

D I S K U S

The Journal of the British Association for the Study of Religions (www.basr.ac.uk)
ISSN: 0967-8948

Diskus 17.1 (2015), 23-29

Entering Jerusalem: Deconstructing Assumptions on Identity as a Researcher and as a Sufi

Yafiah Katherine Randall
University of Winchester
Yafiah.Randall@winchester.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

As a practicing Sufi studying Sufism in Israel I might be considered an 'insider'. My research involved interviews and participant observation on Sufism in Israel as practiced by Jews and Muslims together. In many ways I am also an 'outsider'. In this reflective paper I consider whether the terms 'insider' or 'outsider' aid a fuller understanding of the relationship of the researcher to her respondents? Or are these identity markers too inflexible? Surely integrity and rigour demand more than simple assumptions of where the researcher stands in relation to her subjects. I am using the statement, 'Entering Jerusalem' as a metaphor for entering a space where I discovered that my subjectivity was broader than I had imagined and where my interviewees taught me a wider understanding of self and identity than can be contained within the terms 'insider' or 'outsider'. I will illustrate the alignment I found between academic method and theory, and my practice as a Sufi, based on a Sufi understanding of seeing the other as a mirror in which the self is reflected.

My reflections here are on the impact that my field studies in Israel have had on my sense of identity as a researcher and as a Sufi. The reflections in this piece are based on the comments of two of my interviewees which highlighted the Sufi approach to self and other and which deepened my own understanding of the fluidity of identity. I begin with a few anecdotal reflections of my impressions in Israel and then mention the alignment I found between academic method and theory, and my practice as a Sufi. This is based on a Sufi understanding of seeing the other as a mirror in which the self is reflected. I also reflect on the Sufi concepts of 'mirroring' and residing in a *barzakh*, the space between two realities. Both concepts have played a critical role in the lives of all my interviewees in their engagement with the other and have become pivotal to my own understanding of how I pursue my research. I conclude with an acknowledgement of the two voices that are speaking in this article and how, issuing from one pen, they merge to mirror my experience of a radical re-assessment of what I understand to be identity. The Sufi view of the other

has the potential to subvert the negative aspects of defining the self against the other and my reflections are led by my interviewees who have to negotiate this tendency on a daily basis.

The comments that make up the first example come from a Palestinian-Israeli Sufi who is active in grass-roots peace-making. His comments illustrate the Sufi tools which facilitate relationships with others and which require reflexivity for their profound function of knowing the self. The second example comes from a Jewish-Israeli woman who studies Islamic mysticism experientially and who takes me with her into a profound problematization of how 'identity' is understood. It is the complexity of lives and identities in Israel that contributed to my evaluation of where I stood as a researcher in relation to my interviewees and further, from a Sufi perspective, to ask the question of what is actually meant by the term 'identity'. I invite the reader to enter Jerusalem with me.

In the summer of 2011, I spent ten weeks doing field studies in Israel (cf Randall 2014). This involved interviews and participant observation for my research on Sufism in Israel as practiced by Jews and Muslims together. Twenty percent of the Israeli population consists of Palestinian-Israelis, or Arab-Israelis, as is their official designation. Nazareth is a majority Palestinian-Israeli town and it is here that the Qadiriyya Sufi Order is based. There are also a number of Jewish-Israelis whose interest in Sufism has brought them together with the Muslim Sufis of Nazareth for study and Sufi practice. Together with some of the Sufis of Nazareth the Jewish-Israelis interest in Sufism led them to establish the *Derekh Avraham/Tariqa Ibrahimiyya* Jewish-Sufi order. My interviewees were therefore all practicing Sufis, mostly Jewish and some Muslim. They practice and study together although the political volatility of the region often makes it difficult for the Muslim Sufis to attend sessions or events happening in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. The Jewish Sufis attend *dhikr* at the Sufi *zawiyya* in Nazareth whenever they can and study under the Shaykh of the Qadiriyya Tariqa there. As a practicing Sufi I am an insider in terms of following the Sufi path. In many ways I am also an 'outsider' being neither Jewish nor Israeli. Very soon after my arrival in Israel these terms appeared to me as no more than convenient markers that offered no insight into the actual reality of identity in relation to the participants who I was engaging in conversation and interviews. The scholarly debate within the discipline of Religious Studies on the pitfalls and/or advantages of being an 'insider' or an 'outsider' became an embodied experience in this research project. In speaking of life as a scholar-practitioner, Bado-Fralick, in her work on Wiccan ritual, notes that, "The insider/outsider distinction assumes that there is only *one* insider voice, or that insider perspectives are uniform or monolithic. It also implies that there is only one correct or objective outsider voice, an assumption rarely entertained seriously by scholars familiar with the diversity of scholarly voices and the competition of scholarly perspectives with one another" (2013, 5). Bado-Fralick then states that neither is there a monolithic insider voice and this is something that I experienced and appreciated among the Sufis I interviewed. The diversity of voices on the conflict, and on matters of faith, in the general Israeli population illustrated the complexity of discussions on conflict resolution and I found Bado-Fralick's claim substantiated when she says that, "[T]he terms insider and outsider conceal an entire realm of discourse engaged in by a multitude of shifting voices and perspectives in negotiation or even in contestation with one another" (Ibid.).

