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TASAWWUF ‘USTURALIYA: PROLEGOMENA TO A HISTORY OF SUFISM IN AUSTRALIA

Abu Bakr Sirajuddin Cook*

Abstract: Tracing the history of Sufism in Australia is a challenging task. The reasons for this include the wide dispersal of source materials, the primarily oral transmission of Sufism and the diversity of the manifestation of Sufism. Detailing a history of Sufism in Australia is not possible in a short article. Rather than attempting to do so, this article will emphasise it is a neglected area that deserves significant scholarly attention. Contrary to reports that Sufism’s traditional hiddenness makes it unexaminable, this article surveys Makassan and cameleer engagements with Australia, as well as early media reports, to show that Australia has a rich and diverse heritage of Sufism. This is not without some challenges and raising these will support any study that attempts to engage Australia’s Sufi heritage, especially those that attempt to detail the earlier emergences of Sufism within Australia. Some solutions to the challenges of studying the history of Sufism in Australia will be proposed. In this light, Sufism in Australia can be seen to make an important contribution to the development of Australia generally and Australian Islam specifically.

Keywords: *Australian Islam, Australian Sufism, cameleers, Afghans, Makassans, Indigenous Muslims*

The history of Sufism in Australia has, to date, received minimal scholarly attention. This article highlights that Sufism is evident in many of the major intersections between Islam and Australia, thus deserving greater attention. Unlike today, when all major Sufi orders (*turuq*) have a presence in Australia and are readily contactable, early Australian Sufism was not as apparent and its existence and legacy are scattered across disparate sources and documents. Examining the presence of Sufism among the Makassans, the cameleers, and 19th and early 20th century newspaper reports indicates more evidence of Australia’s Sufi heritage than has heretofore been examined. Collating these sources and documents, as this article aims to show, is only one of the challenges faced in reporting this element of Australian history. These challenges are not insurmountable and some tentative solutions can be proposed to forearm those who will detail the history of Sufism in Australia.

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SUFISM AMONG THE MAKASSANS

One of the earliest, investigated and sustained engagements of Muslims with Australia occurred between the Makassan fishermen of the Indonesian archipelago and the Indigenous peoples of northern Australia. Evidence of these forays into Australian waters indicates “Macassar fishermen from the southern Celebes sailed on a regular basis to Northern Australia in search of *trepang* (*beche de mer*) from as early as the sixteenth century.”¹ Makassan visits “left profound imprints on the cultures and languages of the far north shores.”² These visits occurred with some consistency over a prolonged period, as Ganter states “Macassan trepang fishers have made annual visits to north-east Arnhem Land for at least 150 years, spending from December to April on the north Australia coastline, until South Australian customs effectively outlawed their visits in 1906.”³ It is unsurprising that, as a result of this, cultural exchange occurred, with Russell noting, “some Makassans interacted culturally with the Aboriginal residents in feasts, ceremonies and liaisons, and a mixed language evolved in some places.”⁴ Similarly, Ganter identified that “Aborigines creatively adapted aspects of Islam.”⁵ To better understand the history of Islam in Australia it is useful to examine what type of Islam was being introduced into northern Australia.

To understand the type of Islam being brought to northern Australia by the Makassans, it is important to examine the prevalent and popular trends involved in the spread and development of Islam in Indonesia. Mattulada acknowledged “Islam as a religion was accepted and embraced by the local kingdoms of South Sulawesi early in the 17th century.”⁶ It is widely accepted that key to the spread of Islam in Indonesia was Sufism, as Zulkifli stated “most scholars studying the history of the spread of Islam in Indonesia agree that Sufis played a major role in the Islamisation of the Indonesian archipelago.”⁷ The influence that Sufism played on the uptake of Islam in Indonesia is seen by some to have a continuing influence. Ridhwan maintains “as in other archipelago areas in the early development of Islam in South Sulawesi, the most prominent feature of the implementation of Islamic teachings is the pattern of Sufism even up to now.”⁸ Given the period during which Islam spread through Indonesia, and the earliest estimates of the arrival of Makassans in Australia, it is possible Indigenous Australians were witness to these religious developments through the visiting fishermen. These were not the only, or earliest, encounters with Muslims on Australian shores, as McIntosh indicates the

¹ Anthony H. Johns and Abdullah Saeed, “Muslims in Australia: The Building of a Community,” in *Muslim Minorities in the West*, eds. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane I. Smith (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2002), 197.

