



Iran

Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies

ISSN: 0578-6967 (Print) 2396-9202 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rirn20>

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To cite this article: Eyad Abuali (2019): Words Clothed in Light: *Dhikr* (Recollection), Colour and Synaesthesia in Early Kubrawi Sufism, Iran, DOI: [10.1080/05786967.2019.1583046](https://doi.org/10.1080/05786967.2019.1583046)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/05786967.2019.1583046>



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Published online: 01 Mar 2019.



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Words Clothed in Light: *Dhikr* (Recollection), Colour and Synaesthesia in Early Kubrawi Sufism

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ABSTRACT

Islamic societies and cultures have been, and at times still are, regarded as phono-centric and placed in opposition to supposedly ocular-centric Western traditions. While these binary characterisations have been challenged, much remains to be understood regarding Islamic traditions and their own notions of a hierarchy of the senses. It is worth exploring Kubrawi Sufi thought in this regard since it betrays a movement towards ocular-centrism in twelfth and thirteenth century Sufism.

By analysing the work of early Kubrawi authors, this article investigates Sufi concepts of sound, speech and vision in discussions of *dhikr*, or recollection. For the early Kubrawiyya, recollection facilitates and induces the perception of coloured lights. While much attention has been given to the significance of visions in Kubrawi Sufism, the interconnection between auditory recollection and visionary experiences has not been the subject of a dedicated study. Nor, to my knowledge, has there been a study dedicated to the phenomenon of synaesthesia in medieval Islamic thought.

In this article I argue that early Kubrawi Sufis utilised theological notions of speech, and philosophical notions of colour, to arrive at a mystical theory that accounted for the phenomenon of auditory-visual synaesthesia in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In doing so Kubrawi thinkers developed a theory which facilitated an ocular-centric framework for mystical experiences. This study will also highlight the importance of synaesthetic experiences for the identity of the Kubrawi Sufi community.

KEYWORDS

Dhikr; recollection; remembrance; Kubrawi Sufism; synaesthesia; senses; sound; vision; speech

Introduction

Dhikr, commonly translated as recollection or remembrance, is the practice of reciting the names of God, or formulaic phrases in praise of God. It occupies a prominent place within Sufism and in the theory and practice of the Kubrawiyya in particular where it facilitates and induces visionary experiences in the practitioner. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries recollection practices came to be more heavily theorised and more elaborately practiced.¹ By the fifteenth century, the transition of Sufi communities into distinct orders had been consolidated. The particular method of recollection of a given community at this time served to strengthen ties of belonging, distinguished Sufi communities from one another, and featured in polemics between them.² While in earlier

centuries, the social and communal significance of Sufi recollection is more difficult to trace, we may still learn much about the formation of these earlier Sufi communities by analysing theories and practices of recollection.

Najm al-Din Kubra (d. 617/1221) and the early Kubrawi thinkers are known for their detailed attention to descriptions of the various coloured lights, or photisms, which the Sufis may perceive while experiencing spiritual visions during recollection. However, the link between these two defining features of Kubrawi Sufism, recollection and visions, has yet to be explored in detail and remains somewhat enigmatic. One way of understanding the significance of the relationship between recollection and the lights described in Kubrawi texts is to focus on Kubrawi discussions of visual and auditory

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¹Al-Hujwiri's *Kashf al-mahjub* contains mentions of *dhikr* which are interspersed throughout the text. Here al-Hujwiri argues that *dhikr* is a licit practice, though more suited to advanced Sufis, implying that initiates should read the Qur'an instead. Al-Qushayri's brief section on *dhikr* in his *al-Risala al-qushayriyya* is a more theoretical discussion of the topic which is extremely influential, however this is presented as a collection of the sayings of previous Sufi masters regarding *dhikr* and is far less systematic than the later Kubrawi discussions. Moreover, it does not contain much in the way of practical instruction for the Sufi regarding the method of *dhikr*. Al-Hujwiri, *Kashf al-mahjub*, 87; 301; 307; Al-Qushayri, *al-Risala al-qushayriyya*, 255–60.

²Papas, "Creating a Sufi Soundscape," 41; Deweese, "Ahmed Yasavi," 866–67.

sensations in mystical experiences. In Kubrawi thought, coloured photisms are understood to result from a process whereby the auditory experience of recollection is represented visually as a coloured light. Therefore, I intend to focus on experienced synaesthesia here rather than the synaesthetic descriptions and allegories encountered in much of Sufi literature regarding spiritual experience.

In modern medicine synaesthesia is described as a condition whereby an individual experiences sensation in one sensory modality when another or the same sensory modality is stimulated.³ It has also been characterised as a “mixing of the senses.”⁴ Such experiences tend to be internally coherent and consistent to the perceiver, with a specific sound always triggering a particular colour. A common example of the condition is lexical-colour synaesthesia, where certain words, often those that are part of sequences such as days of the week, or numbers, trigger the perception of certain colours.⁵ In addition, some research has suggested that synaesthetic experiences may be cultivated through meditative practices.⁶

I do not intend to impose modern medical definitions of synaesthesia upon the medieval authors under discussion here. Modern medicine understands these synaesthetic perception of colours as bodily experiences, whereas for Kubrawis the colours imprinted onto their mental screens are considered to be the lights of the hidden world (*ghayb*) which represent the recollective phrase, the condition of the practitioner’s soul, and the lights of God’s beauty and majesty.⁷ Yet, Kubrawi discussions of this phenomenon betray similar characteristics to those described by contemporary medical research regarding synaesthesia. Kubrawis associate seeing these “words clothed in light” as ‘Ammar al-Bidlisi (d. 604/1207-8) describes it, with sensitivity to sensory stimuli, and consistency in colour progressions. They also clearly understand the phenomenon as being induced and cultivated by recollective practices that emphasise the sequential nature, structured as they are by the breaths and stresses placed on the phrases of recollection.⁸ Moreover, Buehler has shown that recollection practices have been, and in some cases remain, very much associated with inner visualisations in some Sufi circles to this day.⁹

Some studies have touched upon the intertwined experiences of auditory recollection and visual photisms in Kubrawi thought.¹⁰ Perhaps most notably, the phenomenon as it is discussed in Kubra’s *Fawa’ih al-jamal wa fawatih al-jalal* is described in some detail in Henry Corbin’s *Man of Light*. However, this interconnection between the auditory and visual stimuli in Kubrawi thought and practice is not fully elucidated here.¹¹ Investigating Kubrawi accounts of synaesthesia requires us to extend our attention beyond Kubra’s *Fawa’ih* and read various early Kubrawi sources together in order to construct, what I will demonstrate to be, a systematic understanding of synaesthetic experiences which depends upon certain notions of sound, speech, and vision. Outside of a particular study on Kubrawi Sufism, the connection between recollection and visions in Sahl al-Tustari’s (d. 283/896) writings has also been briefly discussed by Bowering.¹² Although bearing similarities to Kubrawi thought on the matter, the intricate relationship between sound and vision in recollection is not fully explored here, the focus of Bowering’s work being concerned with the heavenly ascension (*miraj*).

In this article, I will first detail the early Kubrawi method of recollection. I will then demonstrate how Kubrawi recollection was understood to cultivate synaesthetic experiences for the purpose of experiential gnosis. This came to be articulated by a highly developed psychological theory based on the possibility of representing and perceiving speech both audibly and visually. Kubrawis largely drew on Ash‘ari notions of speech in order to arrive at this conception. However, this had to be synthesised with the Kubrawi micro-cosmological conception of the human body and soul in order to expand upon existing mystical theories of recollection.

