

AL-GHAYB

THE POETICS AND POLITICS OF THE UNSEEN IN ISLAM

Conference

Department for Culture and Society
Aarhus University
12-13 December 2013

Place

Nobelparken,
Building 1467, room 515
Jens Chr. Skousvej 7
8000 Aarhus

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Program

Wednesday, December 11

19.00 Pre-conference dinner for the participants in Aarhus. Restaurant will be announced soon.

Thursday, December 12

09.30-10.00 Morning coffee

10.00-10.20 **Introduction**
Christian Suhr, Nils Bubandt and Mikkel Rytter, Aarhus University

10.20-11.10 **On the anthropology of *al-ghayb***
Amira Mittermaier, University of Toronto

11.10-12.00 **Rejected visions: The haunting of dream omens in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan**
Maria Louw, Aarhus University

12.00-13.00 Lunch at Stakladen

13.00-13.50 **Islam in Europe and the problem of ontological doubleness**
Nadia Fadil, KU Leuven

13.50-14.40 **Longing for the Prophet: Connection and affective presence of the absent beloved**
Mikkel Rytter, Aarhus University

14.40-15.00 Coffee break

15.00-15.50 **Did Muḥammad possess knowledge of the Unseen? Puritan Muslims arguing against the concept of *'ilm bil-ghayb***
Martin Thomas Riexinger, Aarhus University

15.50-16.20 **Wrap-up and general discussion of Day 1**

19.00 Conference dinner, restaurant to be announced

Friday, December 13

09.00-09.30 Morning coffee

09.30-10.20 **Al-ghayb in classical Sufism and in Late Antique Philosophy**
Mark Sedgwick, Aarhus University

10.20-11.10 **The invisible in Islamic exorcism**
Christian Suhr, Aarhus University

11.10-11.30 Break

11.30-12.20 **Metaphors and paradoxes: Secrecy, experience and embodiment in the Sufi mystical initiation in Aleppo, Syria**
Paulo G. Pinto, University Federal Fluminense, Brazil

12.20-13.30 Lunch at Stakladen

13.30-14.20 **Spiritual governance in Pakistan**
Ida Sofie Matzen, Institute of Anthropology, Copenhagen

14.20-15.10 **From the spirits' point of view: The ambivalent politics of the *gaib* in Indonesia**
Nils Bubandt, Aarhus University

15.10-15.30 Coffee

15.30-16.00 **Wrap-up and general discussion of Day 2 + "Where do we go from here?"**

Presentations

Each paper has 50 minutes, split between 25 minutes for the presentation and 25 minutes for discussions.

Al-Ghayb

The concept *al-ghayb* refers to the hidden, unseen, and invisible, and encompasses a range of important phenomena in Islam and in the everyday lives of Muslims. The dominion of the unseen ('alam *al-ghayb*) includes both those parts of reality that cannot be seen simply because they are covered by other visible objects and those phenomena that cannot by their nature be perceived (e.g. the face or throne of God, paradise, hell, the past, or the future). *Al-ghayb* for instance plays a role in relation to *barzakh* (the intermediary realm between life and death); to the issue of veiling; to visions of deceased saints or true dreams of Prophet Muhammad; and to the uncontrollable powers of *jinn*, angels, magic, evil eyes, and omens. The unseen is in other words full of power and potential; but the lure of the territories of the unseen is also disturbing, troublesome, even dangerous.

This conference explores the sensual, existential, spiritual and political interfaces between visibility and invisibility in Islam. It invites papers that probe

ethnographically or historically how this-worldly affairs are imagined, understood, and managed in various ways through connections to invisible worlds. In the process, the conference seeks to address the methodological, analytical, and epistemological questions that *al-ghayb* raises for anthropology and other social sciences. How can we approach the unseen world of *al-ghayb* empirically? In what ways might an appreciation of Islamic understandings of invisibility inform a re-thinking of the role of the unseen as a trope in social analysis? And how does the realm of the unseen engage debates within contemporary social theory about (in)visibility, embodiment, affect, imagination, and self-cultivation? The aim of the conference is to bring reflection on these questions of theory, analysis, and method together in an attempt to build a phenomenological and social understanding of the unseen in Islam.