² Regina Ganter, “Muslim Australia: The Deep Histories of Contact,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 32 (2008): 482.

³ Regina Ganter, “Remembering Muslim Histories of Australia,” *The La Trobe Journal* 89 (2012): 55.

⁴ Denise Russell, “Aboriginal-Makassan Interactions in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries in Northern Australia and Contemporary Sea Rights Claims,” *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1 (2004): 5.

⁵ Ganter, “Muslim Australia,” 482.

⁶ Mattulada, “South Sulawesi, Its Ethnicity and Way of Life,” *Southeast Asian Studies* 20 (1982): 11.

⁷ Zulkifli, “Sufism in Java: The Role of the *Pesantren* in the Maintenance of Sufism in Java” (Master’s diss., Australian National University, 1994): 10.

⁸ Ridhwan, “Development of Tasawuf in South Sulawesi,” *Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies* 5 (2017): 36-37.

Yolngu also engaged a “group of Asian seafarers known as the Bayini (or Baiini, the pre-Macassans) who were followers of Allah.”⁹ It is plausible to say these early and sustained engagements of Muslims with Australia were either directly connected with, or at least influenced by, Sufism.

Examining the cultural exchanges, at least from those retained by Indigenous Australians, can give insight into what, if any, lasting impact Sufism had on Australia as a result of this contact. The cultural exchange that has been documented between the Makassan fishermen and Indigenous Australians indicates there are “some unmistakable allusions to ‘Allah’ in the folklore of north-east Arnhem Land” and “before British colonization the Yolngu were engaging with Muslim life-worlds at a much deeper level than has been presumed.”¹⁰ Ganter documents some of the linguistic influences on the Indigenous peoples that are evident in “a mourning ritual which Yolngu say they ‘share with Macassans’”.¹¹ Ganter states “in this ceremony the words ‘Oooo-a-hal-la’, and ‘A-ha-la’, are exclaimed, and which contains appeals to the god in the heavens. These were transcribed as: ‘si-li-la-mo-ha-mo, ha-mo-sil-li-li’, and ‘ra-bin-a-la la-ha-ma-hama’ and ending with ‘Se-ri ma-kas-si’ (terima kasih means thank you in Bahasa).”¹² While McIntosh emphasises the Yolngu never embraced Islam as a faith and “incorporated elements of what they observed from their Indonesian visitors into their own cosmology,”¹³ it is interesting to consider if these phrases refer to the common honorific given to the Prophet Muhammad or elements of prayer the Indigenous Australians heard from the Makassans. Given Ganter records “Se-ri ma-kas-si” as equating to *terima kasih*, there is a similar degree of phonetic similarity between “si-li-la-mo-ha-mo” and *sallallahu alai Muhammad* (peace be upon Muhammad) and “ra-bin-a-la la-ha-ma-hama” and *rabbana lakal hamd* (Our Lord, to You be all praise). Ganter gives weight to this view in stating “there is a remnant vocabulary in Yolngu rituals that is derived from Muslim prayer, and it has long been observed that their most important religious ceremonies are strongly inflected with Macassan influences”¹⁴ and “Muslim prayer references still survive in some secret/sacred incantations on the northern Australian shores, alluding to ‘Allah’”.¹⁵ Given these influences, it will be important for those studying the life-world of the Yolngu to be aware of Islamic cosmology and the nuances of Sufism. This will provide a position from which to better understand the depth of these cross-cultural engagements and determine what, if any, elements of Sufism travelled with the Makassans to Australian shores.

⁹ Ian S. McIntosh, *Between Two Worlds* (Indianapolis: Dog Ear Publishing, 2015), 101.

¹⁰ Regina Ganter, “Yolngu Conversations with Faith: The Outward Signs of Conversion to Christianity and Islam,” *Australian Studies Journal* 30 (2016): 10.

¹¹ Ganter, “Remembering Muslim Histories,” 57.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, 58.

¹⁴ Ibid, 57.

¹⁵ Ganter, “Muslim Australia,” 483.