In addition, I will argue here that the systematisation of synaesthetic experiences is integral to the development of a hierarchy of the senses which represented an ocular-centric mystical framework. This served to mark The Kubrawi community’s identity in distinction to other emerging Sufi communities. Highlighting this movement towards ocular-centrism in this particular Iranian Sufi community in this period is also important for complicating the narrative surrounding the senses in the Islamic world. Islamic society and culture have been, and in

³Walsh, “Can Synaesthesia be Cultivated,” 8.

⁴Rich, Bradshaw and Mattingley, “A Systematic Large-scale Study of Synaesthesia,” 54.

⁵Ibid., 69.

⁶Walsh, “Can Synaesthesia be Cultivated,” 11.

⁷See for example Kubra, *Fawa’ih al-jamal*, 207.

⁸Al-Bidlisi, *Bahjat al-ta’ifa*, 47.

⁹Buehler, *Recognising Sufism*, 66–7; 107–8.

¹⁰Elias, “A Kubrawi Treatise on Mystical Vision,” 69.

¹¹Corbin, *The Man of Light*, 73–6.

¹²Bowering, “From the Word,” 212.

some cases remain, associated with a phono-centric framework in opposition to a Western, or modern, ocular-centric one.¹³ While work has been done to overturn such notions, this study complicates this picture by highlighting an emerging ocular-centrism in medieval Sufism which is nevertheless based on a synaesthetic model of sensory experience.

The Kubrawi Method of Recollection

A recurrent theme in hagiographical literature centring upon prominent Sufis, including Kubra, is the rejection of scholastic models of learning in favour of Sufi training. This is often understood as representing a shift from exoteric to esoteric modes of learning.¹⁴ For Kubrawi Sufis, esoteric training was to do with cultivating the practitioner's inner self (*batin*).¹⁵ Nevertheless, the Kubrawi Sufi training prescribed was psycho-somatic, requiring the disciplining of both the body and soul. For Kubrawi Sufis, this was understood to inculcate within the body the correct affective, kinaesthetic, and sensory responses to a given stimuli. Following Hirschkind's discussion of Islamic listening practices, auditory rituals must be viewed as involving the body in its entirety and not its cognitive faculties alone.¹⁶ Rather, such practices have the capacity to "organise the sensorium, to install and attune affective-gestural potentialities at the level of sensorimotor processes."¹⁷ I propose here that cultivating the visual response to the auditory stimuli is part of Kubrawi psycho-somatic training.

Moreover, in the case of Sufi listening practices such as recollection and musical audition (*sama'*), this conception of the body as "the medium of expression" and the organ which hears is useful.¹⁸ In both cases, Sufis developed rules and conventions that regulated the bodily production of, and responses to, sound.¹⁹ Moreover, in order for recollection to be considered effective in Kubrawi Sufism, it had to be situated within a wider network of bodily practices and behaviours which allowed the proper response to the auditory stimuli. In fact, recollection is understood to be undertaken with one's entire being in Kubrawi thought.²⁰

Conceiving of listening practices in this way allows us to build on the important work undertaken by Devin

Deweese who has shown how different models of recollection in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries distinguished the proto-Kubrawi community from the ethnically Turkic Sufi communities. The former argued for the usage of the phrase "*la illaha illa Allah*", while the latter would recite only "*Allah*."²¹ One aim of the study at hand is to deepen our understanding of the significance that methods of recollection had for emerging Sufi identities in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. For the early Kubrawis, recollection is intimately connected to the identity of the Sufi community, through a synaesthetic association, informing the visual material, and mental culture of the community. Hence, disagreements over the phrase of recollection carry the potential to undermine the legitimacy of an entire Sufi community by questioning a practice that plays a crucial part in forming its identity. Recollection practices help constitute, and in turn are constituted by Sufi communities.

Fortunately, the early Kubrawi method of recollection is recorded in detail by Najm al-Din al-Razi (d. 654/1256) in his *Manarat al-sa'irin*. Al-Razi was taught both by Kubra, as well as by one of Kubra's most prominent students, Majd al-Din al-Baghdadi (d. 616/1219).²² Hence, the method of recollection he records is likely to have been practiced by al-Baghdadi and Kubra. Al-Razi describes the process of learning the method of recollection in the section regarding the etiquettes of recollection in his *Manarat*. This passage shows that learning the Kubrawi method of recollection had developed into a type of initiation ritual, which I shall paraphrase here:

Prior to receiving the prescribed method of recollection, the initiate must fast three days according to the command of his master, he must also remain in a state of constant ritual purity, diligently renewing his ablutions, constantly recollecting God, eating little, sleeping little, not mixing with other people and abandoning any hesitations or doubts he may have. He must then undertake a ritual washing (*ghusl*) which is referred to as the ritual washing of Islam that signifies a transition from inherited, and emulated form of Islam (*islam taqlidi*) to the acquired Islam of truthfulness and desiring God (*irada*). He must then sit on his knees in front of his master with presence of heart, and constant invigilation over his innermost heart. At this point his master utters the recollective phrase "*la*

¹³Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 13–16.

¹⁴Alexanderin, "The Sciences of Intuition," 291.

¹⁵Al-Baghdadi, *Tuhfat al-barara*, fol. 47a–47b.

¹⁶Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 79.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., 27.

¹⁹See for example al-Qushayri's *al-Risala al-qushayriyya*, where the bodily responses to audition are divided into ecstatic bodily movements and utterances due to the spiritual weakness of Sufi novices, and calmness due to the spiritual stability of the advanced Sufis. Al-Qushayri, *al-Risala al-Qushayriyya*, 370.

²⁰Kubra, *Fawa'ih al-jamal*, 157.

²¹Possibly the proto-Yasawi community. See Deweese, "Ahmad Yasawi," 863.

²²Algar, "Daya Razi."

illaha illa Allah” loudly only once, so that the disciple will understand it to mean the negation of all thought impressions (*khawatir*) with “*la illaha*”, and the affirmation of the presence of the divine with “*illa Allah*”.²³

The disciple then repeats the phrase, projecting his voice, straining himself (*maddan nafsahu*), with presence of heart, placing stress and emphasis upon the negative and affirmative sections of the sentence respectively. The master then recites the phrase again and the disciple again repeats it. The master then offers a supplicatory prayer on behalf of the disciple. At this point the disciple rises, remaining silent, he enters the house of seclusion and sits cross-legged facing Mecca with his hands upon his thighs. He must repeat the phrase of recollection constantly while maintaining this position, again with a present heart and in a low voice. Here, he must recite the negative and affirmative parts of the phrase with intensity of breath. This stress and rhythm is necessary in order to realise that there is no thing in existence save God. The disciple is instructed to remain vigilant and attentive to what he hears and sees with his spiritual senses, and to sleep very little in order to subdue the outer senses. Moreover, the disciple is told to constantly recite the phrase upon his tongue and within his heart in order to lift the veils of duality between the practitioner of recollection and God, who is recollected (*al-dhakir wa al-madhkur*).²⁴

Clearly this description of Kubrawi training in the method of recollection represents an initiation ritual. The disciple first enters a three-day period of liminality, fasting and maintaining ritual purity until he is taught the recollective phrase along with its rhythm and acoustic stresses. There is a sense here that the rhythm of this recitation breaks the phrase into two parts which emphasise its negative and affirmative sections.

