-salam” ( عليه السلام ) after the name of the prophet Mohamed or other prophets is said, to the motor movement of the head from side to side when reciting “Assalamu’alaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh ” (May the peace, mercy, and blessings of Allah be with you) are important. Together they compose a set of “ethical performances”

through which the community member is not a passive listener of the chants, but an active embodied resonator of the message. This is what Hirschkind calls “ethical listening”, the type of active listening that involves more than cognitive aspects and that “ invests the body with affective potentialities, depositing them in the preconscious folds of kinesthetic and synaesthetic experience and, in doing so, endows it with the receptive capacities of the sensitive heart, the primary organ of moral knowledge and action” (p.79). The insistence of the heart being the primary organ through which Sufism can be approached, and not the brain, was something that I also encountered continuously. I was confronted with a recurrent pattern of interaction that took place both with more experienced *murids*, with *sheikhs* and with individuals with less time invested in Sufism. Upon learning that I was an academic researcher aiming to understanding Sufism, I was told, through different language, versions of the same idea: That Sufism cannot be understood intellectually with the brain, but felt with the heart. The *Sohbet* or sermon of Sheikh Abdul Wadud often include this assertion as either part of the primary moral lesson or as part of an explanatory argument.

On March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018, I was in conversation with a *murid* named Ismail who found my studies both intriguing and dangerous. I asked him about a book that I could read to further my knowledge on a topic he was relating to me and he pointed to my chest, where my heart is and said “read that.” A similar idea, that tenets of Sufism are “explainable” was expressed to me by a younger Sufi, also named Ismail at the mosque in Madrid, as well as by a brother named Isa, from Portugal. I had the opportunity to have many conversations with Isa, since he was one of the men with whom I shared the van ride from Barcelona to the south of Spain, and in various instances he told me that it was impossible to comprehend Sufism using the mind, stressing that Sufism is “something you have to *feel*, not think about.” I heard the same of very similar ideas from Josh, from France, the youngest member of the community at 25 years old, on February 2<sup>nd</sup> and on April 5<sup>th</sup>, from Suleyman, the heavy and robust built middle-aged man who is sympathetic to my filming and always smiles at me on march 8<sup>th</sup>, and on December 7<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> by a man named Iskender, a taciturn and pensive middle-aged unmarried man who displays the most acetic

and monk-like qualities and who was my first point of contact at the *dergah*.

Perhaps the most important for my study of these assertions came through my meeting with Sheikh Abdul Wadud over coffee in Barcelona on the 19<sup>th</sup> of February. During that meeting the sheikh explained to me about the history of the community and gave me recommendations for my study. Abdul Wadud also counseled me to actively experience the Sufi tradition to be able to fully understand it, beyond only an intellectual perspective, for “the center of experience is the heart and not the brain.” He furthered this point with the assertion that a Sufi *Murid*, or student, is forbidden from reading about Sufism and asking questions to the master, because as Abdul Wadud put it, “intellectualization pushes you away from the experience of Sufism.” We should not take what many of my informants said to be purely a metaphorical reading of the organs, the brain and the heart, in relation to knowledge and morality. Rather, it points towards two models of sensory organization; one simply intellectual, the academic one, and one ethically tuned and honed through repetition of patterns of *sensimotor gesticulations* (Hirschkind, 2006 p.97).

Hirschkind's argument is constructed on the understanding that sonic-ethical practices operate on a level that is per-conscious. His study is of “the patterned interconnections of touch, vision, hearing, smell, and taste that tend to remain outside of awareness in adult perception” (p,78), his analysis is not about the symbolic bodily actions, what he calls the “coding of the body, the attribution of meaning to its surfaces, movements, and speech. Rather, it is more like what rhetoricians call 'attitude;' a kind of "non-self-referential mode of awareness" not reducible to mental states or symbolic processes” (p. 99). Hirschkind makes extensive use of the concept of affect as defined by Brian Massumi as “ the myriad emotional movements within the body occurring below or outside of consciousness, the vast sea of emotionally charged perceptual responses that traverse the body without being assimilated as subjective content” (Massumi in Hirschkind, 2006, p.82). This means that Hirschkind's approach towards understanding the role of the body in listening operates on a level below the subjective and what any individual person may be aware. It is a way of being that is normally and in every-day not made reference to

in cultural and symbolic systems.

To complement this perspective I turn to the work of Patrick Eisenlohr who focuses on the sonic practices of Muslims in Mauritius. In his article “Suggestions of Movement: Voice and Sonic Atmospheres in Mauritian Muslim Devotional Practices” (2018), Eisenlohr studies the *na‘t*, a genre of Urdu devotional poetry that honors the Prophet Muhammad. He claims that sonic studies influenced by Massumi's reading of affect as pre-signification are predicated on an inverted mind-body dualism in which the bodily affectations are seen to exist primarily and fundamentally distinct from meaning, seen at the same time as Saussurean signs / mental representations that are applied *after* by people to a meaning-free materiality (Eisenlohr, 2018 p.50 ). Against this perspective Eisenlohr proposes a neo-phenomenological approach to sonic activities and their consequences based on his findings about how the experience of listening to na't “moved” people. Aiming to go beyond the metaphorical, how does one explain the descriptions of listening to na't as “making one vibrate” or “moving to a different place” (p.38)? Eisenlohr proposes using the concept of atmosphere taken from German neo-phenomenology and defines them as “ quasi-objective entities that spread in a given space, touching and enveloping the bodies of those perceiving them in a way that exceed single, definite sensory impressions. Far from being a matter of subjectivist interiority, feelings are atmospheres poured into a space where they encounter and impact humans, similar to the sensations of being in darkness or warmth” (p.39). Eisenlohr transcend the mind-body dualism of western-influenced religious subjectivity by going beyond the body using instead the felt-body, which transcend the physical limitations of the body as it is normally conceived and is instead “the space of what is felt to pertain to the body beyond what are normally regarded as its limits, thus complicating distinctions between inside and outside” (p. 35).

Taking the analysis away from the individual bodies that both listen to and produce the sounds is an important move that Eisenlohr makes, and follows through fully by analyzing the sounds themselves as they are made by the reciters of na't. The inclusion of the acoustic properties of the recitations and their analysis is a meaningful contribution. The

move is an important step further as it opens up the study, from the phenomenology of listening of a single human body, towards the interactive properties of multiple people chanting and listening, and their relationship with the physical space and all the non-human actors (Latour, 2005) present in a given sonic performance. The production of sound not only changes the subjective, affective and moral states of the performers and listeners, it also changes the physical space around it. Rhythmic chants are alterations to the space around the reciters, vibrating the air around them in specific, controlled and repetitive ways. These in turn create reverberations and echos that are felt through the other people in the room.

Both Eisenlohr's and Hirschkind's analysis of the acoustic aspects of Islam focus mostly on the individual corporeal aspect of listening: Hirschkind through his concept of the soundspace that relies on Massumi's reading of Deleuze's affect, and Eisenlohr's concept of the atmosphere that relies on the phenomenology of the felt body *vis a vis* the actual material body, existing on a level above the precocious one of Hirschkind. Both of these two approaches converged on a point: seeing Muslim ethics as existing and arising out of auditory and physical acts. For this reason I decided to focus my ethnographic engagement on these aspects: All the small physical gestures and movements as well as the sounds that constitute a zikr performance. I describe more on how I did this in the following section.

## **Methodology: Multimodal Anthropology, Reflexivity and the Concept of Space**

### ***Multimodal Anthropology and Filming Inside a Sufi Community***

I decided then to observe the zikr, through participant observation, and it was my primary mode of engagement I used in my study, along with two lengthy ethnographic interviews (Salazar & Orobitg, 2012). I decided to focus on and pay attention to the physical movements and sounds that constitute it. I did this from November of 2017 to March of 2018. During this time I would also engage in informal conversation with the

community members about various topics relate to spirituality, Sufism, the modern world, and their opinions on current events. My aim was to understand more about the approach to life that Sufis had, to build rapport and to create meaningful bonds. Although some of these conversations inform some of the points scattered throughout the work, and I did conduct 2 more formal interviews with the community leader Sheikh Abdul Wadud, most of my ethnographic data comes from the observation of the zikr ceremonies.

In March of 2018 I first introduced the video camera into the ethnographic setting. The ethnographic component of this work coincided in time and in purpose with a one-year educational program I completed in a small, private film-school called “La Casa del Cine” in Barcelona on “documentary and non-fiction film-making.” The documentary I made is called “zikr: 99 Recuerdos” (99 remembrances) and its an allusion to the practice of remembering Allah though his 99 names or attributes. All of the sounds, images and videos that were presented in this work come from this exercise in filming. The visual component of this work was chosen because of its strong resonances with current developments in ethnographic theory and on the role of the visual component in relation to the more traditional exercise associated with anthropology, writing. I am describing the kind of engagement I had “*multimodal*” following a recent call for an expansion of the possibilities of ways of engagement between anthropology and diverse groups of actors outside of the discipline (Collins, Durning, & Gill, 2017). Multimodal does not simply describe an anthropology being done in many “modes”, but a deeper rearticulation of what doing anthropology means in the current complex media ecosystem:

“Multimodality describes the arc of anthropological media through contemporary society. It evokes the heterogeneities of anthropological research across multiple platforms and collaborative sites, including film, photography, dialogue, social media, kinesis, and practice. At its core, multimodal anthropology acknowledges the centrality of media production to the everyday life of both anthropologists and our interlocutors. It demands that we reflect on this multiplicity while working to engage and collaborate along media forms our interlocutors find relevant to their lives” (Collins et al., 2017, p.142).

The turn to multimodality has to be contextualized within the history of anthropology and particularly visual anthropology. The role of visual anthropology to the wider anthropological knowledge enterprise has become more relevant in the past three decades, with the increase in reflexivity of anthropological thought in relation to its own position in the wider social, political and economic milieu, visual anthropology's "element of reportage and its potential to monitor action and process has become an increasingly central field" (Banks & Morphy, 1999).

The decision to film while engaging in participant observation as a technique came hand in hand with the ethnographic process and fitted well with case being studied, both on a methodological and a practical level, and I made it with knowledge of the important role of video-making as a tool of research: On the methodological side, it made sense in relation to the history of visual anthropology. During the early years of the discipline, the vast majority of films produced by anthropologists were about religious practices and rituals (Canals, 2018). At first this seems paradoxical; to create audiovisual content about situations and entities that are *invisible*. Gods, spirits, demons and souls are not captured by the camera. But understood through the lens of material religion (Morgan, 2010) it makes perfect sense. It is precisely these actions, and corporeal relations between people and their environment that the camera is able to capture, and capture in a way that words alone cannot. The camera records events as they transpire in time and space, so through the medium the focus is already placed in the physical and material aspect of the ritual. In other words, the visual register, as I introduce in this work from this section onward, is not supplementary to the literary register. I am not employing the visual as a way to "illustrate" the points I make, more than that, the visual is integrated argumentatively and embedded into the larger arguments I make about the acoustic practices of the Sufi zikr.

The usage of visual techniques is also constrained and helps to re-constitute the theoretical paradigms of the time. For example, the early anthropologist' "anatomical portraits inspired by Huxley's biological anthropology that simultaneously objectify the

powerlessness and subject status of the people captured by the camera, and provide biometric information” (Banks & Morphy, 1999, p.7) are a clear reflection of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century colonialism. Throughout the early period there was a disconnect between visual methods and anthropological theories, so that the capture of film and video served to document or to illustrate, not the make significant contributions to the theory. In this sense, Margaret Mead's influential essay *Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words* (Mead, 1975) provided a concise summary of the relationship between the visual and the written: Anthropology, because of early technological, methodological and theoretical constraints had come to over-rely on words – written accounts – of cultural phenomena. These reasons were related to the associated level of skill necessary for artistic production and the higher demand placed on film than on monograph writing and to the the increasing cost of instruments as the visual technologies became more advanced coupled with decreasing attention to funding of the same. Mead's hope was placed on the fusion of both of the skills, the analytic ethnographic ones and the visual aesthetic ones into a single researcher who could wield the visual to give expression to that which could not be articulated verbally. It is within this context that the multimodal turn of recent times must be placed, extending the reflexivity of first the interpretive turn and later on the ontological turn onto the methods of media production, consumption and manipulation. As I will show later, it was through filming the zikr that I was able to gain insights that I would not have had the chance otherwise.