SUFISM AMONG THE CAMELEERS

Another early, documented, and sustained engagement of Muslims with Australia occurred with the arrival of the cameleers. “The Afghan camel drivers brought to Australia between 1860 and 1910 who were the earliest of the many ethnic groups that have come to constitute a Muslim presence in today's Australia,”¹⁶ and made important contributions to Australia as a nation and Australian Islam. Noting that “most drivers hailed from different provinces of what later became Pakistan (Baluchistan, Punjab, the Sindh, the North West Frontier Province) and the protectorate Kingdom of Afghanistan,”¹⁷ it is important to be aware these are all areas that have rich heritages of Sufism. However, to date, there has been little, in-depth analysis of the cultural nuances between the differing cultural origins of the cameleers.

It has been acknowledged that differing cultural nuances was not a strength of nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Caucasian Australians. Deen recognised the cameleers “maintained their identities through their languages, dialects and customs including the different ways they fashioned their beards and moustaches and tied their turbans,” pertinently adding “such nuances, however, went unnoticed by Caucasian Australians who naïvely added insult to injury by interspersing the usual ham-fisted descriptors.”¹⁸ The lack of awareness shown by Caucasian Australians during the 19th and early 20th centuries means there are, at best, limited records of the diversity of religious practices. A study of the diversified cameleer religious practices would provide definite insight into specific Sufic practices. Deeper study of cameleer photos would, through an analysis of different turban tying styles, highlight the provinces from which individuals hailed. A study of turbans among the cameleers would also identify specifically Sufi styled turbans, indicating a high likelihood of affiliation with a Sufi order.

Another study that would indicate a high likelihood of Sufi affiliation is that of the type of prayer beads used. The type of beads, their number and grouping is often indicative of the Sufi order to which an individual belongs. Even the existence of prayer beads among the cameleers is telling of their Islamic practice as there are some branches of Islam that see the use of such items as innovation, whereas they are an essential tool common to most Sufi orders. For example, Jones and Kenny document “religious booklets and prayer beads used by Sallay Mahomet,” who “played a leading role in establishing a permanent mosque in Alice Springs.”¹⁹ While items such as these are used generally among some Muslims, they are of specific importance in Sufic praxis, particularly items such as the collection of salutations on the Prophet Muhammad. This is far from conclusive evidence that Sallay Mahomet had a connection with Sufism while in Australia, though the existence of such items may yield further evidence of the history of Sufism in Australia and warrants investigation.

The study of Australia's cameleer heritage presents some challenges. It must be acknowledged “little remains of the heritage of Australia's Muslim cameleers” and “theirs is a

¹⁶ Johns and Saeed, “Muslims in Australia,” 197.

¹⁷ Hanifa Deen, “Excavating the Past: Australian Muslims,” *The La Trobe Journal* 89 (2012): 64.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Philip Jones and Anna Kenny, *Australia's Muslim Cameleers* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2007), 131.

fragmentary history of an era that has almost slipped from view, but which has been critically important in Australia's national story,"²⁰ even though there has been a resurgence in interest in Australia's cameleer heritage. The limitation regarding available records is further constrained by the view that "in many ways the cameleers were treated as being of secondary importance to the camels, thus the records of camel importations are often more detailed than those that pertain to the Muslim handlers who made it all possible."²¹ Nevertheless, revisiting the remaining documents may provide crucial evidence of the existence and practice of Sufism among the cameleers. Immigration documents may provide insight into cameleers that came from provinces with strong Sufi heritages or individuals with genealogical ties to a Sufi ancestry.

One document that has been revisited is a book that was in the cameleer made mosque in Broken Hill. This book was "mistakenly identified in a history text as a copy of the Koran," but "is actually a 'Puthi,' a type of songbook that would once have been performed in rural Bengal."²² This document, a "122 year old book of Bengali poetry," was identified by Samia Khatun. Khatun states

this rare 500-page volume was printed in Calcutta in 1895, and its presence suggested that there was once a sizeable community of Bengali speakers in this middle-of-nowhere place, because these poems are meant to be sung and performed for an audience.²³

The existence of this book is important for the history of Sufism in Australia because it is an example of a Bengali variant of devotional poetry from a genre of recited poetry books that "have been popular in Sufi devotional song across the globe."²⁴ It is likely this book would be among the Sufi ode of praise (*qasida*) genre. Its existence is indicative of the importance of revisiting surviving documents for a deeper understanding of the history of Sufism in Australia.²⁵ Another important point this book raises is, aside from immigration and business records kept in English, there are other languages that will be encountered in examining records relevant to the history of Sufism in Australia.