The requirement of a ritual bath of “desiring God” also accentuates the initiation of the disciple into the Sufi community. The ritual bath is also associated with seclusion in Kubra’s *al-Usul al-‘ashra* where he states that the disciple should be like a corpse in the hands of the shaykh who acts as his funerary corpse-washer, in order to be cleansed of all the impurities which bodily existence entails.²⁵ Moreover, in al-Baghdadi’s *Tuhfat al-barara*, it is stipulated that prior to entering seclusion, the Sufi should undertake a ritual bath with the intention of performing the funerary washing of a corpse (*ghusl al-mayyit*).²⁶

Meier notes that the image of the corpse-washer comes to be applied to the Sufi master only in the twelfth

century as Sufi communities were transitioning into orders, and were beginning to coalesce and centralise around particular Sufi masters.²⁷ The Sufi undergoes a spiritual death prior to entering seclusion and practicing recollection, only to be spiritually revived through the master’s training where instruction in the method of recollection is central. Only then is the disciple allowed access to the room of seclusion where the synaesthetic experiences occur. This is implied in al-Razi’s instruction to the Sufi to induce sensory deprivation, and to pay attention to what his spiritual senses of hearing and seeing perceive. Hence, access to the location where spiritual sensation and synaesthesia takes place, is mediated by the Sufi master’s initiation of the disciple into the Kubrawi Sufi community. This ritualisation of recollection into an initiatory practice grants importance to the auditory-visual experiences of recollection, as experiences intimately connected to belonging to the Kubrawi Sufi community.

Moreover, the requirements and restrictions placed on eating, sleeping, speaking and maintaining ritual purity prepare the initiate to respond correctly to the method of recollection. Recollection itself is then imbedded within a network of bodily practices. In Kubra’s *Risalat al-kha’if al-ha’im min lawmat al-la’im*, a short treatise which aims to guide Sufi initiates along the path, the Sufi must adhere to ten conditions including the practice of recollection. These are listed in the following order: constant ritual purity through ablutions and ritual washings, seclusion, constant silence, constant fasting, constant recollection, surrendering oneself and being contented with the will of God, suppressing thought impressions, linking the heart to the Sufi master, sleeping only when necessary, and to eat only a moderate amount (to avoid being fully satiated or hungry).²⁸

In a number of early Kubrawi manuals, performing recollection is only one condition for the appearance of visionary lights. Variations on these ten conditions appear often in Kubrawi texts, they are more or less repeated in Majd al-Din al-Baghdadi’s *Tuhfat al-barara* as well as Najm al-Din al-Razi’s *Manarat al-sa’irin*.²⁹ Together, these conditions are understood to cultivate a response to the auditory stimulus of recollection in the form of the visual perception of lights.³⁰ Hence, the practice of recollection is placed within a wider network of shared theories and practices which centralise the role

²³ Al-Razi, *Manarat al-sa’irin*, 400.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 401.

²⁵ Kubra, *al-Usul al-‘ashra*, 127.

²⁶ Al-Baghdadi, *Tuhfat al-barara*, fol. 30a.

²⁷ Meier, “Khurasan and the End of Classical Sufism,” 203.

²⁸ Kubra, *Risalat al-kha’if*, fol. 107a–112b; fol. 112a.

²⁹ See al-Baghdadi, *Tuhfat al-barara*, fol. 65b–77a.

³⁰ Kubra, *Risalat al-kha’if*, fol. 108a.

of the Sufi master within the community as an instructor in recollection.

Theories of Speech and Sound

In the context of recollection, the distinction between speaker and listener is blurred as the practitioner is at once both reciter and audience. Here, sound is both produced and perceived through the medium of the body. In some strands of Islamic thought hearing is privileged as the only sensation which can be apprehended without direct contact between the perceiver and the object of sensation.³¹ This is argued in the field of Islamic theology, or *kalam*, where understanding the nature of speech carries implications for the status of the Qur'an as either created in time or uncreated and eternal. In these debates, conceptualising speech was crucial since God's speech was understood to be analogous to human speech.³² Ash'aris commonly upheld a distinction between the internal speech of the soul and expressed bodily speech which allowed them to conceive of speech as an attribute of God that exists eternally, therefore establishing the uncreatedness of the Qur'an. The Mu'tazalis denied any distinction between external and internal speech. For the Mu'tazalis, allowing the Qur'an a share in God's eternity was to compromise His unity, it therefore had to have been created in time.³³

By applying their conception of speech to God, Ash'aris rendered the audible and written Qur'an a bodily manifestation of the internal speech of God. There emerged two main positions within Ash'arism with regard to the uncreated Qur'an. The first considered the internal speech of God to be simple and indivisible, that is to say that it is not comprised of the sounds and utterances of the Qur'an as we know it, but an abstract attribute of speech. The second identified God's inner, uncreated speech with the embodied sounds and composition of the Qur'an. It is the former position which the Kubrawis adhere to.³⁴ In fact, this position seems to have been accepted by Sufis more generally by this time as Sviri has pointed to this same distinction in the work of 'Umar al-Suhrawardi (d. 632/1234) with regard to Sufi Qur'an interpretation.³⁵ Likewise, the distinction between embodied and abstract speech is evident in the

collectively authored Kubrawi Qur'an commentary, *al-Ta'wilat al-najmiyya*. This topic is remarked upon in the exegesis of Surat Yusuf, where the author, most probably Najm al-Din al-Razi,³⁶ explains:

The reality of God's speech (*kalam Allah*) is abstracted in its wordedness (*kalamiyyatihi*) from the clothing of letters (*kaswat al-huruf*), sounds and languages. However, people are dependent upon the clothing of letters and languages in order to comprehend its meanings.³⁷

In accordance with the Ash'ari notion of speech, this passage distinguishes between the abstracted inner speech of God and His expressed, audible speech in the form of the Qur'an. In this instance, adopting the Ash'ari position provides a useful argument for the applicability of esoteric exegesis, or *ta'wil*, which attempts to move beyond the literal meanings of the Qur'an and render its hidden meaning explicit. This conception of sound and speech is argued by highlighting the possibility of representing the inner speech of God in more than one language.

Al-Razi elaborates upon this further in his *Mirsad al-'ibad* where he explains that Moses did not achieve spiritual perfection as Muhammad did because Moses heard the word of God through the intermediaries of "letter, sound, and voice." He then explains that Muhammad had no intermediary between himself and God's word upon his heavenly ascension.³⁸ Importantly, this conception of speech also hints at the possibility of representing speech in sensory modalities beyond sound, since the prophet is understood to have witnessed God visually upon his ascent.

Another instance where the distinction between true inner speech and bodily expressed speech is discussed regards the practice of musical audition (*sama'*). As the word suggests, such discussions consider what man hears rather than what God says, shifting the emphasis regarding God's speech to human experience. Al-Razi in his *Manarat* discusses this at some length, largely quoting al-Baghdadi's *Tuhfat al-barara*, but also adding his own remarks and commentaries on the subject in places.³⁹ Here, al-Baghdadi discusses the notion of hearing at length, describing a process through which one can attain true hearing through the purification of the soul.

Al-Baghdadi describes this true spiritual hearing (*ruh al-hiss* and *al-hiss al-haqiqi*) as being represented by the

³¹See Ibn Mattawayh, *al-Tadhkira fi ahkam al-jawahir*, 332.

³²Larkin, "The Inimitability of the Qur'an," 32.

³³Ibid., 32–4.

³⁴This position was also maintained by al-Ghazali who had a great influence over subsequent Sufi thinkers. See Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, 279; 283.

³⁵Sviri, "The Countless Faces," 70–71.