On the practical level, it is important to note the synergy between the production of media by the Sufis (seeing the human body and voice as a technology of the self) and my own production of media through the camera. A way to frame this synergy is through Jean Rouch's discussion in *The Camera and Man* of Vertov's *kinok* manifesto:

“I am the cine-eye, I am the mechanical eye, I am the machine that shows you the world as only a machine can see it. From now on, I will be liberated from immobility. I am in perpetual movement. I draw near to things, I move myself away from them, I enter into them, I travel toward the snout of a racing horse. I move through crowds at top speed, I precede soldiers on attack, I take off with airplanes, I

flip over on my back, I fall down and stand back up as bodies fall down and stand back up” (Vertov in Rouch, 1995, p.3).

The *kinok*, or cine-eye, is the compound visual organism that is the fusion of man and camera. Rouch's point is that through the techniques of filming that the camera provides the anthropological look is transformed in a non-linear manner. The anthropologist cum camera is able to see in a way that is greater than the sum of its element. He describes this process of aggregate transformation earlier (Rouch, 1978) as similar to that experienced by a medium during a trance. The definitions of personhood and the boundaries between man and machine are blurred. In a similar manner, the Sufi zikr, employing the *techniques du corps* (Mauss, 1973) of sound (voice) and movement (gyrations) form socio-technical assemblages that push the definition of the body and space. This synergy between the transformation the anthropologist undergoes and the one of her informants is an example of what Rouch calls “shared anthropology” (1978), an anthropology that does not only aim to describe an outside reality alien to the anthropologist, but is rather based on a shared process of mutual transformation, creativity and experimentation (Canals, 2011).

However, there were many difficulties that arose out of the introduction of the camera into the field study. I go into detail about them:

### **Difficulties and challenges**

1. Participant observation and shifting roles: The zikr is a ritual with a high degree of social and ceremonial involvement by the participants. It is not a situation where one can be in and remain without much contact with others. There are always moments where one needs to interact deeply and meaningfully with the other community members, through greetings and touches, conversations, and of course the chanting itself. This means that when I attended the zikr, all of my concentration had to be placed in being involved and present in the actions I was doing. When I decided to introduce the camera, three months into my study, I noticed that my role

shifted. Since I am still a beginner in the technical sides of filming, I had to pay attention to the operation of the camera, the opening and closing of the diaphragm, the ISO, the focus, etc. With less attention being paid to the engagement in the ritual, I was forced to choose a dominant role for some of the zikr meetings. Some times I was more participant observer, some times I was more documentarian, I could not do both to the fullest at the same time.

2. The disruption of intimacy by the camera: The zikr is performed in a very intimate setting. Everyone there knows each other for years and has deep bonds of unity, a fact that creates a closed-knit social thread that the camera can sometimes disrupt. Moreover, the mood of the place is cozy, the lights of the community space are dimmed to the minimum for the human eye to see, with light bulbs that emit yellow light so that everything in the space has a sepia tone that combined with the many reds and browns of the carpets that line the floor, create a warm and comfortable, organic and earth-like aesthetic feeling. This feeling is counter to the more metallic and synthetic feeling that a camera has, with the constant clicking of the shooting, the clock-like movement of its internal parts and the pulsating red light it emits when recording. I had to manage this situation through various techniques: If I thought that a moment was too intimate I would back away and not film it, since I did not want to risk offending anyone. I also used a longer lens, of 85 millimeters, that allowed me to get closer to the action but being farther away so as to minimize disruption. At the beginning of my study I had thought of using a gopro camera, that is smaller and less visually intrusive than a DSLR, as a way to get over this difficulty. However the filming style that the gopro camera was too much like a hidden camera documentary, it gave the footage a sort of voyeuristic aspect that I did not want to transmit. Eventually I settled for a DSLR camera but as mentioned above, with a longer lens, as an in-between solution. It did not solve the issue completely, but it did provide me with the kind of footage I needed, but it is important to mention that I did not obtain all the footage that I wanted: Many times there were very intimate and powerful situations that I did not film out of respect, and in general, the fact that the lights were dimmed almost entirely during the zikr

ceremony means that I have little to no visual footage of the chanting. I do have the audio of the chants and I use it later on in this work.

3. The visual as threatening: The Sufis are a quiet and modest community, where rejection of ego and of situations and feelings that are perceived to be aggrandizing towards the self are rejected and discouraged. They perceive photos and videos to be such kind of activities, meant mostly for reasons of vanity and aesthetic pleasings. I was approached several times with a wary curiosity about the purpose of my filming. After I explained that I am a researcher doing a masters at the University of Barcelona, their wariness was subdued and they relaxed more. They mostly wanted to know where the footage was going to be seen, by whom and in what context. I responded that the purpose of my filming was academic, and that the footage was not going to be broadcast through any public medium. Most of the men who approached me found this answer satisfactory, and at times even joked about “being famous” and charging me money for their image rights. Only one man said he did not want to be featured in the visual register, and he expressed his desire later on my study, in late May. It is possible that he did not want to appear in the visual footage because in the Ramadan happened to be at the time and Ramadan is seen as a time of emotional austerity, reflection and introspection. The situation with the women was a different story.
4. Gender and being seen in Islam: As I mentioned above, there was a clear and distinct gender aspect to my study that do not go into detail theoretically, but methodologically it is important to mention. There is an element of being seen, the availability and presence of female bodies in the visual domain, and ethics, within Islam. Modesty in women is highly valued as a trait by both the men and the women of the community. For this reason I had almost zero contact with the women of the community. When it came to filming, the difficulty with the gender aspect increased tremendously. I was vigorously requested by many of the female Sufis to not film them. This fact put me in a situation where I could simply not film the women's perspective of the zikr; if one or two of the women did not want to appear in the visual footage, I could maybe configure my camera using angles and positions to

not include them. But since at every instance four or five women requested to not be filmed, there was no area of the women's space that I could film where I would not be infringing upon their request. It seemed to me that appearing in film was a big transgression of the principle of modesty, and simply being present near the women with the camera got me in trouble three times. I was asked in a polite but firm manner to move away from the section where the women conduct the zikr three times. The response from the men in these situations was worth noting. I approached some men with whom I had more rapport, namely the Catalan man named Iskender and the Argentinian man named Jafar. Iskender told me that this is not a Sufi response, but a women response. In other words that women in general are “like this”, and that I should not pay attention to what they say. Jafar said something similar, that I should film regardless of whether the women want to be filmed or not. My concern as I communicated to them was that I would be missing a big aspect of the performance of the zikr if I simply excluded the female perspective, and that I considered it imperative to include it. After the second time I was denied permission to film the women, I approached Sheikh Abdul Wadud with this concern, and he said he gave permission for filming the women and that I should film the women. It is worth noting that all the men with whom I discussed the situation told me to disregard the women's request and film anyways. I decided in the end to not film the women and respect their decision, if to the detriment of the quality and quantity of my ethnographic encounter and the richness of the data. Perhaps in the future a research project can be done by a woman focusing on the female aspect of the Sufi zikr.

The visual aspect of the study allowed me to capture in images many of the gestures and movements that constitute the zikr that both Hirschkind and Eisenlohr describe. For example take the image below.



Sufi *murid* named Khalid, from Vilafranca del Penedes, a small town around sixty kilometers from the city center of Barcelona. Khalid drives with his wife and daughter every Thursday to participate in the Zikr ritual. In the photo we can see him with eyes closed, reciting a salat, a prayer, and with performing one of the most common gestures in Islam, the raising of the index finger. The gesture of the raised index accompanies the small but powerful phrase that is repeated as zikr, “*La Illah illa Allah*” (there is no god by Allah), and it is done to signify the unity of god.

I have many visual examples of the kind of active listening and atmospheric effects that confirm the theory about sound and ethics in Islam. However working on the audiovisual front through my ethnographic experience allowed me to see something *else* and pose questions that are new. Through the lens of the camera I was able to see that the events that constitute the zikr were always events where the interactions between the many community members and the space around them was not only important, but critical to any robust analysis. Hirschkind and Eisenlohr differed in their theoretical analyses of the acoustics of Islam, but coincided in one thing: They both took the individual person listening as the *de facto* unit of analysis. Missing from the approach was an interactive and *supra-individual* approach. For example, when I listened to the recordings of different zikrs done at different spaces during the trip to the south of Spain, I realized that they sounded differently, depending on where they were performed. If ethics in Islam is directly tied up to sound and sonic practices, and sound is directly relational to the space where it is produced, then space and spatial arrangement ought to have a powerful impact on the Sufi ethical

subjectivity.

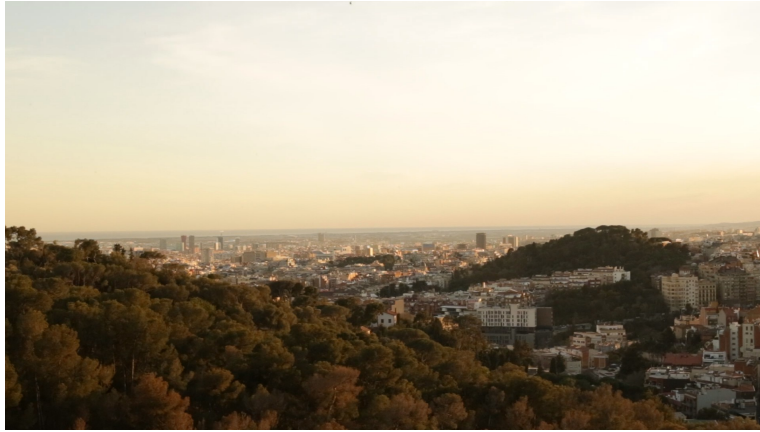
Let us consider the two aspects of this study again, the ethical aspect and the sonic aspect – How is this double situation affected when we consider a unit of analysis that is wider than a single person? In particular, how is the sonic-ethical character of the zikr changed if we bring in spatial considerations into the analysis? My choice to perform a kind of conceptual anthropology arose out of this realization that I had through my ethnography and the process of filming. Therefore in the following section I present the examples of how and why space and spatial dynamic, that is beyond any one individual's listening practices, are important and necessary to be able to understand the Sufi zikr. After that I discuss some of the challenges and benefits of introducing a concept of space and how methodologically I am to solve some of these challenges through the principle of reflexivity.

### ***Spatial Practice of the Sufi Zikr***

The *dergah*, the Sufi community space in Barcelona, is situated in a very quiet area of the city, a residential neighborhood on a mountain called *El Carmel*, roughly four kilometers from the city center and five kilometers from the Mediterranean sea. The street where it is located is not very trafficked by either cars or pedestrians, being shape like a sharp “U” because of the mountain's terrain, and the fact that is adjacent to a dead end street.



The street where the Sufi community is located



View of the city of Barcelona below and the sea in the distance from the location of the *dergah*

These location considerations make it so that the community space is very idyllic, quiet, peaceful and conducive to the performance of the zikr. Remember that these were key considerations when making the decision of establishing a Sufi community center in Spain: the location was the most important aspect, being directly specified by the grand Sheikh at the time, and it was the aspect that proved to be the most difficult to solve for Abdul Wadud. These specifications were that it needed to be in an elevated space, a mountain, hill, or some other form of geographical ascension, that it needed to be near water, and that it needed to be accessible to people. I understand that the last indication makes sense when considering that it is a community center being built – it would not make sense to make it in the middle of the country side where members have to drive one hour to get there – but the other two aspects remain unjustified and unsupported unless we take an acoustic approach. That is to say, if we understand that the zikr is an acoustic event, then *the location where it takes place is of utmost importance*. I mean that, chanting in a quiet and peaceful place is a very different experience, affectively and phenomenologically, than chanting in a busy and loud place. The fact that the *dergah* is located where it is, is not only because spiritual communities seek refuge in nature and away from the hustle and bustle of the urban centers, although that is true as well, but in the Sufi case, the location interacts and enables certain acoustic practices that are central to Sufi ethical and communal life.

The location of the Dergah is just one of the dimensions that one can study under a

spatial approach to the Sufi zikr. Another dimension is the built environment where it takes place. For example the architecture of the place where the zikr takes place matters, in as much as some architectural styles concentrate sound, like concert halls, and others dissipate sound, like memorials or libraries where quietness is to be maintained. In other words, the acoustics of a particular location are dependent in part of the architectural design of the building. They depend as well on the materials being used in its construction. The dergah in Barcelona is located in a lower floor, under the level of the street. It is also built in such a way, with concrete walls in high degree angles of curvature, so that strong echo effects are made. When the Sufis perform the chants, the sound reverberates from the walls making it stronger and more impacting. The ceilings are low and the space where one sits is constricted so that everyone sits closer together and there is less space for the sound to mitigate.



A photo of Yafar, a Sufi from Argentina, sitting down in deep meditative zikr. Behind him can be seen the low ceilings, the white concrete walls, and the concave architecture that give the zikrs in Barcelona their distinctive acoustic character.