SUFISM WITHIN THE MEDIA

Another method for understanding the existence and impact of Sufism in Australia can be seen in its portrayal in the media. No detailed engagements with Sufi beliefs or practices, or

²⁰ Ibid, 15.

²¹ Rebecca Parkes, "Traces of the Cameleers: Landscape Archaeology and Landscape Perception," *Australasian Historical Archaeology* 27 (2009): 88.

²² Emma Sleath, "Rare Bengali Manuscript Found in Broken Hill Mosque," *ABC Broken Hill*, July 21, 2009, accessed September 30, 2018, <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2009/07/21/2631847.htm>.

²³ Madhusree Ghosh, "A Bengali Songbook is Helping Rewrite Local History in the Australian Outback," *Hindustan Times*, November 26, 2017, accessed September 30, 2018, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/a-bengali-songbook-is-helping-rewrite-local-history-in-the-australian-outback/story-d4v3KKCKV8nSJwdyNZffQJ.html>.

²⁴ John Renard, *Historical Dictionary of Sufism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 238.

²⁵ Samia Khatun, *Australianama: The South Asian Odyssey in Australia* (London: C Hurst and Co Publishers, forthcoming) details her work on this *puthi*. It has not been consulted as it was forthcoming at the time of this research.

reports of specific Sufis or Sufi orders, were evident in early Australian newspapers through the research conducted for this article. However, of importance for the topic is the manner in which Sufism has been consistently referred to in these Australian media reports. Glancing at Australia's numerous newspapers, it becomes evident that barely a decade has passed since the 1820s where "dervish" has not been mentioned. Similarly, since the 1860s, barely has a decade passed where "Sufi" or "Sufism" has not been mentioned. Revisiting these newspaper reports can give insight into how Sufism was understood by the literate public of the period. With an understanding of Sufi practice, newspaper reports on groups that have strong Sufi heritages may also, inadvertently, give glimpses of Sufi practice within Australia.

Common among early references to dervishes in Australian newspapers is their use in similes. Examples of this include likening some dancers to "a stray sect of jumping dervishes,"²⁶ "it seemed to me that mountains, and towns, and rivers were whirling around me like dervishes"²⁷ and "in an instant he was twirling round the yard like a dervish in an enthusiasm."²⁸ Sedgwick states "by 1869 the word 'dervish' had become so well-known in English that it could be included without a gloss in a passage in a textbook for learning German."²⁹ This early use within Australian newspapers follows European trends of the period and "reflected the frequent appearances of dervishes in literature and painting, generally as stock characters performing functions that had little or no connection with Sufism."³⁰ Sedgwick highlights it is important to note "to what extent they would have understood that a dervish was a Sufi would depend on which book they read, and how carefully they read it."³¹ Early European references to dervishes did not reference them in a derogatory manner or as a caricature of the Middle East, as Zarcone notes,

the first travelogues published by Westerners who visited the Ottoman Empire gave a notable place to the dervishes, and especially to those who used to perform amazing unexpected rituals and ascetic practices, as expressed by those who have been surprised by them.³²

Zarcone asserts, for the European audience, "dervish" is "the most common word to designate the Muslim mystic or Sufi in the Ottoman Empire."³³ Zarcone continues, stating "the figure of the dervish is emblematic of the Muslim East, and it is frequently considered as embodying not only mysticism but also religious fanaticism or 'oriental despotism'."³⁴ The extent to which this correlates to Australian audiences within the 19th and early 20th centuries requires further investigation.

²⁶ "Miscellanies," *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, July 27, 1833, 3.

²⁷ "Miscellaneous Extracts," *South Australian*, February 14, 1843, 4.

²⁸ "Hoaxing in Dublin," *The Sydney Monitor and Commercial Advertiser*, April 15, 1839, 2.

²⁹ Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 114.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

³² Thierry Zarcone, "Western Visual Representations of Dervishes from the 14th Century to Early 20th," *Kyoto Bulletin of Islamic Area Studies* 6 (2013): 43.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