³⁶I believe this chapter was authored, or at least edited by Najm al-Din al-Razi, due to the discussion of the psycho-spiritual organ of the *khafi* which is absent from Kubra's work but is found in al-Razi's writings.

³⁷Kubra and al-Simnani, *al-Ta'wilat al-najmiyya*, 306.

³⁸al-Razi, *Mirsad*, 244.

³⁹Compare al-Razi, *Manarat al-sa'irin*, 515–46, and al-Baghdadi, *Tuhfat al-barara*, fol. 65b–77a.

“outer layer” (*qishr*) of physical hearing. This true hearing, like God’s speech is beyond time and place but acquires a physical, bodily manifestation in the world. He explains that the physical sensory organs perceive the physical sounds, while the heart perceives the true spiritual sounds. Moreover, true hearing becomes perceptible to Sufis once they “lift the distance” (*raf al-bayan*) between their hiddenness and apparentness, their true spiritual senses and physical senses, through spiritual exercise.⁴⁰ At this point the Sufi may perceive the true speech of God from the particular sounds of the Qur’an, or from any bodily sound:

True hearing emerges and deafness is removed ... And therefore, the servant hears from the sounds of the Qur’an, or from any other [sound composed of] particular syllables which is placed before his two ear drums, the speech of God.⁴¹

Here al-Baghdadi clearly reproduces the Ash‘ari distinction between God’s attribute of speech and his expressed speech in the form of the Qur’an. However, the notion is expanded by equating the Qur’an to any other physical sound one may hear. This assertion renders every auditory perception an occasion for hearing God’s speech depending upon the individual’s psycho-spiritual progress. This notion of hearing also informs Kubrawi thought on recollection where the auditory recollection of the Sufi practitioner is rendered a bodily expression of God’s own recollection of the Sufi.

Kubrawi Theories of Recollection

Ash‘aris often used the example of recollection to illustrate the distinction between inner speech and bodily speech. In Ash‘ari theology, the recollective phrase (*dhikr*) is understood to be a bodily expression composed of particular sounds which indicate God (*al-madhkur*).⁴² Recollection is therefore likened to the distinction between the physical Qur’an and God’s attribute of speech in kalam. This vocabulary was adopted by Sufi thinkers, along with a distinction between the recollection of the tongue and the heart. Such developments reflect the Ash‘ari distinction of inner and outer speech which is found in Sufi works predating the Kubrawiyya, such as in Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri’s (d.465/1072-3) *al-Risala al-qushayriyya*.⁴³ Al-Qushayri was an Ash‘ari

himself and such cross pollination of ideas should seem unsurprising.⁴⁴ Kubrawi Sufi theories clearly draw on these traditions when they discuss the distinction between the recollection of the heart and tongue. However, they are further systematised with reference to a microcosmic conception of the human body and soul.

For example, Kubrawi anthropology comes to play a crucial role in these discussions. Kubrawi anthropology relies upon a particular articulation of the microcosmic theory of man. Here, man is understood to be composed of all the realities in existence, with bodily and spiritual faculties that correspond to the entire cosmos. Humans must therefore ascend through this internal microcosm in order to reach God, beginning by overcoming the most bodily complex faculties and the lower soul (*nafs*). Once this is overcome, the lower soul is pacified, and the Sufi may progress to the higher faculties of the soul, beginning with the heart (*qalb*), followed by the spirit (*ruh*), the innermost heart (*sirr*), until finally reaching the presence of God. The Sufi’s ability to achieve true perception is dependent upon ascending through these psycho-spiritual ranks and accessing the spiritual sensory organs which correspond to the bodily sense organs.⁴⁵ As I will show, the introduction of this micro-cosmological scheme into discussions of speech, sound, and sensation serves to expand upon existing mystical theories of recollection.

Kubra’s teacher ‘Ammar al-Bidlisi in his *Bahjat al-ta’ifa*, discusses recollection at some length, utilising the distinction between bodily speech and the speech of the soul outlined above and introduced in al-Qushayri’s *Risala*. For example, he states that “true recollection is the recollection of the heart not of the tongue.”⁴⁶ By the recollection of the tongue, al-Bidlisi clearly intends the bodily, audible recitation of the *dhikr* formula *la illaha illa Allah*. Above this is the recollection of the heart which he divides into two types. The first is a recollection of intimacy, while the second is a recollection of absorption. He then associates the former with the “station of subtleties” (*lata’if*), while the latter is associated with “the station of witnessing.”⁴⁷

The latter recollection of absorption is the more completed stage as it involves an absence from self-conscious recollection through awareness of God’s recollection of

⁴⁰Al-Razi, *Manarat al-sa’irin*, 521.

⁴¹Al-Razi, *Manarat al-sa’irin*, 517.

⁴²Wolfson, *The Philosophy*, 248–49; 256.

⁴³Al-Qushayri, *al-Risala al-Qushayriyya*, 256–58.

⁴⁴Kazuyo Murata has drawn attention to the influence of Ash‘arism, through al-Qushayri, over the work of Kubra’s contemporary Ruzbihan al-Baqli (d. 606/1209). Murata, *Beauty in Sufism*, 60–61.

⁴⁵Izutsu, “The Theophanic Ego,” 29–31.

⁴⁶Al-Bidlisi, *Bahjat al-ta’ifa*, 44.

⁴⁷Ibid., 45.

the Sufi practitioner. Al-Bidlisi explains this concept through reference to the Qur'anic command "remember me [and] I shall remember you" (*fadhkuruni adhkur-kum*) [Qur'an: 2:152]. He then states that when God is recollected in such a way that deserves His reciprocal recollection, this is properly termed the recollection of the heart, "for if the heart recollects, it is recollected."⁴⁸ Al-Bidlisi later explains that this should truly be understood as God's recollection of himself, since the Sufi's soul is negated at this point, only God remains recollecting himself.⁴⁹

This distinction is further developed by Kubra. In his *Fasl fi fadl al-dhikr*, Kubra like al-Bidlisi distinguishes between three degrees of recollection. Each type of recollection is assigned to a separate bodily or spiritual faculty. The first is the recollection of the tongue, the second is the recollection of the heart, and the third is the recollection of the innermost heart (*sirr*).⁵⁰ He also describes the psychological condition of the individual in each phase of recollection:

The recollection of sounds without presence is the recollection of the tongue. And recollection with the presence of the heart, is the recollection of the heart. And the recollection of absence from presence in He who is recollected (*al-madhkur*, meaning God), is the recollection of the innermost heart. For if you return from presence to understanding [the meaning] of the [phrase of recollection], you have descended a degree. And if you become distracted from He who is recollected, by returning to the awareness of the tongue's [audible] stirring, then you have descended a degree further. And recollection is three stages until it reaches the kernel [of the soul]. Meaning, [the stages are] layers (*qishr*), the first, the second, and the third. And if you come to know the layers and traverse them, you reach the intended aim.⁵¹

Kubra explains that when recollection reaches the kernel of the soul it leads to absorption in God, a state in which the heart no longer takes notice of the recollection of the tongue or its own recollection. This ultimate stage of recollection occurs in the innermost heart (*sirr*). Hence, al-Bidlisi's recollection of absorption is assigned a separate psycho-spiritual faculty here. By assigning each stage of recollection to a certain bodily or spiritual organ, Kubra stratifies the levels of recollection further. This is clearly a development beyond al-Qushayri's account of recollection which was only divided into two levels and was not necessarily assigned to specific spiritual organs.⁵²

Importantly, Kubra also introduces the notion of "layers" of representation which gives the audible physical sensation of recollection a significant role in disciplining the body and the senses. Once achieved, the practitioner is then in a position to condition the heart by focusing on the "meaning", the abstracted reality of recollection. This is followed by conditioning the innermost heart, which requires the soul to become absent of its recollection entirely, both its bodily and abstract forms, focusing on God's recollection of the individual instead.