The conference is sponsored by the project *Sufism and Transnational Spirituality* (www.sufism.au.dk)

ABSTRACTS

On the anthropology of *al-ghayb*

Amira Mittermaier, University of Toronto

"In the West they fear the unknown (*khawf min al-maghūl*)," a prominent Egyptian thinker once said to me, "but in Islam we believe in the Unknown" (*īmān bil-ghayb*). Drawing on my research on dream-stories and Muslim practices of dream interpretation in Egypt, as well as on other recent ethnographies that engage with collective and personal modes of interchange between the Divine and the human, I reflect on the possibilities and challenges of an anthropology of *al-ghayb*. Whereas some of my interlocutors take the divinely inspired dream (*ru'yā*) to offer a key mode of access to *al-ghayb*, others insist, "Nobody knows *al-ghayb* except God." The Unknown is not only an object of allure and a key tenet of belief but it is also a pivotal means through which different forms of Islam are articulated, constituted, and contested. While the politics of *al-ghayb* are largely accessible by conventional anthropological means, I suggest that my interlocutors' dream-stories and other accounts of the unseen pose a more profound challenge to (and open up new possibilities for) doing ethnographic research, writing ethnography, and thinking anthropologically.

Rejected visions: The haunting of dream omens in Bishkek, Kyrgystan

Maria Louw, Aarhus University

Based on fieldwork in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, the paper focuses on esoteric experiences, and notably *ayan*, dream omens, which often play important roles in the lives of its Muslim population - including those who perceive themselves as secular. In retrospect, such experiences tend to be seen as moments of clarity, which shed new light on uncertain situations and help making decisions. However, what I will focus on is the decisions that were *not* taken, and the interpretations that were rejected, and the way

they tend to haunt the recipients of the *ayan*. This haunting makes the hidden dimensions of reality part of everyday existence rather than something that occasionally erupts into the ordinary. Furthermore, it is a disturbing reminder that the foundations on which a life is based may be shaky.

Islam in Europe and the problem of ontological doubleness

Nadia Fadil, KU Leuven

The growing "visibility" of Muslims has been at the source of various societal and political anxieties in Western-Europe. In trying to account for the reasons behind these, most analysts have referred to the established secular model and how practices of Muslims in public life are seen to challenge these. Others have, on the other hand, pointed at the longer politicotheological legacy of Western-Europe, and how Muslim visibility resonates with a historical legacy of conflicting relationships between Christianity and Islam (Anidjar 2008, Asad 2004). This paper will, thinking through the case of the debate on halal food and the question of "sharia", suggest that underlying these different debates resides a problem of "ontology" (Fanon 1956). By this is meant the capacity to determine what counts as real and what constitutes valid "life forms" within social reality. Such a concern with ontology has been at the heart of theoretical works that have sought to consider and think through the phenomenon of colonialism and the postcolonial condition. This has resulted in the argument that postcolonial countries (and more particularly Africa) are characterized by the question of "ontological doubleness" (Mbembe 2001): a continuous negotiation and balancing between the "real" and the "unreal", the "visible" and the "invisible". I will argue that a similar process of ontological doubleness is at play in Western-Europe, and that many of the contemporary anxieties around Islam in Europe reflect destabilization of the demarcation between "visible" and "invisible" ontologies.

Longing for the Prophet: Connection and affective presence of the absent beloved

Mikkel Rytter, Aarhus University

This paper discusses the affective presence and agency of relics, in this particular case in the guise of a single hair of the Prophet Muhammad. The relic is obviously not the Prophet, but it is also not the Prophet, as the hair is filled with baraka of the Prophet and thereby seems to confirm Sir Frazer's thesis of 'sympathetic magic' where part and wholes are forever connected. Based on a study of and within the Naqshbandi Mujjadidi Saifi tariqa, this paper set out to 'follow the hair' in different ethnographic settings in Denmark, Norway and Pakistan in order to discuss how it enables connections between the visible and the invisible aspects of reality and the spiritual transformation of the devoted murids. The relic not only constitutes an affective presence of the beloved, but it also becomes significant in the establishment and religious becoming of the Saifi tariqa.