Above (top) a traditional Turkish carpet. All of the floors of the community space in Barcelona are covered in carpets. Below is a shelf with many books located in the community space. How do carpets and books, that absorb sound, affect the acoustic conditions of the zikr?



The dergah is spatially organized in such a way that Sufis sit next to each other very closely. This involves the type of bodily contact and gestures that Hirschkind talks about, but expanded away from an individual listener outwards to include other listener, and also the spatial relationship between them and the spatial dimension of place. The closeness also has acoustic effects, concentrating sound in a smaller space, creating intra-body resonances, and acoustic harmonies that are important to include in the analysis.

Because of the trip we did in March of 2018 to the south of Spain I was able to listen to zikrs and other prayers in different situations and settings, different locations in respect to the environment, and in different architectural and material configurations, and was able to see that the effects that they produced on the Sufis were different. For example, during the trip we stopped in the middle of the road in a highway, at a gas station, to perform one of the daily prayers that are set in the day according to the position of the sun. Compare that acoustic experience with one had in an old Andalusian house in Seville. Surely the acoustic dimension as well as the corporeal aspect differ vastly.



Prayer being performed in a busy parking lot of a gas station on the highway from Madrid to Seville.



Zikr and prayer in the traditional Islamic architecture house in Seville.

Compare the “atmospheres” as Eisenlohr describes them, of these two Sufi rituals presented above. The spatial and acoustic aspects and elements of them could not be farther away one from the other. The first one is busy, charged with charring and uncomfortable noises that emanate from the gas station and the influx and outflux of cars, trucks and other vehicles. The prayers there disappear into the air because it is an open space and lacks acoustics. The vastness of its open character dissipates whatever compound effect may be created by the fact that multiple people are singing and chanting together. The second is in accord with the mood being created through the zikr: Close bodies sitting together, enclosed space for reverberation, even the color of the wall matches the color of the head wear of the Sufis.

Likewise, the gestures and movements that Hirschkind describes also take on a different meaning when considered in community of listeners / chanters in a given space, and not as individual bodies performing the gestures. For example in the images below we see the Sufi Iskender, mentioned above, giving a hug to another Sufi. These type of intra-body gestures are very common: hugs, kisses, handshakes, gestures of closeness such as resting one's hand in the other's shoulders, and so on.



Hugs are important in the Sufi community and are given easily and freely



Hug taking place between two Sufis in Seville

A very important event that takes place after every zikr session is the ending zikr: every zikr ends with a specific chant, called “*Allahumma salli ‘ala*”, it is recited in shorter versions throughout the ritual, but it is chanted in its full and with a specific intonation only at the end of the ceremony. While this zikr is chanted, all the community members walk around in a steady pace in the shape of a circle, shake the hands of the person in front of them, and take the place next to the last person in the circle. When they pass by the sheikh, they not only shake his hand but bend down in reverence and also kiss his hand. In the following video we see one of these performances that take place inside of the main mosque of Madrid. There, Sheikh Mehmet Al-Haqqani led one of the daily prayers before

the zikr was done. Madrid was the first stop in the peregrination I was invited to attend in March 2018, as it was the city where the grand master flew into from Istanbul. His journey concluded in Barcelona from where he took his place back to Istanbul.



The performance of this specific zikr chant is very meaningful; it is done after every zikr ritual session and it brings together the whole community. Everyone has the chance to establish physical contact and physical closeness with everyone else, and with the leader. Hugs, kisses and handshakes are an integral part of the gesticulations repertoire and the somatic vocabulary of the Sufi community.

In the clip above we can clearly see that in as much as Islam, in this case Sufism, ought to be understood as acoustic practices that are *embodied*, these bodies exist always *in relations to other bodies in specific, non-random and thought-out spaces*. The spaces are specifically configured in ways that promote certain kinds of interactions between said bodies, and discourage others, and thus are partially responsible for both the cognitive and affective effects of the sounds being produced, as well as the ethical considerations that arise from such thereafter. The Sufi zikrs “profoundly modify the entire acoustic environment of the disciple not only during the exercises but also in his everyday life, through ritual after ritual, stage after stage” (Papais, 2014, p.41). How is such an

environment modified? According to what principles? What ideas dictate the way people sit down, walk and in general “inhabit” the Sufi spaces?

Whether we consider the practice of making sounds and listening to sounds in Islam through an affective lens or a phenomenological lens, I have showed that there are particular aspects, such as the geographical location in relation to soundscapes, and the configuration of the built environment, that are missing unless we incorporate a *spatial* dimension into the analysis of the Sufi zikr. What I mean is that it is never a single person listening in a “neutral” space. The listening subject in the performance of Sufi zikr is one always present in a specific and particular space, a space populated with other Sufis, with whom he is always in constant relation, and the master, whose relation to the Sufi student we showed before is crucial for the construction of the Sufi ethical subjectivity, in a specific material environment that is never random and never neutral.

Therefore, the next step in the accurate understanding and framing of the Sufi zikr as an ethical and acoustic doing is to see it as a spatial practice also: a practice in which the material environment where it takes place is not passive, a “background”, instead an active component of what makes a zikr be a zikr. How to do that? In the following section I present an extensive literature review of the concept of space as it is used in anthropology and more generally in cognate fields such as geography, sociology and architecture.

### ***Space in Social and Anthropological Theory***

Space has been a central theoretical, and practical manner through which many phenomena have been approached. One of the most prevalent conceptual typologies of the one proposed by Henri Lefebvre in his influential work *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre & Nicholson-Smith, 1991) that divides space into perceived space, conceived space and lived space. It is not important for this work to go in depth into the different classifications and it suffices to say that for Lefebvre perceived space is the every-day local practices through which people in specific situations perceived and help to reproduce a notion of

space. Conceived space is the specialized representations of space in scientific, technological and artistic mediums, the space of “planners, architects, engineers and scholars” (Lefebvre & Nicholson-Smith, 1991 p.38). Lived space is a category used by Lefebvre to incorporate the emancipatory and revolutionary potential of spatial practices that challenges the dominant ideology.

More recent authors on space in anthropology and in social theory in general such as Setha Low base their own approach on Lefebvres. Low's *Spatializing Culture: The Ethnography of Space and Place* (2016) is a useful summary of how the concept of space has been used in the last thirty years in different social sciences. Her own typology is between the social production of space, which roughly corresponds to Marxist political economic approaches to space, and the social construction of space, more postmodern meaning-based understandings of space. Low emphasizes the difficulty of trying to define the concept of space: Using the example of how David Harvey in *Spaces of Global Capitalism* “struggles to define space by positing that it has such a complicated set of meanings that we risk “losing ourselves in some labyrinth” (Harvey 2006: 119).” Or how “Dolores Hayden wrestles with defining place as “one of the trickiest words in the English language, a suitcase so overfilled one can never shut the lid” (1995: 15).” Low's point is that anthropological work (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003) is uniquely placed to find a balance between these two broad approaches to space: Ethnographers are situated in between these intellectual traditions and able to draw fruitfully from both. They are equally facile at grappling with the political economic forces of Marxist approaches that produce physical space, as with historical accounts of the built environment and the lived experience of individuals that result in place-based meaning” (Low, 2016 p.5).

Space as a concept used specifically in the anthropology of religion also follows a Lefebvrian genealogy. Kim Knott, who specializes in spatial approaches to religion, expands on Lefebvre's first definition of space. To her (Knott, 2005) these “spatial practices” incorporate a repertoire of gestures, bodily movements and behaviors which may take account of the physical and social spaces in which they occur (p. 163) and are cooped in ritual or liturgy. “Religion, in its physical presence, social orderings, and cultural forms, is a consequence of spatial practice, though it is the attribution of meaning that gives such

practice its character as “religious” (p.163). But unfortunately in the process the actuality of space was lost along the way.

What I noticed was that most sociological and anthropological articles that I read understood space as a mental category. In other words, they were employing a constructivist understanding of space. Space, in its many manifestations in the literature, was understood as a “social construct” of the people, community or collective being studied. This had two effects: it rendered politically neuter any chance of using any alterity found in the ethnography by flattening it as a “perspective” on the world. Secondly, and here is where the point about reflexivity mentioned in the introduction comes in, these type of studies were not being reflexive enough about the conceptual use of space as a category of description and analysis. I mean that, even when spatial dimensions were applied to anthropological analyses in other parts of the world outside of the modern, western sphere, the same concept of space was simply shifted from one context to the other, transposed and placed on top and at best “adjusted” for local concerns. “What is space” was never a question that was allowed to flourish out of the ethnographic work, always being decided *a priori* and not allowed to be transformed, questioned or challenged by the findings in the field.

This limitation applied also the spatial studies of Sufism. Particularly within studies of Sufism in the west the concept of space featured prominently. Pnina Werbner's influential essay “Stamping the Earth with the Name of Allah: Zikr and the Sacralizing of Space among British Muslims” (Werbner, 1996) and later book titled *Pilgrims of love: The anthropology of a global Sufi cult* (Werbner, 2003) are based on ethnographic work done with Pakistani Sufis in the United Kingdom and their relationship with the master who lives in Pakistan. Werbner's approach to space is that space is sacralized, made sacred, through a specific kind of marching that Pakistani-British Sufis do in the streets: The argument that Werbner made was about challenging the “profane / sacred” dichotomy of classical anthropological antecedents to affirm that the sanctity of a space is not a “either/of” or “on/off” condition, but rather a function of degrees: The *Darbar*, a Sufi saint's headquarters, or the *maqam*, the final resting place where a Sufi saint is buried, are always more sacred,

flowing the sacred energy of the saint. But the processions that she studied also invoked a sense of sanctity into space, a sense that was tied up with human action and doing, and not with transcendental categories. Although very influential and pioneering in understanding Sufi sanctity in relation to human action and activity (placed within the larger material religion turn in anthropology), Werbner's study does not question what space *is*. She, instead, employs a pre-set definition of space and focuses on how Sufi actions modify the qualifier, the adjective, of said space - "sacred" space for example. Could it not be possible that the Sufis employ and live through a different understanding of what space *is*, in the first place, that would then change what a sacred space means altogether?

More recently there is the book *Sacred Spaces and Transnational Networks in American Sufism: Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and Contemporary Shrine Cultures* (Xavier, 2018) that is an ethnographic study of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, a Sufi community that evolved jointly in Sri Lanka and the United States, and thus has a bipolarity of locality in their existence. Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen was a Sufi saint who had a shrine and mosque in the northern Sri Lankan city of Jaffna. When he died in 1986, his remains were buried in Philadelphia, United States, and since the final resting places of Sufi saints carry immense blessings, his followers have two nodes to account for in the flux of sacred blessings, *baraka*. Xavier cites Werbner's work in the process of choosing a spatial approach to be able to capture this dynamic relationship between location and sacredness. She states "according to the members of the fellowship, their movement is Bawa and his teachings, whereas the space (e.g. shrines, mosques, and centers) exist as a by-product of Bawa and his teachings. I then, have chosen to focus on sacred spaces exclusively for the purpose of my research questions, and hence my attention to spatiality" (Xavier, 2018, p.10). Considering that space is such a central concept of analysis in her study, there is from that point onward, very few deepenings into what spatiality as such, and its effects on the kind of anthropological works that it can engender.

More broadly, space is mentioned and included in many studies linking sound and acoustic practices, and Sufism and Sufi ethics. For example Alexandre Papas' "Creating a

Sufi soundscape: Recitation (dhikr) and audition (sama-') according to Ahmad Kasani Dahbidi (d. 1542)" (2014) is a historical reading of a text written by a medieval Sufi scholar influential in Chinese Central Asia on music and Sufi practices. Papas, who makes explicit reference to Hirschkind's classical text, mentions the relation between sound and space various times (p, 40-41) but fails to provide a definition of space. In the same cultural context of Sufism in China, "Dialectic of embodiment: Mysticism, materiality and the performance of Sufism in China" (Ha, 2014), aims to "challenge the current tendency in anthropological and religious studies of Sufism and Islam that locates the body completely within the space of ethical and performative practice. It argues that the dimension of the symbolic and the sublime, irreducible to the practical, bears its own specificity that demands our analytical attention" (p.85). Ha's article is about the concept of time in Jahriyya eschatology, and since time is a concept tightly related to space, he does mention it various times, but all the mentions are done in passing, without a thorough analysis of the implications involved.