The representational relationship between each stage of recollection is mirrored in the discussion of hearing in al-Razi's *Manarat* and al-Baghdadi's *Tuhfa* as noted earlier. Hence, whatever is spoken and heard acts as a layer (*qishr*) which is a bodily representation of God's attribute of speech, expressed in physical sound. Kubra's discussion of outer layers here introduces an intermediary between physical recollection and God's own recollection, namely the recollection of the heart. This further stratification of sound and speech is dependent upon the hierarchical organisation of man's spiritual and bodily organs.

Kubra expands upon the relationship between the tongue and the heart in his *al-Kha'if*. This text presents the Sufi initiate with ten conditions which must be adhered to if he is to be cured from bewilderment, fear, and blameworthiness.⁵³ Two of these conditions are dedicated to recollection; the third condition prescribes absolute silence apart from when the initiate engages in recollection, while the fifth discusses the method of recollection in more detail. In this fifth condition of "constant recollection" Kubra explains:

"Woe to those whose hearts are hardened against the recollection of God" [39:22]. And this [verse] is an allusion for the servant [which instructs] him to pronounce the recollection with intense force, because [God] has characterised the heart with the attribute of hardness (*qaswa*) which is the attribute of stone ... And stone, if it is hardened, is not broken except by a powerful blow from a pick-axe. And [here] the stone is the heart, and the pick-axe is the tongue that is engaged in recollection, and the metal [of the pick-axe] is the [phrase of] recollection ... And according to this metaphor, when recollection strikes the heart, a fire is ignited which burns and pierces the veils to God.

This discussion of recollection corresponds with the method described by al-Razi. By specifying that the

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid, 46–7.

⁵⁰Kubra, *Fasl fi fadl al-dhikr*, fol. 17b.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Al-Qushayri, *al-Risala al-Qushayriyya*, 259.

⁵³Kubra, *Risalat al-kha'if*, fol. 108a.

pronouncement of recollection be done with intensity, this passage also highlights the fact that lifting the veils from the heart requires the audible, bodily sound of recollection. Hence, the intensity of the sound is essential for successfully conditioning the heart. Moreover, the phrase of recollection itself is given an important role in this passage. The implication here is that the “pick” of the tongue would be ineffective at breaking the “stone” of the heart if it were not attached to the “metal axe” of the bodily recollective phrase. Moreover, in his *Fasl fi al-dhikr*, Kubra states:

If the sincere disciple performs this action while adhering to the conditions for forty days continuously, the door of unveiling and witnessing from the spiritual worlds is opened ... as the prophet peace be upon him has said, “whoever has [worshipped God with dedication] for forty dawns, the springs of wisdom from his heart flow upon his tongue.”⁵⁴

This indicates the proper alignment of the spiritual and bodily organs, whereas the body and lower soul are at first dominant over the heart, after a successfully forty days of recollection the heart is able to direct the bodily organs, including the physical tongue. In Kubra’s *Fawa’ih* this accordance between tongue and heart is expanded with reference to the microcosmic composition of the human being. This emerges in a section of the *Fawa’ih* where Kubra describes the sounds he had heard during recollection while discussing the concept of absorption (*istighraq*):

The first absorption is the absorption of bodily existence (*wujud*) in recollection. And this occurs when the impure substances [of man] are burnt away while the pure substances remain. At this point you hear the recollection of [bodily] existence, and so you hear from each [part of yourself] a recollection, as if a horn is blown or a drum is struck. And if the recollection is aligned [further], [the sound] becomes like that of the buzzing of bees ... I was once performing recollection in seclusion and found in my head the likeness of these sounds [of horns, tablas and drums] accompanied by acute headaches ... And the secret of these intense noises and pains is that recollection opposes all that is other than God.

And after these sounds, [meaning] those of drums and horns, you will hear other sounds such as the murmur of [running] water, the howling of the wind, the sound of blazing fire, the [grinding] of stones, the walk and canter of horses, and the sound of rustling leaves in a stormy wind. And the secret of this is that the human being is composed of every substance, noble and lowly, from these elements ... and these sounds are the

recollection of every particle of these substances. And whoever has heard these sounds has praised God and glorified him with every tongue, and this is one of the conditions of the [Sufi] path.⁵⁵

In this extremely vivid account of the sounds Kubra experienced during recollection, sound and speech are again intimately connected. The Sufi hears the recollection of his own internal faculties in the sounds of nature. Every sound which is apprehended corresponds to the “speech” of each faculty within the microcosm of the human being. Here, the entire composition of man is reflected in the auditory experiences which are heard during recollection, including the elements represented by sounds of water, air, fire, and earth, as well as sounds that correspond to the animal and vegetative soul. Each substance and faculty which together constitute the human body “speak” to the Sufi in accordance with the degree of his spiritual purification. Here, recollection seems to trigger an auditory synaesthetic experience whereby the sound of the *dhikr* induces the perception of other sounds.

This accordance between the degree of the soul’s purification and the various “tongues” of man’s constituent parts, or between the spiritual and bodily organs and faculties, is reflected in al-Baghdadi’s *Tuhfa* from which al-Razi quotes in his *Manarat*. If we return to al-Baghdadi’s discussion with these ideas in mind, what is meant by lifting the distance (*raf al-bayan*) between man’s apparentness and hiddenness in terms of one’s capacity to hear becomes evident. Al-Baghdadi’s distinction between the true spiritual senses which are perceived by the heart and the physical senses which are perceived by the body underscore the correspondence between the human microcosm and the created macrocosm.

At one point al-Baghdadi explains that the heart hears from whatever accompanies it, meaning whatever faculty of the soul predominates upon it. If it is commanded by God then it always hears God even when it encounters a physical sound.⁵⁶ Moreover, once true hearing is achieved, al-Baghdadi states that if the hearer turns his attention towards the world, unintelligible sounds may be comprehensible:

If the distance between [the wayfarer’s] hiddenness and apparentness is lifted through spiritual exercise, it is possible for the hearer to describe what his true sense of hearing perceives from the outer sense [of hearing] with ordered and intelligible speech. So, he may hear from the sound of a well, intelligible and comprehensible speech, and likewise from any sound

⁵⁴Kubra, *Fasl fi fadl al-dhikr*, fol. 19b.

⁵⁵Kubra, *Fawa’ih al-jamal*, 157.

⁵⁶Al-Razi, *Manarat al-sa’irin*, 523.

such as the creaking of a door, or birdsong, or anything else.⁵⁷

In this case, the perfected relation between the Sufi's soul and body is represented by a perfection of hearing and speaking and a synchrony between the tongue and heart. The sounds of birdsong or creaking doors is made intelligible to the Sufi which he may then translate into human language. This is portrayed as an important signifier of spiritual completion as al-Baghdadi goes on to explain that those Sufis whose inner states have been altered by sounds but cannot describe or explain what they have heard, remain at a lower spiritual rank. These Sufis have not successfully lifted the distance between their spiritual and physical senses and have not "apprehended any speech."⁵⁸

Moreover, al-Baghdadi describes these Sufis as experiencing a change in their spiritual states due to the sounds they hear, but explains that they are unaware of this change and remain barred from spiritual completion.⁵⁹ Lacking this ability indicates that they do not perceive the world's praise of God (*tasbih al-kawn*) which is often understood as a type of recollection undertaken by the entirety of creation including animals and inanimate objects. Chittick notes that the universe acts as a form of scripture in Muhy al-Din Ibn Arabi's (d. 638/1240) work alongside the human microcosm and the Qur'an. Taken collectively, Chittick understands reality in its entirety to be configured by God's speech in Ibn Arabi's view.⁶⁰ While Ibn Arabi focuses on the ontological implications of God's speech, the Kubrawis grant us an important insight into its epistemic implications here. It is telling that what qualifies incomplete Sufis as deficient in al-Baghdadi's view is their inability to translate the unintelligible sounds of birdsong and creaking doors into a comprehensible language, a task which requires a perfection both in hearing and speech. Hence, their inability to recollect with the entirety of the microcosm as Kubra describes, is reflected in their inability to hear, comprehend and orally transmit the speech of the macrocosm.

