# Traveling Tariqa–Ten Years Down the Road into *Sufis Entangled*

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**Abstract**

While revisiting the film *Sufis Entangled* ten years after its release, the three filmmakers engage in questions of production, form, and historical context. The essays that constitute this piece flesh out the intricate ways how cultural-religious conflicts are enmeshed in the material realities of the filmmaking process.

**Keywords:**  Sufism, India, Kashmir, entanglement, new materialities

## Introduction

A decade after making the documentary *Sufis Entangled*, we look back at its "revolutionary" beginning in Egypt, its conflicts while filming in India, and its audience responses after semi-public screenings. This film was produced, filmed, and edited by the three of us and resulted from true teamwork. In this spirit, each of us will talk about certain aspects of *Sufis Entangled*, its editing process (Ewald), its production context (Ettmüller), and its form (Kramer). Without a script and with the sole idea of just following *the way* inspired by the term *tariqa* (lit. way, also Sufi order), we set off on a journey to capture different understandings of music, art, and religion in various Sufi settings. The outcome was a polyphonic composition of multiple frames. People spoke for themselves without off-voice guidance or formal introduction in our attempt to show the multiplicity of Sufi practice. This style captured details untethered by preconceived notions of Sufism, Islam, and the places we traveled. Ten years down the road, the film still discloses these contexts and has itself almost become a historical object considering the speed of socio-political change in the volatile regions we have visited.

## 1. Entangled: Heidelberg - Ajmer - Srinagar  (Sarah Ewald)

The idea for the film title came up at the end of a long night. After returning home from filming in India the three of us had made round the clock shifts in a little house close to Heidelberg where we had retreated for a week to edit, translate, and search for red threads in our footage, hoping we could meet the submission deadline of a German ethnographic film festival.

Looking at the film and its title, "entangled," I would say the word's possible meanings, ranging from "intertwined" to the more loaded "imbroglio," do not only correspond with the negotiations between our protagonists concerning the meaning of Sufism; in some way, they also connect to the film team itself, with our different personal backgrounds and professional training in Political and Islamic Studies, Linguistics, and Social Anthropology, and how this played out in the filmmaking process. On yet another level, one could even argue that the film project did weave, for each of us differently, its way into our lives in the years to follow. In my case, it meant spending several months a year in Kashmir between 2013 and summer 2019, the year the Indian government decided to imprison several thousand politicians and civil society members from Kashmir, silently scrapping the region's constitutional autonomy. Closing off more than 8 million people from the rest of the world, India imposed a several months long curfew in Kashmir and shut down all communication from August 5, 2019 onward. This lockdown seamlessly merged into the restrictions imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Against this backdrop, the following paragraph wants to briefly dive into the idea of the filmmaker as a viewer and commentator of his or her film. This will provide the opportunity to speak not only about the film's visible surface but also about how it relates to internal negotiations and dynamics that happened during the more extensive production process. What were the entanglements of different scenes? How did the individual specific stories of the localities play into the development of the film? What became invisible during the filming and editing process?

Let us start where things around the film project began to take shape and then look more closely at a few scenes. The three of us had already been working together on some short films in the past. We had organized a car at the beginning of 2011 and had a tentative plan to travel by road towards South Asia and document our journey in the second half of the year. Then, however, Eliane wanted to return to Egypt to observe the developments of the ongoing revolution there. Max went off to explore the American

South's music scene, and I stayed put in Heidelberg for a film editing job. Our idea seemed to fizzle out. It was the end of August when, on the stairs of the university library, Eliane's call reached me: "I met the leader of a Sufi music group here in Cairo. They are invited to join a couple of events in India. Wouldn't it be a good thing to document their journey?" Twenty minutes later, I stepped out of the library with a small pile of books on Sufism. After less than three weeks, we were at Jaipur airport and waited for the Egyptian group to arrive. And from there, the journey began.