First impressions

As I entered Israel I knew that I was entering a country of which I had no experience. Despite its presumed familiarity from the Bible stories learnt during childhood, or its constant presence in the press, I had no right to assume that these representations constituted any real knowledge of life in this land and any comfortable retreat into a fictive assumption of such would no doubt be dismantled by the reality on the ground. I discovered very quickly that no matter how prepared I was in terms of academic reading, the experience of being immersed in the intricacies of life in Israel and the diversity of religious, political, and socio-cultural narratives of Jewish and Palestinian Israelis was unforeseeable.

When I first entered the Old City of Jerusalem I was struck by the narrative power of the stones. I was impressed by how pertinent were the words of Steven Joseph, an American Jew and Jungian therapist who wrote "A Jerusalem Diary" (2006) as a reflection on his experiences during a visit to Jerusalem. He writes that, "The New City of Jerusalem was built up largely in the nineteenth century - recently as these things go. But the stones used to build it are ancient. For me it is the stones that carry the *numen* the feeling of bottomless depth that Jerusalem evokes" (Joseph 2006, 10). I felt something similar during a day of visiting interfaith activists of all faiths. The group I was with stopped for a lunch break in the Jewish Quarter after walking through the Muslim and the Armenian Quarters. I mused on how the stones speak differently to the different communities living in Jerusalem. While eating falafel and pitta with peace-maker friends in the sunlit square I was aware that the ground beneath us and the buildings around us were the fertile ground of history, myth, and even conspiracy theories. The volume of these probably beats any other plot of land on the planet! Patriarchs, Prophets, Sages, and Saints walk the streets and come into the homes of Jerusalem. Their presence is felt around the many shrines and tombs which are also often painful reminders of more recent history. Life goes on as usual in this extraordinary city. But 'usual' includes a lot of pain. The complex associations and emotions that Jerusalem evokes have been expressed well by NurMasalha: "Furthermore devotion to the 'sacred geography' of Jerusalem has partly to do with the spiritual life of each faith. In fact one of the main current problems of Jerusalem is the *inseparability* of the spiritual/religious and secular/political dimensions. Moreover in all three faiths the notion of the 'sacred geography' of Jerusalem seems to answer a profound human need. In recent years the 'sacred space' of Jerusalem has inspired powerful emotions among Jews, Muslims and Christians: deep anxiety, intense anger, intense traumatic pain, and strong socio-economic, religio-political and spiritual activity" (Marshala& Hayes 2006, 100).

I found it impossible to restrict myself solely to academic work and the sober collection of field data, as the "[i]nseparability of the spiritual/religious and secular/political dimensions," mentioned by Masalha (Marshala& Hayes 2006), impacted on my perceptions of Israel. The faith of my Jewish interviewees, and others who I met and lived with, resonated with my own sentiments mediated by the Sufi connection. As a participant in study sessions – not always of a Sufi nature – in the celebration of Shabbat and attendance at synagogue, and also during

interviews, I began to feel the commonalities between the two faith traditions of Judaism and Islam in an experiential sense. The feeling of belonging together in a mutual endeavour became stronger and as I was conversing mainly with Jewish-Sufi respondents it was the richness of Jewish tradition in which I found aspects of my identity nourished while other assumed components of how I defined myself began to crumble. My field study had become equally a personal journey that ran parallel to my research and interwove with it and informed it in a mutual exchange of further discovery of self and other. This was a spiritual process that was alive and unfolding on my journey and it was, and still is, about experiencing the enrichment of my spiritual path through an engagement with Judaism. The same experience that the Jewish interviewees had in their engagement with Sufism was happening to me in the other direction, meeting in a space of mutual benefit.