Here, the perception of any physical sound may stimulate the perception of a spiritual sound. While spiritual hearing is beyond time and space, the physical sounds of birds and inanimate objects which take place in time and space may induce spiritual sounds. Moreover, the Sufi is dependent upon these instances of

physical sound in order to apprehend a spiritual resonance. Clearly, the spiritual sensation is dependent upon, and triggered by the physical sensory stimuli.

The Interconnection between Sound and Vision

Majd al-Din al-Baghdadi explains in his *T. al-barara* that the practice of recollection is intimately connected to spiritual visions. This is predicated on two psychological premises. The first is that the practice of recollection takes place in the room of seclusion which places the Sufi in sensory deprivation, strengthening the imaginative faculty. The second is that the repetition of the recollective phrase bars thought impressions from entering the soul and disturbing the imaginative faculty from representing truths appropriately. In doing so, recollection allows divine inspiration to enter the soul by barring those thought impressions which corrupt true visions.⁶¹ Once the purification of the soul is achieved through recollection, a true vision may occur. In this scheme, dreams and visions are stratified in accordance with the degree of the soul's purity such that a vision or dream which occurs while the lower soul is dominant over the heart produces an image that is symbolic and requires interpretation. When God commands the heart and manifests himself to it, visions communicate direct literal truths through images.⁶²

The coloured lights that are perceived during recollection follow a similar scheme in early Kubrawi texts. Darker colours indicate a soul dominated by its lower natures whereas lighter and transparent colours indicate a more purified soul. They therefore represent the degree of the soul's purity with respect to visions of light whose forms are in accordance with the degree of the soul's purification. They also correspond to the extent to which God manifests himself to the Sufi, they are referred to as veils to God and God's lights of beauty and majesty by Najm al-Din Razi for example.⁶³ Therefore, once spiritual perfection is attained the lights perceived become colourless, white or black are usually chosen here, since God cannot be represented by an image.⁶⁴

The perception of lights is in fact a visual expression of the auditory recollection. This is made clear by al-Baghdadi who employs the term "the recollective light"

⁵⁷Ibid., 522.

⁵⁸Ibid., 523.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Chittick, "On the Cosmology of Dhikr," 51.

⁶¹Al-Baghdadi, *Tuhfat al-barara*, fol. 39b–41b.

⁶²Ibid., fol. 45a.

⁶³Al-Razi, *Mirsad*, 300–301.

⁶⁴Al-Baghdadi considers white to be the greatest colour, for al-Razi it is black. See al-Baghdadi, *Tuhfat al-barara*, fol. 6b; al-Razi, *Mirsad*, 302.

(*al-nur al-dhikri*) to refer to this phenomenon.⁶⁵ It is this light which purifies the heart from the baser qualities of the soul. The concept perhaps first emerges in ‘Ammar al-Bidlisi’s *Bahjat al-ta’ifa* where he states:

The benefits [the practitioners] receive from these examinations, pursuits, and stations is that their hearts become characterised by the attribute of the word [of recollection]. And if [the heart] becomes characterised [thus], the attribute of the word erases their [bodily] existence ... And at that point the servant witnesses as if he does not exist, and as long as God exists, God remains witnessing Himself. For when the word is united in the inner being [of one who has previously been in a changeable spiritual state], the reality of the word deposits its secrets in the heart, and [the heart] is made to shine due to its clarity, and the purity of its lights. At this point [the practitioners] witness the word naked of [its] letters, clothed in the illumination of the lights of attribution by [He who is described by attributes]. For the recollector has been absorbed in recollection so that he has become annihilated, and only the recollection subsists with the attribute of He who is recollected.⁶⁶

This passage expands upon the relationship between the heart and bodily recollection discussed above by suggesting that light can replace sound as the embodied expression of speech once the heart is appropriately conditioned. The intelligible, auditory word here is understood to be representative of an abstracted attribute. This attribute is at first perceived audibly by the ear. Once the Sufi attains a more advanced spiritual state and becomes unaware of his own recollection, he attains a visual expression of God’s recollection. Here, the word’s auditory form of letters (*huruf*) is replaced by a visual form of light which represents the attributes of God.

By employing terms such as “attribute” (*sifa*) and “word” (*kalima*) in order to describe the abstracted word, its influence over the heart, and its clothing of expressed bodily sound, al-Bidlisi reminds us of the Ash‘ari-inspired discussions of speech and sound presented above. Here, al-Bidlisi’s maintains the abstracted attribute of speech while only replacing its sensible, expressed form. Moreover, the visual representation of the word clearly indicates that the Sufi has truly come to know its reality experientially as al-Bidlisi describes the heart as being characterised by the attribute of the word. Hence, the synaesthetic experience is indicative of progression along the spiritual path which mirrors

this transition from auditory to visual forms of God’s speech.

References to this conception of a visual, rather than auditory word are found throughout Kubrawi texts. One of the most striking examples occurs in a passage of Kubra’s *Fawa’ih* where visions of the Qur’an and recollection are described:

For in the hidden [world] there are books that [God] has written, some of them [are composed only of] dots, and some of shapes, and some with letters ... And at first the wayfarer sees books which are written, intellected, and understood such as the Qur’an. Then they are deposited in the innermost heart where he [either] understands them or does not understand them due to the darkness of [his] forgetful existence. Then he sees [books composed of] shapes such as quadrangles and other [shapes]. Then books written in dots, and he understands them and reads them, for he comes to know divine knowledge. Then, when existence returns he forgets, however the sweetness of understanding remains in his heart ... And it may be that a sky full of stars is displayed for [the wayfarer], and it is the Qur’an. And so, he understands it and reads it [through] the indications of the dots ... And it may be that the meteorite of recollection [is seen] from afar ... For that is the meteorite of recollection which emerges from the right-side of faith, certainty and gnosis.⁶⁷

Later in the text Kubra illustrates his own vision of the Qur’anic verse of the throne [1:255], with an arrangement of dots, or small circles.⁶⁸ This more abstracted vision indicates greater proximity to spiritual completion. The word is at first represented through intelligible language, a written text with a relation to an audible word, followed by abstract shapes, then dots, and finally lights. These visual images indicate a move towards abstraction, ridding one’s perceptions from the veils to God in successive stages.

The Sequence of Colours

It makes sense that this mystical systematisation of lights should take colour as its subject. Colour is essential to vision, so much so that medieval kalam theologians had to grapple with the nature of colour and whether any colour could be thought of as distinct from the visible object or body in which it is found.⁶⁹ Hence, vision in its most abstracted and simple form was understood to be the perception of colour.

For most Kubrawi thinkers, when the Sufi first begins his retreat into seclusion and recollection, a dark blue

⁶⁵ Al-Baghdadi, *Tuhfat al-barara*, fol. 6a.