During these initial days in Rajasthan, one topic, running as one of the main threads through the film later, became apparent: the tension between the authenticity of Sufi veneration and the alleged (in)compatibility of religious belief with perceived economic interests. Disagreement in this regard has become evident in some of the comments made by members of the Egyptian group and the *khadim* (caretaker) at the shrine of Moinuddin Chishti (1141-1230), an Islamic mystic originally from Iran and founder of one of the oldest Sufi *tariqas* in India (see section 2). While the argument resulted mainly from the participants' interactions, we encountered, traced, and actively pursued this tension several times in the filming and later in the editing process.

During the movie's introduction, the camera follows two performances by the young Sufi dancers from Egypt (00:48-01:55). Here we cross-cut between two different settings, an actual stage scene at the Ajmer Sufi festival and an outside rehearsal in an old fort, a performance we had arranged ourselves. The parallel montage's effect indicates the blurriness of the boundary between these two dance performances. This begs the question: When does such an act of veneration feel "true" for the person performing it? In a rehearsal context, on a festival stage, as part of a performance in a shrine amid a circle of visitors, followed by a camera, or when you are all alone?

Editing a conversation with the dancers recorded during a car drive, we placed statements about their work as clerks and business students next to comments about their spiritual perception of the whirling performance when they feel they are not with people, not from this world anymore (19:56-20:33). At the Nizzamuddin Auliya Dargah in Delhi, we show a conversation with the vendor of devotional objects working outside the shrine. At one point, he agreed to stage how he offers prayers at the shrine for a small payment. His short comment at the end of the scene, accompanied by a shoulder shrug and half-smile is interesting: "When else do I have the opportunity to visit the

shrine?" I read this as an example of the intersection between authentic religious performances and economic interests.

Equally, the musical gathering in Kashmir at the little local *Chishtiyya* shrine, which was arranged for a monetary contribution for us, somehow evades such a narrow framing. For the people joining from the more prominent locality, the Sufi music event was perceived as "real" and even became a mourning space. What we found out only later, during the editing, was that despite it being at a *Chishtiyya* shrine, the song the Kashmiri band decided to play for us was based on the work of the Sufi poet Samad Mir. Mir was not connected to traditional forms of Indian Sufism, but rather linked to an autochthonous *tariqa* of Kashmir, called the *Reshi* order. Founded in the 15th century by the Kashmiri mystic and poet Sheikh Noor-ud-din Wali or Nund Rishi (1378-1440), the wisdom of this *tariqa* plays an essential role in the spiritual and everyday life of many people in Kashmir even today.

The first thought of visiting Kashmir came up already at the Sufi festival in Ajmer, which was co-organized by the initiative *Kashmir Society International*. After the festival, when traveling with the Egyptians on a chartered bus to Delhi, things became complicated. One day, the head of the group had communicated very clearly that it would make sense to do interviews with him, as the other group members had nothing important to say. When he found us speaking to one of the musicians, a subsequent quarrel led to our split. Soon after, we decided to board the night bus towards Kashmir, two contact addresses from Srinagar in our pockets. Wind blowing through the open windows, we sat with our co-passengers in the crowded vehicle where one would find one's head almost automatically on an unknown neighbor's shoulder when dozing off. In the long night's drive over bumpy roads towards the Himalayan foothills, this became a more and more exciting adventure, though. During a short Jammu stop-over in the early morning hours, we realized that we had lost one of our hard drives with half the footage from the time with the Egyptian group along the way. This loss would later have consequences while editing, as we couldn't include a considerable number of everyday recordings the drive had contained. Via public transport taxi, we went further up the winding roads of the Jammu-Srinagar highway. In the film, our (camera) gaze secretly follows the long chain of Indian army soldiers and trucks on their way to Kashmir. We decided to combine this road scene with an underlying audio, a classical *sufiana* song from Samad Mir's *Insaaf kar* (do justice), which we had recorded during the music gathering in Kashmir. While interweaving the army images with his music in the editing process, we did not yet know that Mir (1893 – 1959), who was forced to

work at the palace's construction site in Srinagar during the British-backed rule of Hindu Maharaja Hari Singh, was not only revered by people in Kashmir for his spiritual poetry but also for his critical stance on the harsh conditions prevailing during the Dogra regime and later under the Indian occupation of Kashmir (Rather 2015).