Aligning academic method and Sufi epistemology

Historical facts, trans-historical narratives, complex politics, form a tangled ball with threads of sacred inspiration, triumphalism and resentment, deep pain and loss, and a polarization of the facts on the ground. I began to feel that pain with both my Jewish and my Muslim co-narrators and the boundaries of 'outside' and 'inside' began to blur. My experiences in Israel were breaking up my assumptions of who I was and who I was investigating. I had to make decisions on how to proceed with my research. I struggled with the most appropriate theoretical approach to pursue. I needed to be honest in the sense of not allowing a dichotomy to arise between the theoretical requirements of the academy and my personal approach in life which is informed by my Sufi practice. These words of Sa'diyyah Shaikh encouraged me to seek an alignment of the two, "In recognizing the always partial nature of human perceptions, a Sufi approach to knowledge carries the seeds of an organic hermeneutic of humility and openness. Knowledge is recognized as being infinitely layered and expansive – it reveals more or less of itself depending on the state of the seeker. Given this epistemological approach, where reality is constantly unfolding, a Sufi epistemology is theoretically more open to the ways in which truth claims are constantly shifting and are often reconstituted at different levels" (Shaikh 2012, 115).

In applying this readiness to being open to discoveries that re-align my sense of identity I was aware of the subversion of any previously formed expectations or judgements that I had unwittingly brought with me into the field. I decided to apply a methodological approach that gave greater agency to my interviewees by not structuring the interviews other than to give a simple description of my research and then to listen to their narratives. Occasionally I would interject a question appropriate to the narration. My interviewees became participants in producing a contribution to the discourse on Jewish-Muslim relations in a specific form in Israel. They took full advantage of the opportunity to share the story of their work and experience and provided the primary source for the investigation.

Sufi tools and an alternative to 'othering'

Muhasabat al-nafs means regular examination of the self, an assessment of one's responses and reactions to the other. *Adab*, as applied in Sufi terms means courtesy,

to learn, not judge, and to see the other as a mirror of the self. I find these two methods of Sufi practice to be closely aligned to the reflexive practice of the qualitative researcher. The importance of these tools and what they are designed to avoid are highlighted by the comments of peace-maker and academic, Marc Gopin, on the extent of interdependency in the process of othering as a means to building identity. He remarks on the interdependency of groups who are in conflict with each other, "Cultures that live side by side are always in competition in some fashion, and always guarding their boundaries. This is inevitable for the formation of unique identity, which appears to be a near universal need among both individuals and whole groups" (Gopin 2002, 56). He then notes the curious effect of seeking to build a unique identity in this manner, "[e]ven when we see ourselves as qualitatively different and better than our lifelong adversaries, we cannot help but be influenced by and influence the adversary culture. And the worse the conflict becomes, the more it seems that enemies begin to resemble each other, to the point where the propaganda and demonizations of each group seem identical" (ibid).

There is another way of seeing the other and this begins by acknowledging our interdependency. The image of the mirror as a metaphor for the reflection of the self in the other forms one of the most important themes in Sufi teaching. From the narratives of the participants it is clear that it plays a role in their own practice. One of the Nazarene Sufis who works together with a Jewish peace-maker expresses this powerfully at the beginning of a talk given before a Jewish audience in North America. He cites, "The verse of the Holy Qur'ān that God said, *subhanawata'ala*, 'All people, We created you, male and female, and We have made you nations, clans, and tribes, to know one another.' It's a very important verse" (Jerusalem Peacemakers Pt.1, 2011). He then cites a hadith, "Prophet Muḥammad, *salahalayhiwasalam*, said if you want to know your God you must know yourself." But how does one know oneself? He explains the need for the other in knowing the self, "Great! I must know myself then I can know my God. I just have to know myself. I need the other. I need the mirror – to reflect myself on his essence, her essence. Then the other is my mirror. I need him – to realise who I am. Together we can complete one another then he is my bridge to know my God and she is my bridge to know my God. Also I am the bridge for all the other to know their God" (ibid).

This goes beyond mutual support and expresses a belief held by most of my interviewees. What is being related here is, "[t]he essential need of the presence of the other in order, finally, to know God. Whether approaching the other in this spirit, or simply with a desire to meet and engage with the other, a reciprocal 'knowing' acquired through direct engagement and interaction adjusts stereotypes and disables polemical views" (Randall 2014, 199).

Challenging assumptions on identity

What is lost by defining one's identity in too fixed a manner? In answer I find no better explanation than that of a Jewish-Israeli woman who reported the following experience during my interview with her. Speaking about a course of study she had attended on the work of the eleventh century philosopher-mystic Ibn 'Arabi, she related how she had defined herself as a Jewess and an Israeli. The convener of the workshop remarked that he had never thought of her as either. She related her

response to me by citing from a book she has written in Hebrew about her study of Ibn 'Arabi, "My mouth dropped open. Who am I? Are Jewess and Israeli real definitions of who I am? Should I define myself as a mother, a wife, or according to my profession? Or maybe I don't have to live any of these definitions ...? Maybe 'I' am a possibility unknown even to myself, and my life is a laboratory for researching such a possibility?" (Randall 2014, 193).