Did Muḥammad possess knowledge of the Unseen? Puritan Muslims arguing against the concept of *'ilm bil-ghayb*

Martin Thomas Riexinger, Aarhus University

The concept of *al-ghayb* is a central issue in Islamic prophetology, since the question whether Muḥammad has essential knowledge of the unseen world or not is related to the question how exalted his status as compared to other humans is. Although not identical with question whether Muḥammad is completely free from sin and error. Whereas both the concept of *'ilm bil-ghayb* (knowledge of the unseen) and *'iṣma* (understood as complete infallibility) became popular among Sufis, puritan Muslims in the tradition of Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) stressed the human character of Muḥammad and claimed that whenever his knowledge or powers exceed that of ordinary humans, this was not due to an essential difference but to a divine act of grace with the purpose to guarantee the success of his message.

The issue became a bone of contention in British India where the *ṭarīqa-yi muḥammadiyya* attacked their Sufi-Ḥanafī opponents for showing exaggerated devotion to the person of Muḥammad while forgetting his message.

Al-ghayb in classical Sufism and in Late Antique Philosophy

Mark Sedgwick, Aarhus University

The origins of Sufism have been much discussed, among Western scholars as well as among Muslims. Nineteenth-century scholarly views tended to explain the origins of Sufism in terms of non-Islamic phenomena, often pointing to the similarity between the words Sufi and the Greek σοφοί, *sophoi*, sages. Twentieth-century scholarly views have instead tended to reject such explanations, stressing the "authentically" Islamic roots of Sufism—a pattern also followed with explanations of the kabbalah. This paper breaks with the twentieth-century tradition, revisiting earlier understandings to show how Sufi cosmology and theology—though not actual practice—reflect Arab philosophy from al-Kindi to Ibn Sina, and thus also reflect the categories and analyses of Late Antique Philosophy.

The invisible in Islamic exorcism

Christian Suhr, Aarhus University

This presentation discusses the ways in which the invisible, the power of God, and the visible manifestation of the jinn are evoked through the recitation of Quranic verses in neo-orthodox Islamic exorcism (*al-ruqya al-shar'iyya*). The presentation explores the healing encounter as a ritual event that aims at dissolving the power struggle between malevolent jinn and human subjects in order to facilitate the possibility of self-sacrifice and submission to God. Inspired by recent attempts to apply the film theory of Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, and Gilles Deleuze in the theorization of ritual, the healing interaction is described as a ceremonial dialectic moving

towards dissolution by way of disruptive montage. It is concluded that spirit exorcism and divine healing is facilitated when the healer succeeds in conjuring the absent-presence of *al-ghayb* understood as a total world of vision and knowledge to which the patients' and the jinns' limited and partial perspective must succumb. As such neo-orthodox Islamic exorcism provides healing, not so much in the sense of "well-being" or "relief from pain" but in the sense of moral witnessing, an opportunity to testify to the limits of human seeing and action and to the ways invisible and divine forces give shape to the tangible world. The presentation takes a starting point in an ethnographic film project about the attempts of Muslim patients to find their way in Danish psychiatric healthcare and Islamic traditions of healing.

Metaphors and paradoxes: Secrecy, experience and embodiment in the Sufi mystical initiation in Aleppo, Syria

Paulo G. Pinto, Professor at the Graduate Program in Anthropology and Director of the Center for Middle East Studies (NEOM) at the University Federal Fluminense, Brazil

This paper analyzes how both secrecy and revelation, which are central to the mystical tradition of Sufism, are constructed and enacted in the process of initiation (*tarbiya*) into the mystical path in two Sufi *zawiyas* (ritual lodge) in Aleppo. One is led by *shaykh* Badinjki, who is linked to the *tariqa* (Sufi order) Qadiriyya, and the other is led by *shaykh* Nadim, who is linked to *tariqa* Shadhiliyya. The analysis will compare the process of initiation in these two *zawiya*-s in order to show how the tension between the need to pass esoteric knowledge to the disciples and the necessity of adding extra layers of secrecy to it in order to maintain its mystical value shape the process of embodiment of religious subjectivities in the disciples. In each *zawiya* the epistemology of secrecy is played and enacted differently. *Shaykh* Nadim uses the force of paradox of revelations that constantly announce new secrets as a disciplinary mechanism aimed to reconfigure the