There is evidence to suggest something of Sufism was understood, as it was, in more than one instance, used as equivalence. An 1833 newspaper article explains the Quakers “in their ceremonials they much resemble the howling dervishes of the Moslems, whom they far surpass in fanaticism.”³⁵ In 1865, an article states “the utter denial and renunciation of everything almost but the Spirit and its visitations which make the sort of Christian Sufism of the Quaker.”³⁶ Similarly, other religious movements were explained in terms of Sufism, as a 1903 newspaper reports “Babism is essentially one of the innumerable schools of Sufism.”³⁷ Irrespective of their accuracy, these passages indicate, during the period, there was a greater degree of familiarity with Sufism than these other religious movements. This shows there was at least some understanding of Sufism among the literate public of Australia during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Even the regular references to Sufism in Australian newspapers does not suggest it was understood or the depictions are accurate. Zarcone makes an interesting point referring to visual representations of dervishes in Europe, admitting “some of these visual representations of the dervishes must be regarded as ethnographic sources,” while also acknowledging “some other visual sources are, on the contrary, unreliable ‘orientalist’ compositions.”³⁸ A similar point could be made with regard to the references to dervishes in 19th and early 20th century Australian newspapers. Just as with photomontages, where “the aim was for example to gather in one photograph the whole of the symbolic paraphernalia borne by a dervish, to please the eyes of the European public,”³⁹ distinguishing between the dervish trope and authentic reports requires intimate knowledge of Sufi practice. Commenting on the visual representations of Sufis and dervishes, Zarcone notes “the appearance of Orthodox Sufi orders was not amazing for artists or for their public”⁴⁰ and this may go some way towards accounting for limited references to Sufis in Australia as a lack of controversy leaves limited points of interest to report.

One interesting newspaper article from 1877 is worth highlighting for the seemingly unremarkable manner it incorporates key elements of Sufism. It states:

Schamyl, however, was but the most distinguished of the Murids who, having embraced a new religious system known as Sufism, fought with the spirit of religious fanaticism against Russia, and devoted themselves to death, if necessary, in defence of a faith which is believed to give them direct communication with God, and to place in their keeping the destiny of their brethren in the Mohammedan faith.⁴¹

There are several key points to this passage that can be drawn out with an awareness of Sufi practice. It uses the term *murid*, meaning student, which is foreign to English and used as a

³⁵ “Miscellanea,” *Launceston Advertiser*, January 24, 1833, 445.

³⁶ “‘A Friend’ in Rome,” *Freeman’s Journal*, February 8, 1865, 81.

³⁷ “The Babis in Russia,” *Morning Bulletin*, October 9, 1903, 3.

³⁸ Zarcone, “Western Visual Representations,” 58.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 50.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 48.

⁴¹ “Locale of the War,” *Age*, May 21, 1877, 3. This article was reprinted in the *South Bourke and Mornington Journal*, May 23, 1877, 4.

technical term within Sufism. It highlights the adherents of Sufism as being “devoted” to the “defence of faith.” It also places Sufism within the fold of “the Mohammedan faith,” the antiquated method of referring to Islam. More could be made of this passage, though it is sufficient to show a close reading of early newspaper articles elicits an, at least implicit, awareness of key elements of Sufism. The degree to which these elements were understood by the literate portion of the Australian public would take us too far afield from the purpose of the current article.

From about 1915, and for a substantial portion of the 20th century, there was a shift in the manner in which Sufism was mentioned in Australian newspapers. This can, in large part, be seen as a response to the introduction of Inayat Khan (d. 1927) into North America and Europe. An Australian newspaper reported in 1915 that “Inayat Khan has come to the western world to expound the tenets of the Sufi system of philosophy” and subtly intrudes his brand of philosophy as “Sufism is based on the broad principle of the universal brotherhood of man,”⁴² emphasising the “universal” principles at the expense of a de-Islamised practice. It is unclear if the interest at the time was in Sufism generally or Inayat Khan’s philosophy specifically. This change in reporting is evident in Australia in 1933 with Friedrich von Frankenberg (d. 1950) establishing his appointment as “representative of the Sufi movement, and authorised to confer upon approved candidates the first degree of initiation in the Sufi Order in Australia.”⁴³ A 1934 report stated Frankenberg was “a keen follower of Sufism,”⁴⁴ and, after him, his successor Francis Brabazon (d. 1984) is reported in 1950 as being one who “promulgated and administered Sufism in Australia.”⁴⁵ The reports of associates of Inayat Khan’s movement represent some of the earliest specific and explicit references to a particular form of Sufism in Australia by Australian newspapers.