Perhaps the most direct articulation of the relationship between sound and space in Islam was proposed by Andre Eisenberg's "Islam, Sound, and Space: Acoustemology and Muslim Citizenship on the Kenyan Coast" (Eisenberg, 2013). The study is about Mombasa's historic Muslim-Swahili Old Town, and how through specific bodily practices the public spaces of the neighborhood are transformed into private spaces of the Muslim-Swahili community. This work makes reference to the work of Hirschkind and the "Islamic soundscape" approach that I also quote extensively above, combined with Steven Feld's (1996) "acoustemology of place" to frame the contested aspect of the sonic practices that arises out of the conflict with the liberal-democratic logic of urban public space in Kenya. Although very illuminating and insightful, Eisenberg's study lacks in the same manner as I pointed out before: a study concerning space that was not reflexive enough about the author's own conceptual use and the accompanying intellectual and political assumptions that accompany such usages. Instead, "Space" was taken to be, its definition granted, set in stone, later to be studied was how different sociocultural groups *interpreted* this definition.

I considered this to be a problematic that I needed to solve, methodologically speaking, before I could fully move ahead with trying to understand my interlocutors. because I was not interested in studying ethnographically how the Sufi's conceive, imagine, talk about or represent, in their own semiotic or symbolic sense, what I, through my modern-western intellectual training, already know to be “space.” I feared that such as study would end up replicating certain ontological assumptions about what space *is*, and within the context of my own study, what “intentions” are, in relation the zikr chants. For example, a constructivist anthropology would simply say that the chanting and the whirling are ways of “representing” or manifesting, through song and dance, the ethical beliefs of the Sufis. That Iskender, the ascetic man I mentioned earlier, through his habitual and corporeal chanting was “representing” in practice his ethical beliefs, abstract and amaterial. Done. Difference was absorbed and bifurcated – intentions as beliefs streamlined into the Cartesian mind, chanting as action sent away to actions in Euclidean space, the bridge between them understood as epistemology of representation. That move would have amounted to a mistake often made in anthropology, as Holbraad and Petersen (2017, p.212) discuss this historically contingent but prominent disciplinary mistake:

[...]a very real danger in the ethnographic study of things, namely that of imagining them as different ways in which people may think ‘about’ them (represent them, imagine them, socially construct them and so forth). For to think of things in that manner is just a way of endorsing the basic ‘modern’ tenet of one- nature-many- cultures in what may be its crassest version, namely the idea of inert and mute things invested with varied meanings only by human fiats of representation. It is, in other words, to rule out of court the very possibility in which we are interested here, namely that things themselves might be able to help to provide alternative ways for us, as analysts, to conceptualize what they are – ways that challenge and go beyond our metaphysical (and by that token also methodological and analytical) expectations.

The “thing” above discussed by Holbraad and Petersen is space itself. The promise

then of what I am calling *reflexive anthropology* is as they point out, both theoretical and methodological; the exploration of the metaphysical assumptions in the comparison between myself, as the anthropologist, and the ones present in the particular situation I study ethnographically becomes the anthropological exercise *itself*. Beyond the perhaps naive quest to neutrally describe the other, the reflexive anthropology takes even further the reflexivity that started with the interpretative turn. The end result is an anthropology that arises out of the full awareness my own position in the world as a WEIRD person (western, educate, industrialized, rich and developed) and through my humble experiential encounter with the ethnographic field.

Moreover, since it is through the process of being socialized into a specific knowledge community, and its epistemic culture that patterns of thinking become formalized, then the kind of study that I am making, inspired out of the ontological turn, must necessarily be, at least partially, auto-ethnographic. In my specific case, I have been contending with, and struggling against, the Euro-American assumptions about the world, for quite some years. During my formative education years I was uncritical of them; I was born in a northbound-oriented community in Venezuela, where cultural norms and behaviors of The United States of America and Europe were held in high regard and were aimed to be emulated. It was after my first extended stay in India, in the years 2010 and 2011 that I was first introduced to critiques of the western knowledge system. I have delved with different degrees of involvement into these questions: first during my first masters thesis, completed in 2012, that was about “postcolonial cognition”, an conceptual analysis of cognition and the possibility of thought creation by non-Europeans (Dabashi, 2015) within the broadly defined “cognitive sciences.” Afterwards, I spent some time in Istanbul, Turkey, where I researched about the history of philosophy of science in Islam. It has been through these endeavors and the readings I have done in the past six to eight years that I have cultivated an interest for what I called before conceptual anthropology, framed within the geo-politics of knowledge that various of the ontological turn anthropologists introduce (Holbraad, Pedersen, & de Castro, 2014). Particularly in relation to the Sufi case study at hand, I did not have a previously established comparison with any content. I had never

studied Sufism and I had never joined a Sufi ceremonial event. However, I was not a fully and complete European “other” to the Sufi context, as I detailed above. My own condition as an insider/outsider to the western knowledge culture facilitated the kind of Wagnerian “reverse” anthropology of the west that I was, in a way, achieving also through the ethnography of the Sufi spaces.

I tried to approach the field, and the question about space that was central, without a pre-conceived impetus for difference to be found. In other words, I was not trying to force some difference, between the Sufi understanding of space and the Euro-American one. In fact, considering that Sufi conceptual bases are highly influenced by the Persian philosophical tradition (Cecil, 2013) and so is the western one, there was a strong possibility, at least stronger than in the classical ontological texts that were done comparing western culture with Amazonian, Melanesian and Mongolian culture, that radical difference between the two would not be the case. Therefore I merely approached the situation with the possibility of difference in mind, remembering that there was not any reason that the space and spatial dynamics of Sufis ought to be the same as mine, but there also was not any reason that they ought to be totally different. Part of my own auto-ethnographic methodology of reflexivity involved both being aware of how my own concepts weren't universal, but also, recognizing how the ontological literature had an influence on me, that I would not commit the opposite error, and create, or project onto my findings, a kind or degree of difference that was over exaggerated, only there to facilitate a kind of political project of difference, popular also within the ontologically-influenced anthropology (Escobar, 2010).

The methodology of this work, then, does not only include concrete references to what I did, to reach these results and conclusions. It encompasses a much richer and complex exercise in self-awareness, conscience and presence, in an auto-ethnographic context of critique of, and historical, political and cultural contextualization of, the very primal concepts I am using in my anthropology. This, I hope is done with the aim that all the potentialities of difference, where existing, have a chance to be realized fully.

This is what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro calls “Controlled Equivocation” (2004), and in terms of methodology, it not only accepts that one, as an anthropologist, will have different conceptual understandings of the world, but operationalizes this situation as the primary mode of engaging with the field. My goal is to be able to describe difference where it matters the most, in those entrenched crevasses of cultural “blind spots”, making ethnography be “a technology of description [Pedersen 2012a] designed in the optimistic (non-skeptical) hope of making the otherwise visible by experimenting with the conceptual affordances [Holbraad, forthcoming] present in a given body of ethnographic materials” (Holbraad et al., 2014). I have shown by way of examples in the literature, that studies about space seem to be recurrently replicating one of this blind spots, and therefore I aim to address it.

To summarize, the goal, speaking methodologically, is to get to a position where we can introduce the concept of space into the analysis of the Sufi zikr without totally bringing in into the analysis my own conceptual assumptions about what space is, or how it behaves or operates, to the point that it obscures or hinders my ethnography. Instead, my own concepts must be brought into a dialogue with those operating in the ethnographic setting I study. The first step is to employ the principle of reflexivity (Holbraad, 2015) about my own euro-American understandings (Salmond, 2014) and that anthropology, being a modern-western science, runs the risk of reproducing. The primary perspective I will try to not reproduce when I bring in the concept of space is an Euclidean understanding of space. Following the advice given by Holbraad and Pedersen, Viveiros de Castro, and other “ontological” anthropologists, in the next section I go into more details about Euclidean space, and how the Euclidean view of space presents itself in the way that constrains and constricts some possibilities of thought, and enables others.

## **Euclidean Space and its Metaphysics**

To sum up the argument so far, after participating in various Sufi zikr rituals I realized that the way that the participants related to each other and to the material space around them was crucial to a description of such event. Therefore I aimed to introduce a component of space and spatial thinking, but I did not want to assume that space for the Sufis was the same as space for me, I.E Euclidean space. I wanted to try and see if through the ethnographic engagement of Sufi spatial practices, the zikr, a different definition of what space can mean could arise, and that I could later use to understand the zikr through.

I did not want to frame the question as what Sufis think of space, not metaphors for space, not space as an idiom for some other sociocultural power dynamic, but space itself. What I was after was an understanding of space that was not representational. But different in relation to what? What is the concept of space that most anthropological texts use uncritically? What is the concept of space that laypeople in the west use everyday? What is the concept of space that I use? Part of the methodology of reflexivity is identifying what concepts one operates under, as an anthropologist, to be able to question it or subvert it, or to simply transform it through the ethnographic encounter. In the following section I identify the view of space that is hegemonic in the west, including the western academia, and I list some of the ways that this conception of space is intrinsically tied up with constructivism and perspectivalism, two ideologies that I aiming to leave behind, to be able to describe the Sufi zikrs spatial practices in relation to its ethical vision.

The “normal” and “uncritical” view of space in western society is the Euclidean view of space. The Euclidean view of space “fits in” with the representationalist theory of knowledge, and with the perspectivalist anthropologies, that is to say they complement and reinforce one another. Therefore I will now dedicate a section to making more explicit this connection as to illustrate why an approach to space and the spatial practices of the Sufi Zikr that is non-Euclidean is necessary in the pursuit of a post-constructivist anthropology.

The activity of collectively chanting and listening to those chants that is the Sufi zikr is a knowledge practice, but it is not a representationalist knowledge practice. It is a

knowledge practice in the sense that through sound knowledge about the world can be obtained. Acoustics, or the science of sound, has had a diffused history in the western knowledge tradition. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, interest in the reverberations of sound in a room led Sigmund Exner to invent the acoustometer: “In terms of disciplinary history, the acoustometer stands for the epistemic entanglement of electroacoustics, room acoustics, and the physiology of hearing. In terms of cultural history, it marks the advent of a new concept of reverberation, and thus a new culture of listening concerned with room acoustics” (Tcakzyk, 2015). The anthropology of sound therefore is also concerned with how sound reproductions, manipulations and their accompanying listening practices are methods for creating knowledge about the world. Particularly in its relation to space, sound is an important knowledge method: The auditory system perceives objects or events by the sound they produce, they can be characterized by volume, pitch, and timbre. Sound as an element of spatial settings is certainly important when we think of the musical and speech-related dimensions of religious place-making. One could even think of ‘spaces of sound,’ emanating from minarets and thus exceeding the sheer walls of a mosque” (Radermacher, 2016, p.35-36). But the knowledge created through sound is not the representational kind. Representationalism is a view of knowledge as representations and knowing as the process of creating representations that relate to the things that they represent through a relation of correspondence (the representation of a tree in someone's mind “corresponds” with a tree outside in the real world). This means that the measure of validity of representations is their accuracy of correspondence to the outside world.

Representationalism functions as a relational concept linking two domains: the inside (amaterial representations) and the outside (material representants). In this sense it is dependent on very specific conceptions of what the inside is and what the outside is and what constitutes each of them. For the inside representationalism depends on and helps to co-produce Cartesianism and a Cartesian dualism between the mind and the body. Therefore for representationalism the inside representations are abstract, a-material and a-spatial (Tettner, 2012). The ontological assumptions that accompany Cartesianism have been exposed, challenged and revised at length by many disciplines including anthropology

and so I will abstain from delving into them. For the purposes of this argument it is important to state only that representations exist as internal entities in the “mind” of a person, also an abstract space that westerners believe is inside of the head of a person who knows something, and they point, semiotically speaking, towards the outside material world.

The outside representationalism conceives of as and helps to co-produce an Euclidean view of space. “belief that representations serve a mediating function between knower and known -that displays a deep mistrust of matter, holding it off at a distance, figuring it as passive, immutable, and mute, in need of the mark of an external force like culture or history to complete it” (Barad, 2007, p. 135). John Law in his important book *After Method* (Law, 2004) does a fantastic job of laying out the ontological assumptions associated with the Euclidean view of space. Representationalism “rests on the assumption that the real world is a Euclidean space, and that space is populated with representable objects possessed of Euclidean volumes” (p.25). In terms of what constitutes space the Euclidean view has three dimensions (the x, y and z axes) and one other dimension, time, to describe changes in the other three. I will list a few of ontological assumptions associated with Euclidean space.