⁶⁶ al-Bidlisi, *Bahjat al-ta’ifa*, 46–7.

⁶⁷ Kubra, *Fawa’ih al-jamal*, 173–4.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 239. This echoes a similar experience witnessed by al-Tustari who describes seeing the word “Allah” in the sky with stars, and goes on to describe seeing the same verse of the throne written in the stars in the form of a line of green light. See Bowering, “From the Word,” 212.

⁶⁹ Morabia, “Lawn.”

light emerges.⁷⁰ Al-Baghdadi explains that blue is a consequence of mixing black and white light; it is the first colour the Sufi perceives because it is a result of the light of recollection, which is whiteness in its purest form, mixing with the dark opaqueness of the lower soul which is dominant over the heart.⁷¹ Between black and white lie other colours, various shades of blue usually make up the stages of the lower soul. Green is usually mentioned as an intermediate colour associated with a pacified lower soul and the heart, while red and yellow tend to be placed closer to the end of the progression and are associated with the spirit.⁷²

Though early Kubrawi notions of sound and speech were clearly influenced by Ash'ari doctrine, their colour theory seems to be adapted from the work of philosophers rather than Ash'aris. In kalam, colours were usually considered for their relationship to perceptible bodies, and were often thought of as accidents that inhered in bodies.⁷³ Such discussions are somewhat removed from questions of colour progression. Instead, early Kubrawi theories of colour depend on mixing various degrees of darkness and light, largely following discussions of philosophers who elaborated upon, and questioned Aristotelian colour theory.

The Aristotelian scheme of colour progression, which early Arab-Islamic philosophers largely adopted, orders colours based on the extent to which lightness and darkness are mixed. Black was thought of as pure darkness, while white was pure light. From black to white, colours are produced in the following sequence: black, blue, green, violet, red, yellow, and finally white.⁷⁴ Al-Kindi developed the philosophical discussion of colour further by focusing on the translucency of the visible object. For al-Kindi the mixture of lightness and darkness is determined by the extent to which a given element, or combination of elements, whether earth, fire, water, or air, is present in an object. Depending on the density resulting from such a mixture, an object may obstruct light to varying degrees and therefore produce a colour. In this case, the element of earth is the densest and most obstructive element to light.⁷⁵

Avicenna broke with the Aristotelian scheme and proposed multiple branches from black to white. He also fundamentally disagreed with Aristotle's assertion that green is impossible to create artificially, stating that it could be created by mixing, yellow, indigo, and black.⁷⁶ Later thinkers who seem to have shifted their focus to pigmentation rather than light, such as Ṭusi, Nishaburi, and Kashani, questioned whether black and white may truly be considered colours and seem to have distinguished them from the chromatic colours as they only produced shades of grey when mixed.⁷⁷

Kubrawi thinking on coloured photisms bears resemblance to some of these ideas. The Aristotelian scheme is certainly influential here as al-Baghdadi refers to the initial blue colour perceived by the Sufi as a result of intense blackness mixing with the pure white light of recollection. In addition, the progression recounted in al-Baghdadi's *Tuhfa* and al-Razi's *Mirsad*, ascends in order from shades of dark blue, green, red, yellow, finally ending in white (or in al-Razi's case ending in black). This maps on rather well with the Aristotelian progression of colours.⁷⁸

At the same time, these Kubrawi thinkers betray a similarity to al-Kindi's theory of colour when they turn to explaining the causes of the darker lights. Referring to microcosmology, the darker colours are understood to be the result of the dominance of the body and the lower soul over the heart. These represent the densest faculties within the human being's composition, containing within them complex mixtures of elements such as the animal and vegetative soul, as well as mineral faculties. Hence, these faculties obstruct the pure white light most and produce the darkest colours.⁷⁹ Lighter colours represent the subtler bodies in existence such as the element of fire, the stars, and planets.⁸⁰ As luminous or reflective bodies, these existents do not obstruct light but cause it to become visible.

Completion of the spiritual path depends upon freeing the immaterial soul from the microcosm of human existence and reaching the presence of God, thus its representative light lacks colour entirely as both white

⁷⁰Kubra, *Fawa'ih al-jamal*, 125–6.

⁷¹Al-Baghdadi, *Tuhfat al-barara*, fol. 6a.

⁷²al-Razi, *Mirsad*, 300–302.

⁷³Morabia, "Lawn."

⁷⁴Baghari and Kircher, "Color Theory in Medieval Islamic Lapidaries," 2.

⁷⁵Adamson, "Vision, Light and Color in al-Kindi," 226–32.

⁷⁶Kircher, "Color Theory and Color Order," 4.

⁷⁷Baghari and Kircher, "Color Theory," 15.

⁷⁸Al-Baghdadi and Kubra mention dark blue, and green as the colours of the lower soul and of the heart respectively. Red and yellow seem to be associated with the higher stages of the heart and the spirit by al-Baghdadi. These two colours are explicitly assigned to the spirit by Najm al-Din al-Razi. Al-Baghdadi introduces white as the colour of spiritual completion, representing the complete annihilation of the self and the manifestation of God. The same progression is found in al-Razi's *Mirsad al-ibad*, which however places a black light above the white light of purification. See al-Din al-Baghdadi, *Tuhfat al-barara*, fol. 6a–6b; Kubra, *Fawa'ih al-jamal*, 125; al-Razi, *Mirsad*, 300–302.

⁷⁹Al-Baghdadi, *Tuhfat al-barara*, fol. 6a.

⁸⁰Ibid., fol. 10a–10b; Kubra, *Fawa'ih al-jamal*, 175.

and black are understood by al-Baghdadi to be without colour.⁸¹ In one passage in the *Fawa'ih*, Kubra explains that “our path is the path of alchemy”, whereby the soul must be freed from each element of earth, water, air and fire that make up the human body.⁸² The bodily practices which accompany recollection are understood to aid this process. For example, in *al-Kha'if*, Kubra explains that constant ritual purity is required because ablution with the element of water helps remove the denser element of earth from the soul, “washing away the dirt from the face of the spirit.”⁸³ Such passages clearly identify a connection between density and light in the production of colours.

This sequence of colours maps onto the sequence of stresses placed upon the phrase of recollection. In Kubrawi Sufism, travelling towards God comprises traversing the “*la illaha*” of negation, followed by the “*illa Allah*” of affirmation. The manifestation of the colourless light indicates that the Sufi has come to understand the affirmative part of the phrase. Hence, the auditory sequence of recollection has its counterpart in the visual sequence of colours which is understood in reference to Kubrawi microcosmology.

Ocular-centrism and Kubrawi Identity

The focus on synaesthesia in Kubrawi thought supports a claim of superiority for the Kubrawi recollective method and by extension, the repertoire of bodily practices, and syneasthetic responses which surround it. There is a notable trend towards ocular-centrism in these texts whereby mystical experiences involving sight are positioned above those involving sound. Al-Baghdadi in his discussion of audition notes that although auditory experiences are useful for the initiate, completion is achieved through vision.⁸⁴ This argument is prevalent in Kubrawi prophetology as Moses, who is associated with sound comes to be equated with the state of a Sufi initiate who receives the word of God but is denied a vision of Him. By contrast, Muhammad, who had been granted a vision, corresponds to the station of the advanced Sufi. For this reason, al-Baghdadi states that the people of sight are a degree above the people of hearing.⁸⁵ Recalling al-Razi's characterisation of

Moses as apprehending the speech of God only through the intermediary of letters and sounds, it seems that “sight” is understood to offer more direct access to the attributes of God than hearing is able to.