Apart from the shrines we visited in Kashmir, we also tried to depict a spectrum of negotiations about Sufism through two other encounters. As already indicated by the road scene with the Indian army, a few sequences—visually, acoustically, and through montage—work as references for the connection between Sufi thought and the larger political situation in Kashmir. One of the first places we explored after arriving was the main mosque in Srinagar's old city, the Jamia Masjid, where we met the custodian of the place. Out of this chance meeting a conversation developed, which we later also used for the movie's initial scene: two voices against the backdrop of a black screen indicate the film's trajectory through their discussion. Only later, in the Kashmir sequence, we see the people who lend us their voices in the first scene: the caretaker and his friend. They had joined our conversation on Sufism and turned it into an argument. While the one took up an anti-Sufi position, the other not only kept referring to the spiritual authority of Sufi saints; he also pointed out that performing Islamic rituals is only one step towards understanding the real form of religion. He continued that knowing oneself, one's body and one's environment are even more essential. Looking closer at the framing of the scene, another person, without our intention, seems to make a silent, though strong comment: a picture frame over the custodian's desk holds the image of *mirwaiz* Moulvi Farooq, the head priest of the Kashmir valley, who was assassinated in 1990. His son Umar Farooq, the current *mirwaiz*, organized a series of protests together with an alliance of over two dozen political, social, and religious initiatives just a year before we reached Srinagar. He called for the complete demilitarization of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The militarization, however, is still very much an everyday reality which becomes evident in most of the Srinagar street scenes. In editing the pondering of Parvez–a Sufi disciple, whose spiritual alliances lay less with the secular institution of a shrine but rather in immersing into a teacher's mystical wisdom–under the scenes of bunkers, concertina wire, and army checkpoints his Sufi thoughts permeate the Indian occupation structure: "Neither windows nor doors would be left, if we both would understand reality, why should I put a lock on your door? What should I take from you, and what would you take from me?"

## 2. A journey from revolutionary Egypt to the world of Indian Dargahs (Eliane Ettmüller)

The year 2011 was revolutionary. The Arab world turned upside down, and decades-long dictatorships fell as young people cheered and felt that they had toppled an oppressive system to create a brave new world. In September 2011, after different clashes with the armed forces, the Cairene Tahrir square was again occupied by the families of the victims who had died or were injured during the revolutionary uprisings. The army had already crushed several sit-ins, and the chants of "the army and the people hand in hand" were replaced by graffiti showing ex-president Mubarak's face next to Field Marshall Tantawi's. The people demanded the fall of the "SCAF[1]-regime." While sitting in a coffee shop and talking to Egyptian artists in this politically tense atmosphere, I met Amer el-Touny, who was introduced to me as a Sufi music performer. I went to see one of his shows which was attended by a large crowd of people. Amer explained that he used to perform with his group at Indian Sufi festivals and that he was about to travel to Ajmer and Delhi to attend two of them. Immediately, I was thrilled about the idea of observing the interaction between Egyptian and Indian Sufi musicians.

In Jaipur, we waited for the Oman Air Flight landing with the Egyptian band on board. They all arrived formally dressed in suit and tie, an attire their leader considered appropriate for his men on tour. From there, we took a bus to Ajmer, where we first stayed at a compound with dorms shared by different participants of the festival. The Egyptians were taken to the Dargah of Khwaja Garib Nawaz, also known as Moinuddin Chishti, where they were welcomed by one of the *khadims*, the caretakers of the shrine. It soon became clear that the Egyptians neither understood the meaning of this Indian sanctuary nor made any effort to be culturally sensitive. When asked to wear a prayer cap, they rolled their eyes and looked desperately at me—as someone familiar with their culture and language—to silently voice their discomfort. Only Amer enjoyed the attention he got as an Arab leader clad in a white *jalabiyya*[2] with a scarf over his head. After he sang, people came to kiss his hands and ask for his blessings.

He even managed to force his band to participate in a ritual where they had to kneel in front of the Sufi saint's grave. When I showed the sequence in Cairo, my artist friends concluded that Amer would get excommunicated back home if anybody came to know about this sinful behavior, which, for them, had absolutely nothing to do with Islam.