- Independence: Space exists independent of human activity and human knowledge inquiry and perception, what John Law calls “out-there-ness.”
- Anteriority: Space exists before human activity, as in, it is possible to imagine space without humans.
- Definiteness: Space is specific, clear, certain, definable and decided. This is the same aspect described by Holbraad (2012 p.97) when he states “representationism involves a predisposition toward imagining that (in their pristine state at least) meanings must correspond to something discrete and stable.
- Singularity: There is only one space that is uniform and the same wherever one is, what Schemmel calls “metric homogeneity of space” (2016 p. 16).
- Universality: Space is thought to exist in the same manner everywhere. Schemmel

explains: “Yet, in two important respects the Newtonian concept constitutes the historical acme of the generality of concepts of space: it was thought of as fundamental not only for the theory of mechanics from which it arose, but for the physical world in general, regardless of what was considered to be in that space and what discipline described things in space. It was further considered to be universal in the sense that space was the same everywhere: it was homogeneous and isotropic. This property was closely related to its autonomy from other fundamental concepts; since the distribution of things in space (matter and forces, say) is obviously not homogeneous, space has to be decoupled from these things in order to be so. (p.24)

The point I am making is that representationalism, an Euclidean view of space and perspectivalist theories of anthropology in which the Sufi ethical subjectivity are described in terms of “beliefs” that are socially or culturally constructed, all converge into a stable configuration of 1. what the world is and 2. how we humans relate to it. Through the idiom of knowledge we can say that such assertions not only enact a western conception of the world in relation to the amaterial side, our representations (thoughts, beliefs, certainties, facts) *but also to what knowing means in relation to the material side, space itself*. In fact, the different “perspectives” of perspectivalism and the accompanying politics of situation or location of postmodernism are political-epistemological subjectivities that depend on Euclideanism:

“If space is Euclidean, and it is populated with objects with specific volumes, then it follows that representational eyes in different places will see different views or perspectives. At the same time, since the rules are explicit, they precisely provide for the projection of a single three-dimensional real-world object from several different perspectival viewpoints. Perspectivalism is thus most strongly committed not only to a specific version of definiteness, but also, and as a part of this, to a specific and spatially-based version of singularity” (Law, 2004 p.26).

Law's quote must be considered in relation to both perspectivalism and social constructivism, for it ties together and makes apparent the aim of this research. When

aiming to explain the practice of the Sufi zikr from a spatial perspective I did not simply want to project and impose by own western conception of space, Euclidean space, that is to say I wanted to apply the principle of reflexivity as discussed by the ontological anthropology literature. But at the same time, I did not want to see the spatial practices of the Sufi from a perspectivalist or a constructivist frame – that Sufis have this or that “perspective” on space, or that this or that view of space is “socially constructed.” Because doing so would indirectly reaffirm my own epistemological and ontological commitments (as a western trained social anthropologist) as privileged and superior. This is the case because the way that theories and practices reproduce each other means that often approaches or theories bound together to create “islands of stability” (Pickering, 2016) which means that to go beyond or to destabilize a specific angle one must also target, at least partially, some other linked and mutually supportive side. In my goal to offer a way to understand the spaces of the Sufi Zikr and of its spatial practices in an perspective that is not Euclidean (understanding space as being three dimensional and *flat*, and also locating the human body in a three-dimensional space) I also need to take aim to Cartesianism (separating *a priori* something called the mind away from the body, and locating these two in separate domains), representationalist (where our inside amaterial thoughts “represent” outside, material realities), and also perspectivalism (where there is one, scientifically describable real world out there, one reality, with many cultural “interpretations” or socially constructed perspectives of it).

These (Euclideanism to understand material space, Cartesianism to understand how individual human minds relate to this material space, representationalism to understand how knowledge in the generalized form relates to material space, and perspectivalism to understand how aggregates of knowledge grouped together by “culture” related to this material space) combine in complex ways to create these amalgamations of perspective that give rise to what we may call a “western” mindset. I will not have the space to develop a critique of all of these but I will bring up studies that in the past have done very similar works to what I intend to do in order to make sure the appropriate theoretical developments

are made. I therefore intend to provide an alternative to this modern, western configuration constructed analytically around and through a non-Euclidean understanding of space to describe the incantations and the intentions of the Sufi zikr.

The idea would be then, to approach, with as little conceptual baggage as possible, the spatial practices of the Sufis. This implies performing a type of recursive, or “reverse anthropology,” in the sense that the engagement with peoples and their knowledges and ways of living that are different from “ours” have not only the potential to shed a light on, but also *transform* our own social scientific categories that we use to describe the world:

“The inherent limit of cultural relativism, as has often been remarked, is that even when it admits that all cultures are *a priori* equal in dignity, it treats just one of them as capable of thinking this relativity by producing anthropologists. Roy Wagner was the first to exhort anthropologists to overcome this undue feeling of superiority by identifying counterparts to anthropology in the collective they study. His proposal that Melanesian cargo cults should be treated as inverted variants of anthropology was aimed at showing that this attempt to translate Western material production into religious terms was neither more absurd nor any less inventive than the means generations of ethnographers used to insert the activities of collectives primarily concerned with relations between persons into a curatorial conception of culture. In other words, anthropologists should not be satisfied to “imagine a culture for people who do not imagine themselves to have one” (Wagner 1975). And in order to do justice to the creativity of peoples who were not their objects but their interlocutors, he added, anthropologists should endeavor to destabilize the concept of culture in which their discipline had fixed them, and according to such peoples’ perspectives” (Charbonnier, Salmon, & Skafish, 2016, p.9)

This work is the an endeavor of the destabilization of the concept of space as Euclidean, and an opening up of the possibilities of what it can mean through my ethnographic engagement with the Sufis and the zikr. My aim is then to open up a

conversation about how a different space can be theorized to exist out of the Sufi zikr, through my own ethnographic work. To do so, the next step is to see how space is related to human practices. How space is made through human actions, and more specifically, how space is made through human *ethical* practices and human acoustic practices, since after all, we are approaching the zikr through this double-headed framework. I now turn in the next section to the work of quantum physicist and feminist philosopher of science Karen Barad, on her influential book *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Meaning and Matter* (2007). In this book Barad proposes a framework to understand ethics and physicality in the same approach using the idiom of quantum physics, and I use it as a way to open up discussions about the relationship between ethical action and spatial dimensions in the performance of the Sufi zikr.

### ***Spatialized Ethics and Sound Epistemics***

Barad proposes what she calls a “ethico-onto-epistemological” approach to the exercise of knowing as a situated practice. The onto-epistemological is a way to talk about a non-representationalist theory of knowledge and phenomenology, or “the study of the practices of knowing in-being” (p. 185). Her ethics arrive into the equation as “the possibilities for what the world may become call out in the pause that precedes each breath before a moment comes into being and the world is remade again, because the becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter” (p. 185). Barad's approach, which she calls agential realism, is rooted in a reading of Neils Bohrs philosophical writings that he did in conjunction to his more well-known physics work on quantum experiments, most relevant to Barad his work on the wave-particle duality of light. She uses the dynamics of light in quantum experiments to propose a different metaphor for knowledge making that is not representationalist. For Barad, representationalism relies on a metaphor of light that is reflective – the outside, material realm is reflected into the inside realm of thoughts and ideas. But reflection is too passive of a metaphor, for it hides the active, productive side of knowledge-making. Therefore she draws on the process of diffraction to better describe the entanglement of thoughts and realities: “while social constructivist and traditional realist

approaches get caught up in the geometrical optics of reflection where, much like the infinite play of images between two facing mirrors, the epistemological gets bounced back and forth, but nothing more is seen. Moving away from the representationalist trap of geometrical optics, I shift the focus to physical optics, to questions of diffraction rather than reflection. Diffractionally reading the insights of poststructuralist theory, science studies, and physics through one another entails thinking the cultural and the natural together in illuminating ways...This is not a static relationality but a doing-the enactment of boundaries-that always entails constitutive exclusions and therefore requisite questions of accountability” (Barad, 2007, p. 135). What Barad means is that the separation, the boundaries, between both subject and object, nature and culture, inside and outside, bodies and space, are all made together through the act of engaging with the world. In her nomenclature, apparatuses are the inter and intra-acting configurations of “measuring agencies”, and phenomena are the specific configuration of relationships between objects and the apparatuses.

Let us have a look at the Sufi zikr practices through this lens: The measuring agencies in this case are the collection of singing and chanting murids, emitting sounds that emanate from their mouths, bounce off the physical walls and the furniture around them, and returns back to their ears, registering knowledge about the space and its composition, including rough estimates of how many people there are at the ceremony, where they are sitting, and in which physical arrangement. The phenomenon is altogether the physical space being known by the chanting Sufis, and being created through this practice. As Barad claimed “Space, time, and matter are mutually constituted through the dynamics of iterative intra-activity. The spacetime manifold is iteratively (re)configured in terms of how material-discursive practices come to matter. The dynamics of enfolding involve the reconfiguring of the connectivity of the spacetime matter manifold itself (a changing topology), rather than mere changes in the shape or the size of a bounded domain (geometrical shifts)” (p. 181). To transcend Euclidean space and its assumptions about the aspects and characteristics of space, we must be open to the possibility that through different spatio-temporal human activities, such as chanting together, a different space is

created. This is what Barad means when she says a changing topology and not just geometrical shifts within the same topological space. Let us then consider that the Sufi zikr is a specific material activity that produces sound and sonic alterations to the space, co-producing at the same time a space that is not describable as Euclidean. As I have done before, the ethical character of the Sufi zikr is to be considered side-by-side as the material aspect.

The more common and hegemonic way of thinking about ethics is through a spatialized metaphor of “right” and “wrong” as two physical poles on a Cartesian plane. As Edward Soja explains ““This essentially physical view of space has deeply influenced all forms of spatial analysis, whether philosophical, theoretical or empirical, whether applied to the movement of heavenly bodies or to the history and landscape of human society. It has also tended to imbue all things spatial with a lingering sense of primordiality and physical composition, an aura of objectivity, inevitability, and reification” (Soja, 1989, p. 79). That is to say, spatial metaphors about space give ethical discourses strength and grounding in materiality. The study of the spatialized character of ethics begins with Robert Hertz's *Death and the Right Hand* (2013) (1960). Modern western society has its foundations for ethical thinking in what Hertz described as the contrast between the meaning of the words “right” and “left”: The former is used to express ideas of physical strength and 'dexterity', of intellectual 'rectitude' and good judgement, of 'uprightness' and moral integrity, of good fortune and beauty, of juridical norm; while the word 'left' evokes most of the ideas contrary to these” (Hertz, 2013, p.99). This is a relatively common association in Indo-European languages, for example “derecho” in Spanish and “droit” in French, to mean “right” in the legal context, right in the ethical sense as rectitude (“recto” in Spanish), and “right” as the spatial coordinate directionality (“vas por el camino derecho”, for example). In Indo-European cultures, moral dualism is mapped onto a spatial mode of thinking so that “The right is the inside, the finite, assured well-being, and peace; the left is the outside, the infinite, hostile, and the perpetual menace of evil (Hertz, 2013, p.102). The right-wrong dualistic view on ethics is dependent on a Euclidean perspective on space (and as we saw earlier, on a Cartesian dualism between the mind and

the body). Ethical action can “move” in a Cartesian map of space through the quantification of distance along a linear, equidistant, constant, neutral and permanent “grid” that exists both everywhere, and nowhere (it cannot be seen or touched). The way ethics are measured and ethical action understood in relation to each other is the same as spatial movement: One can be located in the “wrong”, and through good deeds, “move” into the “right”, ethically and spatially. We can see how these spatial thinking of ethics ground our expressions, for example “he is so wrong, but he is not willing to move one centimeter!” This type of ethical thinking functions on a logic of spatial displacement – alterations to the ethical coordinates of specific people, actions or places as they re-locate or are made to be relocated along an axis, but no “topographical” manipulations to the ethical space itself can be made, by definition. In other words, it is the person who has to “move” into the right territory, through a change in behavior or repentance, the space itself cannot be altered to fit the person.

A way to further understand this last point is made by Barad herself in the treatment that she does of Leela Fernandez's book *Producing Workers* (Fernandes, 1997). Fernandez's work is about the relations of power as they get contested and strengthened in a Calcutta jute mill. Fernandez's focus is on how the set of structural and agential relations through which the social phenomena that take place in the mill also help to produce the apparatuses of bodily production and of spatiality itself in the mill. In this sense the mill as a social space cannot be described using a Euclidean geometrical model. These identities that were formed in the mill can not be described in terms of social “position” or social “location”, in other words following a logic of spatial displacement, but were instead reconfigurations of the dynamics of space and matter *itself*. The shop floor of the mill then, as a spatial apparatus that helps to produce the power differentials of capitalism, gender relations, and other identities as differentiations of the subject/object potential: “The shop floor is not a neutral observing device or a Euclidean frame of reference that allows managers and social scientists to specify the social location of individual workers or to track the trajectories of identity formation. Rather, the apparatuses that make 'position' intelligible are implicated in the iterative (re)production of particular material-discursive boundaries

among workers” (Barad, 2007, p. 243). This means that certain human spatial practices cannot be just “described” using spatial terminology, like many of the studies I referenced earlier did, because the practices themselves implicate a reformulation of what the concept of space *is*, in relation to the people and the material beings that accompany them.