As I do research on the 'other' I also discover aspects of myself of which I was previously unaware. In those places where I originally perceived myself to be an 'outsider' I often entered the inside. I am a Sufi but I often found a lot in common with the Jewish faith practices in which I participated. I am not a Jew but I felt my faith enriched by my encounter with Judaism and being invited to light the Sabbath candles did not feel foreign to me. I propose that the integrity and rigour of our research is not invested in maintaining an 'outsider' or 'insider' stance but in being open to the continuous discovery that the definitions of self that we choose are subject to adjustment and surprise – or as we say in Sufi terminology – continuous unveilings. The exploration of identity that my interviewee reported above helped me to understand more clearly that it is an attachment to roles as identity markers that clouds the mirror of the heart. In an academic sense such attachments can close doors that might otherwise lead to a fuller perspectival approach in a research investigation. Finding, rather than assuming, an 'identity', in this sense, can be understood as shedding attachments to transient identities to release the possibilities held behind those attachments.

Outside, inside, or in a *barzakh*

I find the insider-outsider dichotomy unhelpful in that it inevitably denies the diversity of manifestations in the field and indicates the lack of an important level of reflexivity by the researcher on her own complexity in the claiming of identity? I can never presume to be either fully outside or fully inside. To enter the space of the other and to maintain integrity in one's own faith and sense of identity in a situation of conflict involves holding the tensions of in-between, of living in a *barzakh*. This space is simultaneously painful and joyful and necessary to any successful engagement with the other. It is also the space of greater creativity and imagination. I saw this demonstrated by many of the individuals I spoke with and for me this applies equally to my role as researcher.

Conclusion

Two voices are heard in this essay: the academic and the personal. They alternate and finally merge as I ask questions of myself prompted by the statements of my interviewees that pertain to issues of identity. As I reflect I note two factors emerging: a re-assessment of what identity means to me and a recognition that Sufi techniques of self-transformation and the integrity required of the researcher in a qualitative study align very well. The line between subjectivity and objectivity is thin especially when both I and my interviewees are looking at each other through the Sufi lens of seeing the other as a mirror of the self. Yet I do not find this a compromise of my integrity or a threat to my ability to analyse the field data without inserting any

agenda other than the stated aim of my research. On the contrary, the only vulnerability arises from the challenge posed to my own sense of identity which, if I remain open to the challenge, offers a wider perspective that dismantles any fixed notions of the other. Another factor that highlights the inadequacy of the insider/outsider dichotomy is how we interpret the diverse influences that contribute to our sense of self, both environmental and biological aspects: the hermeneutics of identity. To conclude, I refer back to the words of the interviewee who questioned how she defined herself and said, "Maybe 'I' am a possibility unknown even to myself, and my life is a laboratory for researching such a possibility?" If I reflect on this statement in the light of what David J. Hufford (1995, 58) notes on reflexivity, namely that, "All knowing is subjective, and the 'objective world' is what knowers claim to know about. Reflexivity in knowledge-making involves bringing the subject, the "doer" of the knowledge-making activity, back into the account of knowledge" then I feel the need to expand this and acknowledge that the subjectivity of self-knowledge also benefits from an openness to new discoveries.

Bibliography

- Bado-Fralick, Nikki (2013, reprint edition) *Coming to the Edge of the Circle: A Wiccan Initiation Ritual*, New York: Oxford University Press. American Academy of Religion Series.
- Hufford, David J. (1995) 'The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies' in *Western Folklore*, Vol. 54, No. 1, *Reflexivity and the Study of Belief*, January 1995 pp. 57 -76.
- Joseph, Steven (2006) 'A Jerusalem Diary' in *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Winter 2006), pp. 6-23.
- Masalha, Nur and Michael Hayes (2006) 'Research Notes: A Comparative Study of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Fundamentalist Perspectives on Jerusalem: Implications for Interfaith Relations' in *Holy Land Studies: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 5, Number One, May 2006, pp. 97 – 112, Edinburgh University Press.
- Randall, Yafiah Katherine (2014) *Remembering Al-Andalus: Sufi Pathways of Engagement Between Jews and Muslims and Their Contribution to Reconciliation and Conflict Transformation* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Winchester). This work is to be published by Routledge in their Sufi Studies series under the title *Sufism and Jewish-Muslim Relations: TheDerekh Avraham Order in Israel*.
- Shaikh, Sa'diyya (2012) *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabī, Gender, and Sexuality*, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press.