It is not surprising then that the proto-Kubrawi community betrays an anxiety over competing recollective phrases used by other Sufis at the time. Other communities, notably those associated with the ethnically Turkic Sufi masters preferred to repeat “Allah” rather than the profession of faith. Various Kubrawi sources dispute the value of this form of recollection. Al-Baghdadi in his *T. al-barara* for example, mentions that this form is not adopted by his community because it belongs to the methods of the “Turkic shaykhs” whereas it is more appropriate to imitate the practice of the Sufi masters within one's own lineage.⁸⁶ He then explains that the disciple requires this recollective formula in order to “traverse” the negation of *la ilaha* and come to the realisation of the affirmative, *illa Allah*. The negation frustrates the lower soul, while the affirmation “feeds” the higher faculty of the spirit.⁸⁷

In an exchange of letters between al-Baghdadi and his disciple Sharaf al-Din al-Balkhi, this anxiety over the correct recollective method is played out dramatically in a dream vision. Here, al-Balkhi, the dreamer, is visited by jinn who instruct him to change his recollection formula from *la ilaha illa Allah* to *Allah*. The Jinn puts forward a problem to the dreamer stating that if the negation of the self truly succeeds, then there remains no one to continue the journey towards the affirmative part of the phrase. Al-Baghdadi's interprets this vision and responds to the Jinn's arguments, echoing his argument in the *Tuhfa*. He states that the usage of the phrase is predicated on the requirement for the disciple to negate his human attributes. Moreover, towards the end of his letter, al-Baghdadi tells al-Balkhi not to take advice from Jinn as they are not faced with the same impediments that humans face, as such they are not suitable spiritual teachers.⁸⁸ Hence, the Kubrawi conception of the human micro-cosmos necessitates the use of this particular phrase. As Fritz Meier has noted, in al-Baghdadi's ascribing to jinn the quality of bypassing the impediments of humanity, he equates them to Sufis who have achieved spiritual progression through effortless attraction to God, often seen as unfit to train disciples and

⁸¹ Al-Baghdadi, *Tuhfat al-barara*, fol. 6a–6b; al-Razi, *Mirsad*, 300–302.

⁸² Kubra, *Fawa'ih al-jamal*, 129.

⁸³ Kubra, *Risalat al-kha'if*, fol. 108a.

⁸⁴ Al-Baghdadi, *Tuhfat al-barara*, fol. 66b.

⁸⁵ Al-Baghdadi also mentions in his *Tuhfa* that Moses was a person of hearing (*sahib al-sam'*) while Muhammad was a person of vision (*sahib al-basar*). He also states that “initiation [onto the path] begins with hearing, and completion is achieved with sight.” Al-Baghdadi, *Tuhfat al-barara*, 42.

⁸⁶ Al-Baghdadi, *Tuhfat al-barara*, fol. 24a.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, fol. 24b.

⁸⁸ Al-Baghdadi, “An Exchange of letters,” 274; 280–1.

lacking in genealogical legitimacy.⁸⁹ This serves to imply the superiority of the Kubrawi recollective method, associating it with the proper training of disciples, and a traceable spiritual lineage, while critiquing the “Turkic shaykhs” formula of “*Allah*”.

As Sufi communities gradually became more self-consciously distinct, the claim to the supremacy of sight over sound elevates the Kubrawi method of recollection above others. It allows Kubrawi Sufis to advocate the effectiveness of their particular recollective method, and by extension the superiority of their particular community. By further theorising notions of sound, speech, and vision, the early Kubrawis facilitate a movement within Sufism towards ocular-centrism, breaking with previous Sufi traditions that have at times privileged the sense of hearing over sight.⁹⁰ This was undoubtedly an important shift that had implication for the societal and institutional changes which Sufis attempted to navigate at the time. Ocular-centrism may have also helped distinguish the emerging Kubrawiyya from other contemporaneous Sufi communities such as those associated with ʿUmar al-Suhrawardi whose writings seem to emphasise a phonocentric framework of spiritual completion.⁹¹

Moreover, this theorisation of sensory experiences is reflected in the emerging institutional structure of the Kubrawi community. Perhaps the most immediate example of the significance of crafting this synaesthetic relationship between recollection and vision for the institutionalisation of the early Kubrawiyya, is that it came to be represented in their clothing practices. Al-Baghdadi for example stipulates that the Sufis should wear the colours they perceive in their visions.⁹² The private, internal visions of the early Kubrawi community are therefore given a very public and institutional significance.

The visual marker of clothing becomes symbolic of Kubrawi recollection which is placed at the centre of a network of bodily practices, and functions as an initiation ritual. The colour coding of the spiritual path then strengthens ties of belonging, hierarchy, and identity within the Kubrawi community, acting as a marker which refers to the recollective practice and may distinguish the Kubrawi community from other emerging Sufi institutions. In other words, representing the synaesthetic experience of recollection in clothing renders the garment a communicable symbol which synthesises a host of ideas and practices.⁹³ The visual symbol here is able to play this role through a synaesthetic association

with the auditory practice of recollection. Visual mediums of clothing may have been more effective in communicating this distinctive synthesis than the auditory medium of recollection since the recollective phrase of “*la illaha illa Allah*” was not exclusive to the early Kubrawiyya.⁹⁴

Conclusion

This analysis of synaesthesia has shed light on a number of hitherto unexplored areas of Sufi thought. By analysing Kubrawi conceptions of recollection, the extent to which Ashʿarism had influenced Sufi conceptions of hearing and speech is made evident. Kubrawi Sufis exploited the possibilities offered by a distinction between the abstract attribute of speech and the audible, bodily expression of it, allowing any sensed physical sound to become an expression of God’s speech. Coupled with increasingly systematic psychological and cosmological theories, this opened the possibility of representing speech visually, positing a visual counterpart to abstract speech alongside an audible one. Here, we saw that Kubrawi Sufis developed a colour theory in relation to philosophical colour theory. Hence, the reception of Ashʿari theories of speech and philosophical theories of colour within twelfth and thirteenth century Kubrawi circles aided the development of a theoretical framework which could account for the phenomenon of synaesthesia, and make a case for ocular-centrism.

Such theoretical developments must not however be seen in isolation to their social and institutional implications. Clearly, recollection came to be intertwined with the identity of the emerging Kubrawi community. It came to act as an initiation ritual, and was placed at the centre of Kubrawi spiritual exercise and devotional practice. This gave the synaesthesia experienced during recollection an important role in marking the Kubrawi community against other emerging Sufi communities. It also offered an internal stratification of the institution by associating initiates with hearing while advanced Sufis were associated with sight. This ocular-centric hierarchy of sensation then had very practical and tangible consequences for the development of Sufi communities in this period.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

⁸⁹Meier, *An Exchange of Letters*, 266.

⁹⁰Al-Hujwiri states that hearing is superior to seeing in the *Kashf al-Mahjub*. See al-Hujwiri, *Kashf al-mahjub*, 393.

⁹¹Sviri, “The Countless Faces,” 73–4.

⁹²Al-Baghdadi, *Tuhfat al-barara*, fol. 6a.

⁹³A case for this theoretical understanding of clothing as a symbol is made by Shahzad Bashir in reference to Safavid headgear. See Bashir, “The World as a Hat,” 343–4.

⁹⁴Umar al-Suhrawardi recommends the same formula of recollection of *la illaha illa Allah*. See Ohlander, *Sufism*, 223–5.

Funding

This work was supported by European Research Council [grant number ERC-2016-COG].

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