So far we have done the following: Approached a particular cultural situation, the ritual singing and chanting that is the Sufi zikr, through a material-discursive framework, understanding it both as something that people do, and that has a specific meaning to them. Following recent literature on the anthropology of Islam, we set these parameters to be the sounds and acoustic practices, and the ethical subjectivity of Sufism. From my participant observations we noticed that the space where these ritual chanting take place should not be considered a background, or a secondary consideration, and instead should be brought to the front of the anthropological analysis. Aiming to incorporate space into the acoustic and ethical aspects of the zikr we realized that most studies simply “applied” a spatial dimension into their ethnographic observation, and failed to conceptualize how the ethnographic materials may change the definition of space that anthropologists have. We explored the definition of space that anthropologists have by default, by virtue of being educated and socialized into the western-modern epistemic culture. And lastly, we proposed a theoretical model for how ethical practices can change the definitions of space. We can now put everything together in the following section, the analysis, where we will see how the ethical practices of the Sufi zikr not only have spatial dimensions worth discussing, but create new conceptual ways of understanding what spatialized ethics can be, beyond the right/wrong dichotomy of Euclidian-space ethics.

## **Analysis: Rethinking intentions**

### ***Elliptical Space***

Retaking Barad's argument, let us have a look at the specific discursive and material practices of the zikr incantations, and pay attention to the ways they are related specific

ways the space of ethical comportment. How to describe this space, then, if not by the Euclidean-Cartesian conception of space? In the following section I analyze my ethnographic findings to theorize out of them a different conception of space.

Let us start by recounting the Sufi ethical subjectivity. Remember that in Sufism, like in other divisions of Islam, the ethical subjects are made through a relationship of imitation of the persona of the prophet, Muhammad, in his every-day ways of being – how he talked, how he walked, how he went about doing his daily activities like eating, sleeping, and praying. But in Sufism, there is the added component of the strong and very meaningful relationship that students have with the master. This relationship is legitimized through the unbroken chain that the Sufi masters have that extends all the way back to the prophet himself, and thus, it is in the masters own physicality, his corporeal existence, that the prophet exists also. And this means that the ethical subjectivity of Sufis is made in practice through a relation to the habits of Sheikh, or master. Therefore we can understand the actions that take place during the performance of a Sufi zikr as ethical mimetic performances that have the power and potential to re-shape the space they constitute and through which spatialized ethics come to be.

What do we find when we look at the Sufi practices? Are there parallels between the zikr actions and the Sufi ethics? Indeed there are. Let us begin by looking at the location arrangement of bodies during a zikr performance. The following observations apply to the zikr rituals that were performed under the guidance of Sheikh Mehmet during the trip in the south of Spain, as well as the weekly zikrs conducted by Sheikh Abdul Wadud in Barcelona. The spatial arrangement of the room and the position of the Sufi students is itself an embodiment of the Sufi ethics. The directionality of the arrangement during Salats, everyday prayer, carries a signification of *baraka*, or blessing: The farther “up” towards the Mihrab, and equally towards Mecca, the more spiritual blessings one would be in place to receive. This is not only in the Sufi community but a general embodiment of Islamic acoustic ethics.

What is particularly interesting is when the person of the master is introduced. The person standing in direct opposition to the Mihrab in front of the rest of the community, and thus closest to Mecca, is always the Sheikh, either Abdul Wadud in the meetings in Barcelona or Mehmet during the days of the meeting. But the more fascinating aspect is the somatic arrangement not of the salats, but during the performance of the zikr. All participants sit in a circular shape, partially eliminating a well-defined sense of direct direction, although Abdul Wadud retains his seat at the focal point of the space, right in front of the Mihrab. The shape is never a perfect circle because the participants sit tilted and angled towards the sheikh. It is more of an elliptical shape at times, with the sheikh sitting on the line that marks the longer axis of the ellipse. Next to him on either side sit community members with seniority, almost always on Abdul Wadud's right side sits Abdul Fatah, the oldest member of the community of Barcelona. Also dignified guests who visit from other communities, for example Abdul Rahim, who is a Moroccan man, around fifty years old, with high standing in the community but who does not live in Barcelona, but who visits often, and his brother Mohammad, who is a regular in the community, and who also regularly sits close to Abdul Wadud. One can, generally but not always, see the standing of the member reflected in the complexity and degrees of adornment of the head wear carried. The members who sit close to sheikh Wadud are usually wearing complex head wear. Even though there is no formal nor explicit "sitting chart", in practice physical distance from the sheikh is directly correlated with advancement in the Sufi spiritual path. In this manner, the topological features of a zikr, the spatial organization of the space in relation to where bodies are located, is done in reference to the location of the body of the sheikh. In this sense, they are the result of and help to recreate the mimetic and embodied Sufi ethical subject.



Sheikh Abdul Wadud sits in the center of an elliptical shape made up of Sufi students. Behind him, the Mihrab, in the direction of the Mecca. He sits, literally and figuratively, illuminated, as a small lamp is lit and placed behind him every time he delivers a sermon. On his right-hand side sits Abdul Fatah, the oldest community-member. On his left, devout Sufis and regular attendants of the zikr, Khalid and Muhammad.

Proximity is not just a spatial feature of the zikr, it is also an ethical one.

The relationship to Mohammad embodied in the relationship with the Sheikh of the community is manifested not only on the location of the Sufis in the physical space, but also in the acoustic component of the zikr. As Eisenlohr (p.40) explains:

“the occupying of a nondimensional space or area within the range of experienced presence.” Sound waves come into existence when objects or human bodies disturb a medium such as air, enveloping and often transductively entering the bodies of those perceiving them, thereby weakening their boundaries. Sound waves propagating through the medium of air as differences in air pressure cannot only be perceived by the hearing apparatus but can also potentially reverberate in and be sensed by the entire body, by its flesh. This is an experience familiar to anyone who has felt the bass resonate in one’s own body in a dance club[...] In this somatic

dimension, sound is one of our principal modes of experiential commingling with the world (Ingold 2007, 11). According to Bohme (2000, 18), the concrete role that sonic phenomena play in such commingling is that they affect the felt-body's sense of spatiality: Listeners will sense tones, voices, sounds as modifications of their own space of being. Human beings who listen in this way are dangerously open, release themselves into the world and can therefore be struck by acoustic events. . . .

Listening is a being-beside-yourself (außer-sich-sein); it can for this reason be the joyful experience of discovering oneself to be alive.

Sheikh Abdul Wadud leads the ritual of the zikr like a conductor of an orchestra. He “sets the tone” literally, depending on the configurations of the requirements. For example one night in May 2018, because of the changing times associated with the prayer of sunset, salat al magreb, as the sun sets later in the day, conflict arose between the times of prayer, the times of communal dinner, and the times of zikr. Abdul Wadud in this case “hurried up” the zikr by indicating with his voice the performance of shorter, quicker and more compact versions of the blessings that are normally recited. When I interviewed him about it, he said that certain zikrs can be shortened or lengthened depending on the mood, time constraints, and other external factors. Since there is no previously agreed or standard set number of repetitions that these zikrs need to be chanted, it is up to the specific master to lead and adjust, depending on how he feels the setting. Since the community members do not know how many times they are going to be performing a particular set of repetitive chants, they truly are “following” the sheikh; listening acutely for acoustic cues like changes in his tone, pitch, length and duration to be able to both estimate when the final repetition will take place, and to be able to coordinate with the other chanting members so that harmony in sound is achieved and there is not discordance.

All of these changes of pace, pitch, tone and volume have concrete effects in the acoustic-spatial aspects of the Sufi zikr. Bohme (2009, p.30-31) writes:

“We listen to a voice in space. We are affectively struck by the voice because we are

modified in our own presence in space through the voices we hear. To be present in a space means to reach out into this space through the sensing of the felt-body. This occurs through feeling oneself contracted or expanded, pushed down or lifted up and much more[...]The extraordinary effect of voices on our present emotional state is due to them immediately modifying our presence in space as sensed by the felt-body. They can make one contracted or expanded, they can be elevating and redeeming, or dampening and frightening. As tones are called high and low, having a broad base (Greek: *barus*), or pointed and sharp (Greek: *oxus*), so do our sensations follow the suggestive impressions of such tones by inviting or forcing us to be present in space in this or that way with the sensing of our felt-body.”

Let us have a look at an audiovisual clip that illustrates this relationship:



This was filmed in a private house outside of Seville in March 2018, during the visit of Sheikh Mehmet Al-Haqqani to Spain. The zikr being performed in the clip is “La Ilaha

Il'Allah” - there is no god but Allah – and it is one of the most common and important zikrs. A Sufi is supposed to say it at least five hundred times a day. We can see in the clip that at the center of the personal corporal arrangement of the bodies sits the grand Sheikh. On his left is the sheikh of the Barcelona community, Abdul Wadud. On his right the Sheikh of the Orjiva community - the largest Sufi community in Spain - Sheikh Omar. Next to them are other Sheikhs of other communities, and also members with long-standing honor and status within the community. We can see that the spatial arrangement of the room and its dynamics is directly related to the ethical corporality of Sufism. Unrelated to the point I am making, yet noteworthy, we can see in the video a child gyrating. These actions illustrate the corporal dimension of listening I mentioned above through the work of Hirschkind and Einsenlohr and that is very present in this case study. Let us have a look at another audiovisual to see what happens next during the zikr:



During the course of a zikr performance, the sheikh is the first to recite, while everyone is quiet and listening, waiting for his command to join. His voice stands out from

that of everyone: By virtue of habituation he has managed to secure a specific pitch that is slightly higher than the collective, one, this way making sure that his voice stands out above the collective voice and is able to lead. This vocal effect creates a situation in which the community “follows” acoustically speaking the leader. We can hear this change in the audiovisual clip above. The members are chanting La Ilaha Il'Allah repeatedly and they do not know when the Sheikh will decide to make the change. Remember that there is no previously established number. The members are not told how many times they will chant a given zikr before starting to chant. In fact, the point of the exercise is to recite this phrase without having explicit knowledge of when it will end, to get lost in the chanting as if it will happen endlessly and has been happening forever. The removal of this knowledge creates two effects: One is that the members who are chanting get to fully concentrate on the doing of the chanting, since knowing when it will end creates a sense of expectation. And secondly it means that the Sufis are also following through trust the Sheikh. Because of the speed and the rhythm of the chant, when the Sheikh decides to move on to the next chant, an acoustic effect is created: The Sheikh starts with the following chant alone, and outwardly from him, starting with those who are closest, the others stop the previous chant and begin the new one. A sort of wave effect is made. Acoustically speaking, an rhythmic oscillation is created through and because of the spatial configuration of the space that mirrors the Sufi ethical relationship with the master. This material-semiotic oscillation irradiates outwards out of the master's singing body and spreads radially, re-creating in spatial and acoustic dimensions the Sufi ethical subjectivity. In this way, the relational ethics of Sufism get manifested acoustically and spatially through the performance of the zikr.

The following two videos are part of the events that took place in a private house in Madrid. In the first we see the Sheikh delivering a small sermon to the listening audience. Again we can see how the Sufis are seated in concentric circles around the Sheikh, so that the spatial arrangement is in alignment with the strong relationship towards Muhammad that passes through the Sheikh.



The second video, of the same zikr session, illustrates two aspects: The corporeal and embodied aspect of chanting, in the way of movements of the head. Acoustically, it shows how the Sufi students do not know when the chanting will stop. The sheikh initiates the following chant while the students are in the middle of chanting the previous one. The change is abrupt and can create disharmony. But the effect is desired: enacting in practice the leader / follower dynamic.



Abdul Latif, from Barcelona, shakes his head from left to right in a rhythmic way, to the tune of the melody of the zikr “hu” (he is). When the chant has been repeated enough times, the leader chooses to move on to the next chant, and the students must follow him.

Similarly to the event in Seville and in Barcelona, the women are notoriously missing from the frame. Women are not forbidden from attending the ritual, although I do not have visual material of them because of the reasons I outlined above in the methodology section. But they are required to sit in a different physical space from the men. Because of the physical layout of the rooms, the sounds reach the back of the room, where women sometimes sit, on in the examples of Seville and Madrid, a totally different room, with a slight delay and distortion. This means that there is a rippling effects when a particular Sufi zikr is ending and another one is beginning, as some of these changes are quite sudden. The acoustic effect is that when Sheikh Mehmet changes the chant, as we saw above, the persons closest to him notice it right away. The next group of men closest to him notice the change rapidly, and lastly those sitting farthest away from him, the less pious of the men as well as the women of the group<sup>5</sup>, are caught up in a one or two second differential in the previous chant. If the women are seated in a different room, this differential becomes more meaningful.