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1 Supreme Council of Armed Forces.

2 Long garment popular in Arab countries.

While many of the spectators at the shrine showed delight and seemed to be touched by Amer's singing and the Dervish boy's turning in white cloths (30:00-33:00), the Egyptians did not make a connection between their performance and their personal religious beliefs in this context. They defined themselves as artists and musicians on tour. In several interviews and off-record conversations, it became clear that they judged the Indian Sufi rituals as a distorted version of Islam, which had more in common with polytheistic Hinduism than their religion. They were convinced that true Islam was found in Egypt or Saudi Arabia but not in India (38:15-38:45). As far as Sufism was concerned, they praised the Egyptian *mawlawiyya* festivals but clearly distinguished them from *istarad tannura*, the *tannura* show, which they had come to perform in India. This attitude could only lead to clashes. Two of them were so noteworthy that we decided to make them parts of the film. At some point off the record, we even had to set up a "translation line" from Urdu to Arabic via German to mediate between the parties.

The first clash happened when an Egyptian artist began to whirl a colorful cloth through the air at the *dargah* instead of performing in white clothes (TC 32:45-33:03). Even though the movements were the same, the use of color was taken as an offense to the holy place by the *khadims*. Traditionally, when Egypt was still part of the Ottoman Empire, the *tannura* performance—men whirling in colored clothes—was used for festivals or processions when important people walked through the streets. Consequently, the Indian hosts in Ajmer had correctly interpreted this performance as a "secular" art and judged it not fit for this setting. However, the Egyptians interpreted all of their actions in India as detached from their religious beliefs. They knew that their music and dancing originally came from a Sufi tradition, but they felt that they performed a show and not an act of worship. This is the reason why they did not understand the *khadims'* outrage. At the same time, not all the Indians felt the offense. The *dargah's* ordinary worshippers were thrilled and came to greet and kiss Amer while the authorities hastened to get rid of him as soon as possible.

The second clash was about money. For the Indian hosts, it was part of their culture that the people who came to their holy place donated a *chador* (a particular piece of cloth) or flowers for the grave. As the Egyptians were a prominent group invited and guided by local *khadims*, they were expected to make a rather big donation. The Egyptians, on the other hand, did not understand at all why they should pay anything. They considered themselves stars with an international reputation who had already performed for free because the Indian crowd had liked them. At the same time, they

told me in a somewhat offended way that when going to the most important mosques in Egypt, they could donate if they pleased, but that they were never asked to do so. These were a couple of cultural misunderstandings which were not easy to mediate. Luckily, the Egyptians left Ajmer and went to Delhi to perform in another more secular surrounding.

Before the big Sufi festival in Delhi started, the band was invited by the ambassador to rehearse in a big hall of the Egyptian embassy (15:58-16:54). They rehearsed with Indian musicians and even a female singer and a female dancer. All of it was as far from their religious sentiments as a rock concert would have been. The boys turned, the woman danced around them in front of the embassy walls covered from the ground to the ceiling in pictures of the, at that point, glorious 25 January Revolution of 2011 in Egypt. Even the ambassador seemed to be a true representative of the common men and women on the streets who had instigated the victorious revolution. He had opened the door himself, shook hands, no suit, no tie. Ten years later, as Egypt is under tight military rule, we know: all of it was just a show.

In Ajmer, we met Zamzam, a German convert and follower of the *Chishtiyya* order. She explained that she had gone through a spiritual experience at the *dargah* of Khwaja Garib Nawaz, which had brought her to Islam. She would never have converted to the version of Islam the Egyptians held for the absolute truth. Near the shrine of Nizzamuddin in Delhi, Sadia Dehlvi told us precisely the same. She insisted that most Muslims in the world followed some Sufi traditions and did not feel attracted to the purist Middle Eastern Arab style of Islam. She felt home near the *dargah* of Nizzamuddin.