The dialogue surrounding the early newspaper reports on Inayat Khan’s movement in Australia presents it as being the start of Sufism in Australia. This has been maintained in recent scholarship in assertions such as “while the cultures of these early arrivals possess a strong Sufi heritage, Sufism was formally introduced to Australia in 1927 through non-Muslim representation”⁴⁶ and “for over 50 years this was virtually the only Sufi order in the West and the only group readily available to Westerners.”⁴⁷ These views are problematic in that, while admitting prior cultural connections to Sufism, they dismiss the possibility of Sufism in Australia without investigation. Current commentators on Inayat Khan’s movement take it as the beginning point of Sufism in Australia. This is evident in claims such as “the existing literature on the Sufi Movement has marked the beginning point of a history of Sufism in

⁴² “Music and the Stage,” *Advertiser*, August 7, 1915, 6.

⁴³ “Representative of Sufi Order,” *Camden News*, October 26, 1933, 6.

⁴⁴ “Sufism’s Leader,” *Sun*, June 10, 1934, 7.

⁴⁵ “Sufis has no use for £100,000,” *The Daily Telegraph*, October 22, 1950, 10.

⁴⁶ Milad Milani, Adam Possamai, and Firdaus Wajdi, “Branding of Spiritual Authority and Nationalism in Transnational Sufism,” in *Religions, Nations, and Transnationalism in Multiple Modernities*, eds. Patrick Michel, Adam Possamai, and Bryan S. Turner (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 207.

⁴⁷ Celia Anne Genn, “The Development of a Modern Western Sufism,” in *Sufism and the “Modern” in Islam*, eds. Martin von Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 257.

Australia”⁴⁸ and “this provides insight into the intricacies of Sufi practice in Australia.”⁴⁹ Such claims are problematic as they do not consider the gamut of Sufi practice within Australia. This overlooks all other expressions of Sufism aside from one group.

Greater scholarly nuance is needed for the discussion of Inayat Khan’s movement than has been taken to date. Phrases such as “most Australian Sufis,”⁵⁰ when this is intended to refer to those connected with the group associated with Inayat Khan, undermines the identity and acknowledged existence of other groups and individuals associated with the practice of Sufism within Australia. While the focus of Genn’s work is Inayat Khan, the lack of explicit definitions of terms used in a technical sense, such as “Sufi Movement” or “Western Sufism,” diminishes other Sufi movements and expressions of Sufism in Australia. Genn is not alone in overlooking the plurality of Sufi expression. Kerkhove describes the movement as “Australia’s first Sufi group.”⁵¹ Focusing on one group, and its history within Australia, that uses universalising terminology, at best, lacks nuance and, at worst, overrides and marginalises the wider historical context and diversified expression of Sufism within Australia. This is further emphasised through the lack of acknowledgement of other forms of Sufism within Australia, especially those predating the Sufi movement connected to Inayat Khan in the 1930s. As this article shows, Sufism in Australia has a longer history than has been assumed and is not limited to one movement or person.

The attempt, historically and contemporarily, to establish and maintain a monologue regarding the history of Australian Sufism feeds into a larger debate regarding the nature of Sufism. The establishment of the Sufi movement of Inayat Khan into Australia in the 1930s introduced a decontextualised practice, later called “Universal Sufism.” The tenets of Universal Sufism, as expressed by a 1933 Australian newspaper, are that “Sufism is a very ancient method of training offered to all those who are in search of truth” and “it is not a religion nor intellectual philosophy and still less a sect.”⁵² The somewhat reactionary response to this by traditionally oriented proponents of Sufism was to coin the tautological term “Islamic Sufism.” This reply aimed to highlight an Islamic framework underpinning Sufi praxis and thought, though at the expense of implicitly acknowledging a non-Islamic Sufism.⁵³ The publication of reviews in Australian newspapers in 1934 of Sirdar Iqbal Ali Shah’s *Islamic Sufism* can be seen as a response to the development and spread of Universal Sufism.⁵⁴ It is interesting to note, prior to the introduction of Universal Sufism into Australia, Australian newspapers often explained Sufism as being intrinsically connected to Islam. One instance of this can be found in a 1929

⁴⁸ Milani, Possamai, and Wajdi, “Branding of Spiritual Authority,” 207.

⁴⁹ Celia Anne Genn, “Exploration and Analysis of the Origins, Nature and Development of the Sufi Movement in Australia” (PhD diss., University of Queensland, 2004), iv.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 134.

⁵¹ Ray Kerkhove, *Francis Brabazon Collection: Significance Assessment Report* (Woombye: Avatar’s Abode, 2008), 3.