nafs (self) of his disciples, which are often faced with senseless or humiliating tasks as part of their process of initiation. *Shaykh* Badinjki emphasizes less the paradox than the metaphorical aspect of truth, which is only fully grasped when it ceases to be intellectually constructed and becomes experientially grounded. In both cases the initiation works through a set of experiences, which are mobilized to unsettle and reconfigure the sense of self of the disciples or to gradually individualize the disciple and reposition his self in the world.

Spiritual governance in Pakistan

Ida Sofie Matzen, Institute of Anthropology, Copenhagen

On the day following the death of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, a Sufi guide and friend in Lahore told me: "You've seen what they've done now, the Sufis?! Great evil has been destroyed". According to this *pir* (spiritual guide) it was in fact the 'hidden Sufis' who had instigated the capture of the evil bin Laden. What my friend was referring to is a specific idea of a hierarchical network of hidden Sufi saints governing the entire universe. The pole or apex in this hierarchy is known as the *qutb*. Sufis are thus seen to protect people and the entire universe and to exterminate evil, but they do so "in their own secret way", my friend further explained. What is hidden or invisible, as I was also told, is just a matter of how much one is able to see – according to one's spiritual stage. This paper explores the wider cosmological background for this kind of claims and the overarching features of the hierarchical, yet monist, cosmos of my Pakistani Sufi informants. Sufism can, I will argue, be seen as the trope that encompasses and trumps all other hierarchical orders. The paper is based on 11 months of fieldwork among Sufi masters and disciples in Lahore, Pakistan, between 2009 and 2012. I am enrolled as a PhD student at the Department of Anthropology, Copenhagen, and my project *Spirituality, Politics and Security in Pakistan: Sufi Imaginaries and Cosmological Modes of Securitization* is financed by Centre for Advanced Security Studies (CAST) at Political Science, Copenhagen.

From the spirits' point of view: The ambivalent politics of the *gaib* in Indonesia

Nils Bubandt, Aarhus University

Kyai Muzakkin runs a Koranic spirit school in East Java. The one thousand spirits (*jin*) who inhabit Kyai Muzakkin's *pesantren* are crucial to his practice of traditional healing and exorcism but also act as protection against political opponents of his anti-corruption NGO. The spirits of Kyai

Muzakkin are not only politically effective, however. They are also politically embarrassing, because they are signs of a worldview associated with tradition, fantasy, and irrationality. Spirits are in this sense both politically effective and ontologically unreal. This paper looks at the ambivalent political ontology of the invisible (*gaib*) in Indonesia, suggesting that it may be the doubtful ontological reality of the world of spirits that contributes to its political efficacy.