We can conclude then out of these observations that the dergah, the Sufi community space, is not a neutral Euclidean space where the location of the Sufis believers and the Sheikh Abdul Wadud can be plotted in a grid-like manner, both positionally speaking, that is as material bodies in a physical space, and ethically speaking, as subjects inhabiting an embodied relational piety. Instead, we see how the two are intertwined in such a way that they co-create one another: physical space is configured in a specific manner through the zikr incantations, and at the same time the Sufi ethics of intentionality are configured through the very physical act of chanting and reciting. The Sufi ethics exist, not as “beliefs” about something beyond and unreachable. As Holbraad and Petersen explain (2017, p.266):

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<sup>5</sup> The effects of this on gender difference and the gendered aspect of Sufi zikr, and of the Sufi ethics in general remain to be studied in dept.

Traditionally it has been assumed of Christianity at least (the point is moot, and we'll come to it presently) that faith is directed at the obscure and the unattainable: mysterious and subjective stuff that lies beyond the transparent objectivity of science. But just as the illusion of representational transparency in science results from bracketing off the long 'distances' traversed by scientists' fragile chains of reference (see, for example, Latour 1999 ), so, for Latour, the notion of transcendence in religion (the distance faith is supposed to 'leap' across) ignores the intimacy religious expression is meant to elicit. For in religion, as in love, the message is the medium. 'I love you' is not a statement that conveys information – if it were, Latour urges, lovers would hardly ask each other to repeat it, time and again. It is a statement that, while utterly banal in itself, strives to bring the utterer and his interlocutor closer. It is just this delicate operation, in which subtle sensibilities as to tone and timing are so vital, that religious speech seeks to enact. Latour chooses as his example the devotional role of iconography in Catholic art, but the point could be made as well with reference to conversion, the Eucharist or the Life and Passion of Jesus: each of these 'speech-acts' conspires to efface its own propositional force so as to render present, in the act, the intimacy of relation itself'.

While Latour focuses on the christian experience, the point can be very well made about Islam, and the Muslim subjectivity (Mahmood, 2009). Like the "I love you's", the utterations of the zikr chants are constant enactments of the particular relationship Sufis have with their Sheikh. They are instantiations of socio-material configurations, as realizations of modes of ordering the real. These modes of ordering can vary according to the setting, something that I realized while filming the visit of the grand leader to Spain, but not much. They have a set aspect, a hierarchy, based on the relationship that the community has with the Sufi master, and with the figure of the prophet, Muhammad. So, what does this tell us about the concept of space and the spatialization of ethics?

If we were to spatialize then the Sufi Islamic subjectivity using the principle of

recursivity and draw inspiration from the acoustic/ethical practices of the zikr, it would not make sense to do it along a straight line from left/wrong to right/right as was described by Hertz. The right and wrong polar spectrum of ethics is based on the Euclidean model of space in which any given ethical “position” can be accurately measured against another one through a straight-forward comparison of its coordinates. However as we saw earlier, the Sufi ethics are constructed in a mimetic relationship that passes from the believers to the master, through his previous masters, all the way up to the prophet Muhammad. And as we just saw, these are not simply metaphorical or allegorical in their kind, amaterial or abstract “ideas” that Sufis have.

The coordinate planes where actions and people are positioned are themselves inclined towards a center, towards the perfect ethical subject of Muhammad, through the person of the sheikh. Therefore we need to place Muhammad as a referent, in the center, at the origin of a space, and then construct all the other points in relation to it, so that the space itself is *curved*. Specifically, the ethical space of a Sufi murid lies on a plane curved inwards, because ethical action is conceptualized to go towards the center, its directionality is inwards because Sufi ethics are presented as the process of constantly becoming more and more similar to Muhammad through mimesis. This type of space is called in geometry a non-Euclidean space. There are two types of non-Euclidean spaces, hyperbolic, where the space diverges, or goes away from the center, and elliptical, where space converges or goes towards the center. Sufi ethical spaces are elliptical spaces<sup>6</sup>. It is worth noting that Elliptical

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<sup>6</sup> It may seem at first to be contradictory to replace a western, modern concept (Euclidean space) with another modern, western concept (spherical space). After all, is it not the methodological induction of reflexivity about *transcending* the conceptual stronghold that western sciences have in describing the world? Here I would like to respond that it is not *per se* the westernness of a specific concept that ought to incline us to reconsider it or to be critical to it. It is only when taken in context of the history of colonialism and conceptual imperialism that this denoting of modernity and of westernness makes sense. Therefore I believe that in the process of “decolonization of thought” (de Castro & Skafish, 2015) one must be open to the possibility of enrolling into the process perspectives and ways of living that actively undermine or subvert their own categories from within. If we consider that it is the Euclidean view of space that is hegemonic in today's world, then the Spherical space view can be considered an alternative worth exploring, regardless of whether

spaces are not abstract mathematical concepts; They are used in many applications of every day engineering and technological projects, and are as “real” as Euclidean spaces, regardless of the fact that our everyday experience of the world feels Euclidean. For example, spherical space is a kind of elliptical space, that was one of the types of non-euclidean spaces that were first proposed in the nineteenth century. Spherical space has countless applications, since the earth is a sphere and thus geometrical actions on its surface also belong to the type of non-euclidean spherical geometry. At a small scale such as our every-day actions, it is possible to disregard this reality, but airplanes for example, constantly make use of mathematical postulates that make sense in spherical space and not in Euclidean space to be able to travel around the globe.

The zikr's physical changes replicate the spherical spatialization following the model proposed above. The believer's voices following of Abdul Wadud's voice create acoustic resonance and interference patterns so that his voice is positioned in the center of the spectrum, nested inside of theirs. From the inside, acoustically speaking, it leads and commands the progression of the sonic ritual. Around him, acoustic-physically speaking and ethically speaking are the voices of those closest to him, and so on, creating a gradient of sound and piety that expands symmetrical outwards in the shape of ellipsis.

Notice that “close to him” in this case is not a location that can be determined using Euclidean spatial procedures, because the “closeness”, the proximity as a unit of analysis, needs to be understood in relation to both the physicality of the production of sound *as well*

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it was developed in the west or not. It is worth mentioning, without going into the history of this specific concept, that while most of the work on its development has been done in Europe in the last two hundred years, many of the theoretical bases for it were developed by Arab and Muslim mathematicians in the middle ages (Rashed, 2002). This makes sense when we consider that “the west” is not a monolithic building block to be positioned against in contrast with other geographically determined epistemic cultures. It is rather a loosely-held constellation of epistemic and ontological configurations. And while it is true that there are many commonalities, it is important for anthropological thought to not solidify or “blackbox” it as a concept, and to always look for specific genealogies of thought that can be used to challenge and question the hegemonic order.

as the spatial dimensionality of Sufi piety. The zikr, as a material-discursive practice in the form an acoustic-ethical doing *creates its own dimensions of spatiality and thus spatial measurement*. Dimensions such as proximity, location, distance and scale, understood strictly as geometric operands, need to be reconsidered and or supplemented (Barad, 2007, p. 244). This is because the zikr is not simply a practice that takes place *inside* of time and space but an active reconfiguration of what space and time *are*. For example Barad proposes including the questions of boundary, connectivity and the interiority and exteriority dichotomy so as to shift the analysis to be more topological, meaning more attuned to how the space and the bodies that co-construct it are made and remade through the doings in different ways (p.244).

The introduction of elliptical space as space that curves inward as opposed to Euclidean, neutral space serves the purpose of allowing us the possibility of talking about direction and directionality. In this sense it is akin to the concept of motility as used by Holbraad in *Truth in Motion* (2012) and later discussed by Holbraad and Petersen (2017, p.275) as revisions to the concept of the relation of Latour:

“Recall Latour’s central claim, namely that religious expressions in Christianity are meant to generate our proximate relation to God by conspiring to cancel the possibility of representation. The problem, as we have suggested, is that, for some Christians at least, human beings’ relation to God is not initially proximate, as indicated, for example, by the common Christian conviction that after the Fall the human predicament is one of estrangement (in which case, far from an illusion or a representationalist misunderstanding, the transcendence of God is a basic cosmological premise). Unlike Latour’s notion of intimacy (analytically cast as the ‘relation’), the idea of motility (the ‘vector’) is able to render transcendence as an irreducible dimension of human beings’ relationship with God. On this analysis, transcendence is not to be understood as a mysterious alterity, characteristic of representationist dualisms (the incommensurability of humans vs. God). Rather it should be taken as a logical constituent of a particular and new kind of relationship

(cf. Corsín- Jimenez 2007 ), namely that of transformation, properly construed as a motion that relates terms (humans and God) always at one logical step removed, as a potentiality is related to its own actualization. Human beings are what they are because of what they are-not- yet, the ‘yet’ here being that of salvation, perhaps – the hope of the immanence of God, or of communion.”

We can see how the Sufi spiritual and ethical path is predicated upon a definition of transcendence similar to that of Holbraad and Petersen in the quote above. What their concept of the vector does to the concept of the relation is what my introduction of elliptical space does to Euclidean space: It allows us to spatialize the zikr (that is to say, to think of its elements relationally one to the other in space) in accordance to the Sufi ethical subjectivity.

### ***Intentions beyond interior/exterior dichotomy***

The attention to the question of interiority and exteriority that Barad mentioned is particularly interesting for Sufi ethics. Remember that the representationalist view has very strict and well-defined boundaries for what counts as inside and what counts as outside. For representationalism “representations serve a mediating function between knower and known that displays a deep mistrust of matter, holding it off at a distance, figuring it as passive, immutable, and mute, in need of the mark of an external force like culture or history to complete it [...] the representationalist belief in the power of words to mirror preexisting phenomena is the metaphysical substrate that supports social constructivist, as well as traditional realist, beliefs” ( Barad, 2007, p.133). But if we consider the possibility that through the practice of the zikr these boundaries of what counts as interior (thoughts, representations, ethical ideals) and what counts as exterior (matter, bodies, space, chants) can be re-draws along different lines, we can arrive at a creative re-interpretation of spatialized ethics. Remember that the Sufis make a habit of speaking of intentions. Under the Euclidean view of space and the representationalist view of knowledge, an intention is

classified as an internal concept. That is to say, intentions are not “things in the world” but rather amaterial and interior beings, existing in the mind of a person. In the common way of speaking, “she has good intentions” or “do not trust him, he has bad intentions” are ways of speaking that organizes the world in a particular manner and places some entities, “intentions”, inside of the material head of a person. The person is material, his intentions are not.

With the conceptual opening afforded by the reconfiguration of the inside and outside that the zikr's material-discursive doings provide we can see how things can be otherwise. To speak of intentions as the operation through which ethics are made does not have to be contrasted against actions, necessarily (intention versus actions being a mirror of the whole internal versus external, representation versus reality Euclidean-Cartesian metaphysics we are trying to leave behind). Intentions can be considered to subvert this typology, if we remember that Islamic ethical subjectivity is intra-actively made as embodied habits and patterns of daily behaviors that emulate the prophet Muhammad, in Sufism in the flesh through the habits of the Sufi master. Instead of as abstract notions or ideals of “right” and “wrong” in an imaginary Cartesian plane. In this sense, the meaning of the word “intention” is closer to its meaning in the sentence “to live with intention.” To live with intention has become in recent years an available quip of the self-help movement and associated new age spiritualities. But it is something that many religions, including Sufism, have been stressing for a long time. “Intention” as understood by the Sufi ethical lens, is a way of living life, a way of organizing daily activities and habits, that offers a different configuration than the inside/outside setup of representationalism. Intentions in this way of thinking do not exist in reference to inside “thoughts” and outside “doings”. They are, as Barad proposed, interminglings of affect and matter that challenge the disembodied rational self. The Sufi ethical subject is a subject existing always embodied in every-day practices and also always *in relation* – to the prophet Muhammad through her local leader and broader tariqa Sheikh.