Women followers of Sufi *tariqas* like Sadia Dehlvi or Zamzam who lived by themselves and seemed to be respected by their male peers made quite an impression on us. It appeared at first sight that Sufi Islam in India offered gender equality. However, our *dargah* experience at Nizzamuddin soon showed us that this hypothetical equality did not go very far. I was held back at the entry to the grave. Surprised at this refusal, I asked for the reason. At the *dargah* of Moinuddin Chishti, Khadim Nadir had positioned me next to my female Hindu colleague right in front of the grave only a couple of days ago. In order to highlight these differences, the film shows the scene, where I get the explanation that in Ajmer, the grave is underground. This implicitly meant that in this case, we potentially unclean women could not spoil the holy tomb of a dead male saint by our presence. I will never understand this kind of disrespect for the female body and

its natural functions. Is it not even self-destructive? All people in the world were born out of female bodies! How can the origin of birth be considered unclean?

In Kashmir at Zaynuddin Wali's shrine in Ashmuqam, women followers were again allowed to approach the saintly tomb. However, this was not the case in all the other Kashmiri *dargahs* that I visited in 2011. It seemed to me that women who wanted to enter the shrine usually had to go through ugly backdoors only to access small rooms with worn-out carpets and walls that needed some painting. Having the "privilege" of a window or wooden grid through which to catch a glimpse of all the beautifully shimmering artwork around the grave on the men's sides felt additionally cynical. Consequently, most of the traditional Sufi Islam we got to see did not look very empowering for women.

While traveling to Kashmir, I checked the news in Egypt. In November 2011, protesters and security forces fought in Muhammad Mahmoud street next to the Tahrir square and in front of the American University in Cairo. Live ammunition was used. Many were killed. I was afraid for my friends. However, Kashmir did not look much better either when we entered by taxi. In Egypt, walls had been put up downtown to ward off demonstrations. However, people came and made big wall paintings mocking the armed forces, referring to the Handala figure from Palestine[3] and the Berlin wall with a Trabi car that burst through the stone. When we entered Srinagar, we saw cemeteries and more cemeteries, then barbed wire and soldiers. Nobody had to say anything. It was more than evident that we had arrived in a region of armed conflict.

## 3. Entanglement and form (Max Kramer)

Why is there no story in the film? We cannot identify with any of the characters, and eventually, even those we got a little used to disappear towards the end. Where is the thread running through the film?

During test screenings, I heard many questions similar to those above from audience members confused from following the complex negotiations between unnamed characters in constantly changing locations. In what follows, I would like to go deeper into these questions, not to defend the film, but to explore some of its strengths that have been perceived—although in parts negatively expressed—by some audience members.

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3 Handala is the Palestinian artist Naji al-Ali's ten-year old alter-ego character, a refugee boy who became a symbol of the Palestinian people.

The film was never meant to be driven by character development. We did not aim for the kind of psychological causation and personal growth or the narrative form of the "journey of the hero" that is often supported in pitching sessions of international funding agencies. In any case, the narrative is woven around different places, their atmospheres, and the performances in the name of Sufism. This could be inferred by our choice to give titles only to sites and never to people. In other words, we dramatize Sufism: where, when, how, and why do people in constellations that involve us, our cameras, personal memories, momentary conflicts, our co-travelers, our budget (and so on) get "entangled" in something "Sufi"?

Entanglement is a buzzword in contemporary theory. It is usually linked to flat-ontologies marked precisely by making lists like the one above: linking the material and the discursive through their performative becoming. This is the approach towards "entanglement" by feminist physicist-philosopher Karen Barad (2003). Such an approach does not ask "What is Sufism?" but rather sees how the human and non-human *perform* the contested signifier "Sufi" in the coming together *and* separation between materiality (the camera, the hard disc, a certain quality of light) and discourse (the word Sufi, the questions asked, the explanations given). Let's look at an example.