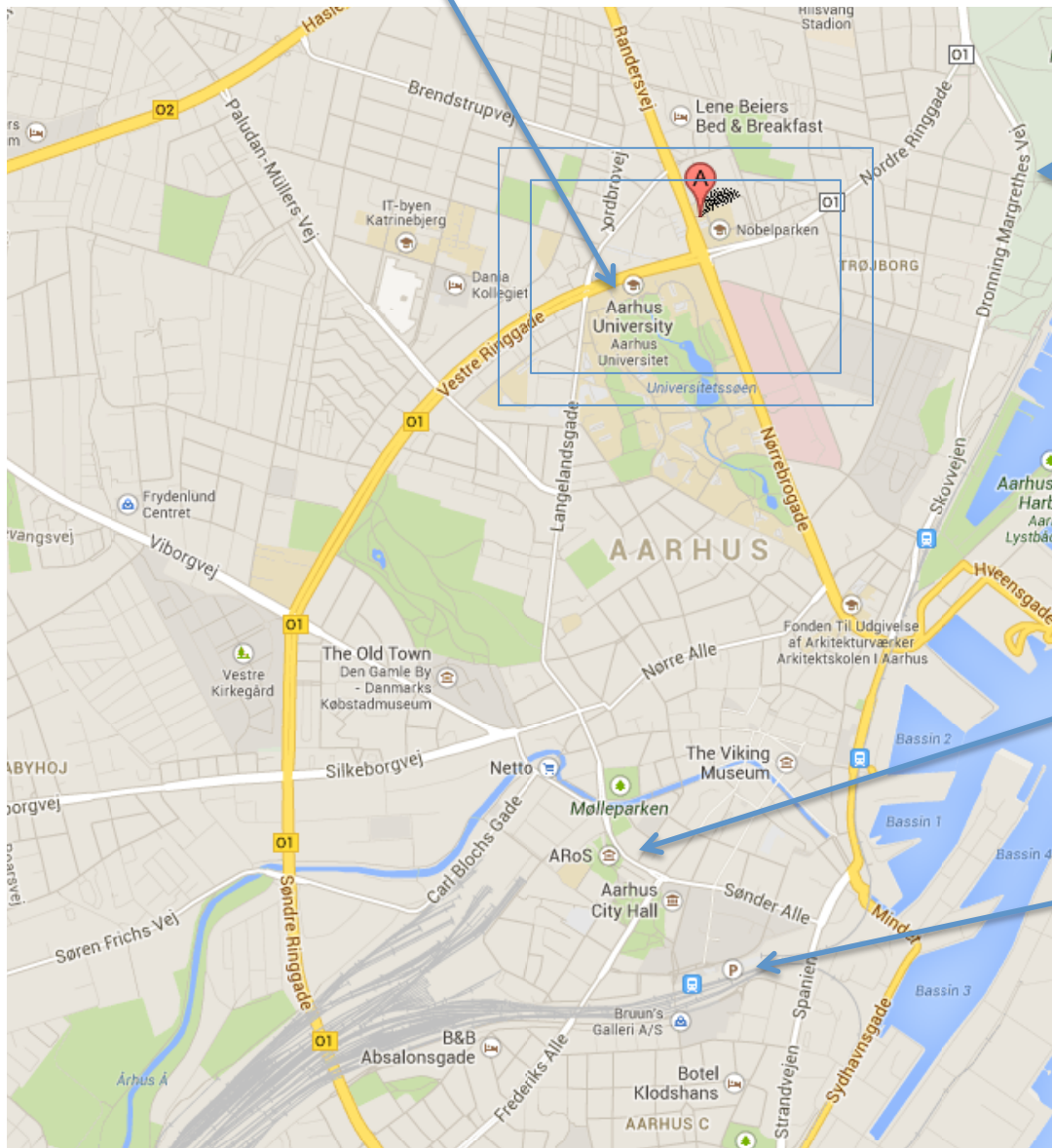
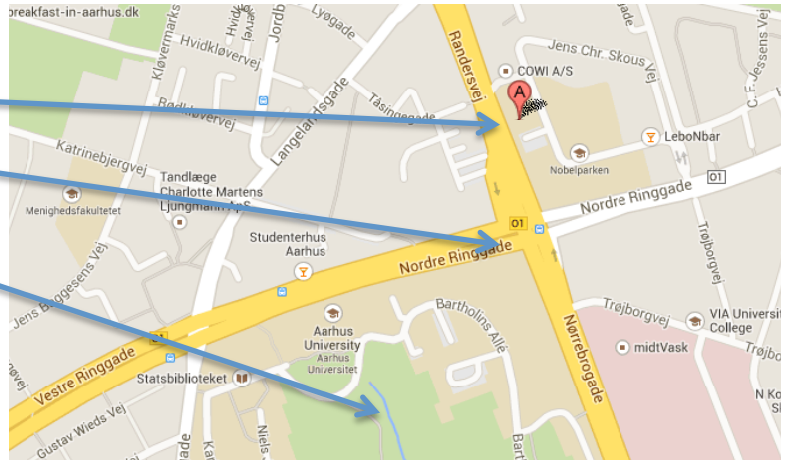


City of Aarhus

Conference
Nobelparken 1467, 515

Busses to and from city
center (no. 12, 13, 14, 18)

Main campus
and nice park



Nice forest and walk to
the sea

AROS
nice art museum

Train station