The embodied aspect is present then, rather than through the idiom of seeing,

through the idiom of *feeling*. Barad's ethics of intra-activity are framed through an active physical contact with the world, of existing in the world in relation to others – the other subjects who inhabits it with us but also the other objects that populate our world: “The intra-actively emergent "parts" of phenomena are co-constituted. Not only subjects but also the myriad of objects are permeated through and through with their entangled kin; the other is not just in one's skin, but in one's bones, in one's belly, in one's heart, in one's nucleus, in one's past and future” (p.393). This is a view of ethics as a type of ontological and epistemological entanglement, manifested through the corporeal and embodied aspect of every-day life. This embodied feeling as the operator of ethical action is present in Sufism: “For Sufi mystics, such as Ibn al-Arabi, it was by means of the sound, rhythm, affect, and harmony afforded by both poetry and recited Quranic verses that imaginal knowledge of the right and true (as opposed to rational knowledge) could be achieved, or, in Ibn al-Arabi's term, "tasted [dhawq]" (Hirschkind, 2006, p. 102).

So, are intentions material actions or ethical concepts in the abstract? Part of the ontological turn from where I am drawing the principle of reflexivity is to try and undermine and undue these long-held dichotomies: “the turn toward ontology is designed as a corrective to [...] epistemological explanations—that is, analyses that account for difference in terms of diverse (culturally influenced) ways of knowing and representing reality. According to the ontologists, what the authors of such accounts often forget—even in attacking Eurocentrism—is their own reliance on the same series of dichotomies that underwrite the privileged status of humans (and especially of Western civilization) vis-a-vis the environment and all other beings: culture vs. nature; mind vs. matter; subjects vs. objects; concepts vs. things (Salmond 2014, p.162-163).” If Sufi ethics are about intentions, and intentions are not understood solely as “ethical concepts” that exist in the head of some people, but as specific and situated ways of feeling the world through an embodied relationship with sound (rhythm, harmony, duration, tone and pitch), then what can we say about Sufi ethics that we were not able before? Here I would like to bring in the concept of recursivity as deployed by Martin Holbraad in his book *Truth in Motion: The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination* (Holbraad, 2012b, 2012a) and further explained later

by Holbraad and Petersen (2017). Recursivity for them refers to the ways in which the sensuous involvement with things (what we see, hear, smell and touch) are understood as *conceptual affordances* (p. 218). That means, how the specific material characteristics of the materials around us can help to inform and form anthropological conceptualization of such things. This was the fundamental idea behind the book *Thinking Through Things* (Henare, Holbraad, & Wastell, 2007) that Holbraad and Petersen later revisited, and that they framed as the symmetrical move to the reflexivity of the ontological turn, blurring the distinction between concept and thing. In other words, the aim is to try to not approach the study of the world with any ideological assumptions (reflexivity) and out of the ethnographic engagement with the things themselves [through the senses] develop conceptual understandings (recursivity).

For Holbraad and Pedersen, certain concepts can be considered “post-human”, as in associated with what comes after the interpretative or linguistic turn in anthropology, in the sense that they were not made by a single person, and do not exist independently in the minds of individuals. They use the example of the Talisman from Pedersen's book (Pedersen, 2007) to illustrate the point that “certain material artefacts may be said to ‘emit concepts’ as radiation beams from radioactive materials, and in that sense may be subject to self-scalings, self- transformations and indeed self- abstractions” (p. 236). Since the concept = thing equation can be transversed equally in both directions, I would like to offer an interpretation of what the concept of “intention” can be transposed into the material domain. In this case it is more useful to speak of phenomena, like Barad does, and not simply artefacts. I mean to say the compound unit of Sufis performing the zikr incantations along with the material environments that are affected and transformed through this acoustic action. The whole ethical soundscape with the phenomenological atmospheres.

There are two conventional difficulties that exist when we look at Sufi ethics through an Euclidean-Cartesian lens that we are now in a better position to tackle: The first has to do with the idea that piety is dependent on a given ethical position. From the western perspective, we would tend to think that the correctness or wrongness of an action is in the

action itself, not so much on who does it. In other words the spaces of right and wrong are “fixed” and pinned one-to-one in a flat space, and it is individuals who can “inhabit” or exist in, temporarily, but also displace themselves around, these right and wrong spaces. But the Sufi ethics are much more dynamic, depending not on static positionalities but on dynamic patterns of behaviors associated with the master. The curved aspect of elliptical space captures this component and allows us to express piety not in terms of right and wrong as absolute cardinalities but as functions of proximity. Mimesis is spatial approximation, and is elliptical, it has a component of direction that Euclidean space simply did not capture.

The other has to do with intentions, and with seeing them as pre-action, abstract entities. As we saw before, the concept of intention arises out of the complete scenario of intra-actions and interactions that compose a Sufi zikr. The zikr is a concept-producing phenomenon. Intentions then are not concepts that individual Sufis believe in, as an aggregate of individuals. They are not located “inside” of the minds of the Sufis. They rather come into existence through the acoustic practice of the zikr, a simultaneous ethical and material practice of chanting. They aren't solely acoustic actions though, or are solely ethical relationalities, they inhabit a dual existence: Intentions are lived and embodied ways of engaging with the world, habits of responses, patterns of behaviors, routines of thought and action, that are in alignment with, and are understood in relation to, the ethical comportment of the prophet Muhammad. They are activated acoustically and somatically through the zikr, and are “post-human concepts” in the terminology above, because they cannot be reduced to mental representations. This is the kind of finding that I aimed to realize through this exercise of “post-constructivist” anthropology. Particularly by emphasizing Barad's conceptual argument of a performative ethics, that are derived from the findings of quantum physics, as an important and necessary piece of my argument, we can see how this angle is both different and complements the anthropology of space that is highly influenced by Lefebvre's work, where reflexivity about Euro-American concepts about materiality in a non-Marxist framework are virtually non-existent.

## ***The audiovisual register and the ontological***

I will now reflect back on the methodological aspect of filming in relation to visual anthropology and my ethnographic findings. As mentioned before, the way I approached filming was through the prism of “shared anthropology” of visual anthropologist Jean Rouch, with the aim of embarking on novel possibilities not offered through traditional anthropological methods. We can see how many of the theoretical findings of this thesis, those that rely on an attention to sound and its aspects (pitch, tone, volume and rhythm, to name a few) and those related to body-space dynamics (location, distances between people, gestures and movements, among others) arise exactly through this particular engagement. I will now offer a way to connect these findings within the ontological anthropology that informs the previous part of this work. The aim is to integrate the visual aspect of this thesis so that it does not simply remain a “tool” for documenting or registering, but a contributor to the theoretical side as well. Holbraad and Petersen (2017, p.238) discuss the concept of pragmatology. Pragmatology, or “art backwards”, refers to the practice of extracting concepts from things themselves as an analytical technique. It is “art backwards” in the sense that art is the congealment in concrete form a set of conceptual possibilities. Pragmatology is the reverse process, it consists in “producing conceptualizations that express in abstract form a set of concrete realities” (p. 239). The role of visual anthropology in relation to pragmatology seems clear then. The visual register is a fantastic channel to grasp at, and contend with, these concrete realities. Recall from Vertov's manifesto that the cine-eye is also “the machine that shows you the world as only a machine can see it.” By incorporating the machinist with the human vision, we are in a privileged position of experimentation to abstract the conceptual out of the concrete. Is the machine view more “objective” than the human eye? Does it offer us a less mediated or less culturally-biased perspective than our own? Some may argue that it does. I will only go so far to say that the camera's eye provides us a *different* take on reality than our own. One that, in this case, allowed me to integrate into my analysis aspects that were obscured before. The combination of both allows for a degree of creativity and experimentation in ontological anthropology that is novel and can prove to be productive.

The visual can also be considered the product, the abstraction itself, the result of this worldly transformation that is doing ethnography in our complex and ever-flowing world. I'd like to consider my visual component of this work as artistic (to be evaluated partly through its aesthetic value) and also pragmatological – as an anthropological research tool of concept abstraction. Questions remain: Can it or should it be only one of those? Or can it be both? How to integrate the informants in both the video production and also the conceptualization process? I leave this only as speculation and as possibilities for future research at the intersection between visual anthropology and the post-ontological turn anthropology.

## **Conclusion**

### ***The Concept of Maqam***

As a way of concluding this exercise I will look at a particular Sufi concept, *maqam*, through the newly formed definition of piety and space that arose out of this ethnography. In Sufism there is a concept, *maqam*, which means “place of residence.” It has many different meanings, depending on the intellectual and cultural tradition where it is employed, but generally it has three (Sabate, 2018): One is the spiritual location or station where a Sufi murid, student, is located on his journey towards the union with the divine. The second is the location where a Sufi saint is buried and/or where there is a strong presence of a dead Sufi saint. The third meaning is applied in music theory where *maqam* refers to a key or a music register, speaking about a location in the musical scale. *Maqam* then is a concept of “dwelling”, an abode, a domicile, a temporary and possibly transient habitation of a *place*. It is different from “location”, the closest counter-part in western knowledge sphere, in the sense that there is an implicit subject, someone who dwells or inhabits the place, whereas location is usually understood to be subject-less, to be filled by the subject afterwards.

These three habitations let us think of them as ethical habitation, the first meaning, referring to the progressing location of a Sufi murid in the direction towards Allah, mimicking the habits of Muhammad and the Sufi sheikh. Habitation of the physical, material space, making reference to specific places on earth, a geographical indicator, where the presence of a Sufi saint is felt through *baraka*, or blessings. The third is the habitation of a musical mode, understanding music as the progressive composition of inhabited temporary locations (musical notes). As Sayed Hossein Nasr explains, under Sufism music can be “one of the most powerful means for awakening the qualified person from the sleep of forgetfulness (*ghaflah*). It is a sure and dependable steed, one that is able to take man from the abyss of the material world with all its hardship and pain to the zenith of the limitless world of the Spirit, within which all pain and suffering is transformed into happiness and joy” (Nasr, 1972, p.4).

The concept of *maqam*, then, as a concept that has simultaneous meanings in relation to ethical positional states of being (stations), geographical locations and acoustic phenomenological dimensions, does not make complete sense within the Euclidean-Cartesian and general western modern view of dynamics of space and spatialized ethics of right/wrong. There is a direct and complex interplay between these three concepts of existing in relation to space; the ethical, physical and acoustic / musical, that is simply not there in the western epistemic culture, where different dynamics exist. A perhaps more apt spatialization of Sufi *zikr* practices that can make better sense of Sufi concepts like *Maqam* is the concept of elliptical space, where space itself is curved inwardly towards the model of the supreme ethical subject, Muhammad. The phenomenology of acoustic practices - of creating sounds as in chanting, and of listening to music – can be understood as a bridge between the other two other habitations. Residing in the realm of the physical and residing in the realm of piety at the same time *through* the acoustic-ethical actions, like playing and listening to divine music, or performing *zikrs*. Without the space or time to develop this argument further, I leave it here as a way to pave a road towards future research, where a more rich, time-consuming and intensive ethnographic study of the concept of *maqam* as it exists in practice can be made. My point was to tie together the ethical and the acoustic in

relation to the spatial, and use a very practical example – a concept that exists and is in practice in the world – to illustrate how my proposition of elliptical space can be put to practice to generate new anthropological concepts and understandings.

Let us circle back to the beginning and zoom out to see everything one last time. This is what I did in this work: I engaged in an intensive ethnographic exercise with the Sufi community in Barcelona in their practice of the zikr. As a framework to understand the zikr I decided on the two aspects that seemed prominent, understanding the actions as producing and listening to sounds, and in relation to its importance in the wider ethical framework of Islam. From my observations I decided to compliment the current literature along the lines of the effect that space had on both of these aspects, a task that led me through a deeper methodological avenue in a process of reflexivity. To compliment the reflexive element I employed a theory of ethics and space that allowed me to introduce a recursive approach to the concept of space. Ultimately that allowed me to propose that Sufi ethics must be spatialized through an elliptical concept of space, not an Euclidean one. Through this spatialization technique I was able to propose two readings of Sufi ethics that could be generative of further research: The first is a way to make sense of piety that is linked with a given person, a master, spiritual leader or another kind of person with particular pious status, without introducing a concept of transcendence or a transcendental element into the analysis. The second is a way to frame discussions in moral anthropology and legal anthropology about concept of intent, intention and motives as compared with results, consequences and actions that do not pin one against the other as opposites or complementary in time. As a way of conclusion, I presented a Sufi concept, the concept of Maqam, that does not make sense from an Euclidean-Cartesian angle, and I showed how the elliptical ethico-spatial thinking is better suited to understand it. Sufis live their life according to a conceptual definition of piety that is as follows: To live a pious life is to live with good intentions, but it does not mean to think good thoughts, or to have the appropriate ideas in one's head. To live with good intentions is to periodically re-locate oneself, through the every-day performance of the zikr, the remembrance of Allah through the utterance of specific phrases, in an elliptical space that curves and eventually converges

asymptotically towards the master's charismatic ethical persona.

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