The scene where we introduce ourselves as a film crew at the shrine of Haji Ali in Mumbai could be understood as "entangled." The sequence affects through the music played, it shows us and our cameras as intrusive, it may evoke economic interest on the side of the musicians through its editing and their words ("find us on YouTube;" 03:15-03:25), it portrays our interest in framing and creating situations, it points to the misunderstandings and cultural stereotypes that are involved in these encounters ("what will you get from these hippie idiots?;" 03:58-04:20). It shows how materialities have an active pull on how something like a documentary film sequence comes into being, how the affective power of music, human bodies, architecture, the grip and size of a camera, etc., are irreducible to either human intentionality or discursive meaning. Barad would ask "how matter makes itself felt" (Barad 2003, 810). What I assume has triggered unease amongst some members of the audience is a form of documentary that does not represent "Sufism" while making a film which has "Sufi" in the title.

The film makes us think of flat ontologies as an entanglement of cameras, words, atmospheres, people, and so on. It does not explore the phenomena in historical or regional depth. It moves over the surface of the sensible, the sayable, the audible, and the non-sensical with every sequence to being a cut *within* a material-discursive

arrangement. The enjoyment that some members of the audience derived from watching may be bound to the collapse of stereotypical concepts of Islam or Sufism. In that sense, our form is neither observational nor is it *vérité*. It is a form of entanglement.

We went along different performances—usually musical—connected to one particular Sufi tradition of the subcontinent: the *chistiyya tariqa*. This tradition is famous for the role music plays within its practice. Thus, the focus on musical performance at different shrines of important saints made sense to us. But by accompanying an Egyptian group of musicians around some of these shrines, audience expectations got tied to these characters, which we *set up* but which we did not *build up*. The focus on the conflict between the Egyptian performers and their Indian hosts may overall be misleading. It induces some false image of character development which we did not pursue. The complexity that emerges from the places and conflicts is linked to images that are open to debate. Hardly any of the film's protagonists attempt to connect a particular understanding of Islam to its discursive history. When, for example, Sadia Dehlvi attempts to do such a contextualization (10:55-12:00), her account is challenged by Arabi, the Oud player, later during our interview on the rooftop of the hotel in Delhi. When Nadir, the *khadim* at the shrine of Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer Sharif, questions the intentions of Amer (34:45-35:17), the head of the Egyptian artists, he, in turn, gets challenged again by Arabi on the grounds of Hindu-Muslim *mixtures* being somewhat not real Islam (38:15-38:45; see section 2).

We have shown the film at various academic venues and ethnographic festivals where audiences have often criticized the lack of historical depth concerning Islam. However, our intention was never to make a film about Sufism, but to follow a group of  musician who perform in the name of Sufism. The flatness is partly an outcome of our mobility and is fully intentional. This implies looking at the world through an *aesthetic* lens— always bound to the dramatic potentials of the sensual—the minute intensity of perception that can undermine our existing knowledge where it remains in linguistic abstraction. The medium of film thus involves a specific non-discursive learning and— following from the aesthetic investment proper to the documentary form—a possibility of conceptual creation. Entanglement is such a concept that becomes palpable through our film. It can be fairly stated that—*en passant*—we border on something central to much of Sufi traditions in the way that they challenge straightforward knowledge *claims* through the registers of poetry and musical intensity—as part of a journey, a *tariqa.*

## Conclusion

Our documentary exerts its force through the depiction of a way (or a *tariqa*) followed by an unknown destiny or ending. It shows highly atmospheric performances that constantly challenge audience expectations of the word "Sufi." Furthermore, the film preserves many sequences of historical moments, such as the 25 January Revolution in Egypt, as displayed at the Egyptian embassy in Delhi. Simultaneously, it shows different, sometimes conflicting understandings of Sufism by Muslim men and women from different cultural backgrounds. What our writings add to the film is eventually a further increase in its openness. This essay does not attempt to close its potential to speak in atmospheres and images about things where words are bound to fail. While shooting the film we had this running gag on who is the real Sufi. As the story goes, it is always the one who does not claim it for him/herself.

## Contributor's biography

Eliane Ettmüller holds a PhD in Islamic Studies. She focuses on researching, filmmaking, and writing on modern Egypt.

Sarah Ewald works as a film editor and doctoral fellow, with an interest in applied and collaborative research and teaching. At the moment her focus is on civil society practices in Kashmir.

Max Kramer is a postdoctoral researcher who looks at the mediation of religious minorities in India. He has worked on documentary film and conflict zones with a focus on Kashmir.

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