⁵² “Representative of Sufi Order,” 6.

⁵³ For a further deliberation of the tautological aspects of “Islamic Sufism” and the decontextualised nature of “Universal Sufism,” see Abu Bakr Sirajuddin Cook, *Ibn ‘Ata’ Allah, Muslim Sufi Saint and Gift of Heaven* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017): 13–33.

⁵⁴ “Publications Received,” *Age*, January 20, 1934, 4; “The World of Books,” *The Mercury*, April 20, 1934, 3.

article focused on a New Zealand woman who held “threads of a mystic Mohammedan belief from the Orient, known as Sufism.”⁵⁵ The nature of Sufi praxis and thought continues to be debated with regard to its relationship to Islam. The sources quoted here indicate this debate played out within early 20th century Australia. However, the degree to which it was debated and if there were any local contributions require further investigation.

SOME CHALLENGES TO STUDYING EARLY AUSTRALIAN SUFISM

The challenges of investigating the history of Sufism in Australia are many. Johns and Saeed state “one would expect Sufi orders to play a role in Islamic education in Australia, but it is difficult to find detailed information about them”⁵⁶ and the scarcity of available information on manifestations of Sufism in Australia is valid historically more so than contemporarily.⁵⁷ One reason for this is because “the Sufi heritage is an ‘inner’ or ‘hidden’ dimension of Islam, its members and their specific practices are often indistinguishable from the general Muslim community, at least to the non-Muslim observer”⁵⁸ and, as a result of this, “Sufis have generally experienced a degree of anonymity in Australia, a tendency that makes a traditional narrative history of Sufism in Australia a somewhat challenging task.”⁵⁹ As Deen has noted with regard to external markers, if differences in beards, moustaches and turbans went unnoticed,⁶⁰ this has been more so with regard to noticing differences in religious practice. One attempt to examine the nuances of lifestyle and practice was made by Stevens and applied to the Adelaide herbalist Mohamet Allum (d. 1964). Stevens states “from the evidence of Mohamet Allum’s background and life’s work in Australia, he appears to have been at least orientated towards Sufism.”⁶¹ While Stevens’ assessment is not conclusive and requires further study, it shows an attempt to use the documentation of practice in a nuanced manner to understand the underpinning motivation in order to pierce the traditional hiddenness of Sufi affiliation.

Uncovering Sufism from its traditional hiddenness requires a thorough understanding of Sufi orthopraxy. This is important because documentation of Sufi praxis within Australia, particularly during the 19th and early 20th centuries, is not come clearly labelled or understood. One possible example of this is in a 1902 newspaper report on the conditions within Afghan camps. The newspaper report documented, aside from a generally unhygienic location “owing to the camels which are kept about,” a “new terror in the shape of corroborrees or what ever [*sic*] the Afghans call their ear splitting evening concerts,” which are distinguished by “the howls and wails of the men with bandage pants who work themselves up into a voice far

⁵⁵ “NZ Woman Who Masqueraded as Man Confesses on Death Bed,” *Daily Telegraph*, May 6, 1929, 4.

⁵⁶ Johns and Saeed, “Muslims in Australia,” 206.

⁵⁷ Contemporary studies of Sufism with specific reference to Australia include: Milad Milani and Adam Possamai, “The Nimatullahiya and the Naqshbandiya Sufi Orders on the Internet: The Cyber-construction of Tradition and the McDonaldisation of Spirituality,” *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 26 (2013); Milad Milani and Adam Possamai, “Sufism, Spirituality and Consumerism: The Case Study of the Nimatullahiya and Naqshbandiya Sufi Orders in Australia,” *Contemporary Islam* 10 (2015).

⁵⁸ Milani, Possamai, and Wajdi, “Branding of Spiritual Authority,” 206.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 206–207.

⁶⁰ Deen, “Excavating the Past,” 64.

⁶¹ Christine Stevens, *Tin Mosques & Ghantowns* (Alice Springs: Paul Fitzsimons, 2002), 198.

exceeding concert pitch.”⁶² It is possible this is one of the earliest, if not the first, documented recording of a Sufi congregational gathering (*halqa*) in Australia. More evidence would be required to substantiate this claim, though it is consistent with some forms of such practice and is an apt description of such a gathering from a witness with little to no knowledge of such practices. Thus, a close reading of historical documents with an in-depth awareness of Sufi praxis may yield further evidence pertaining to the history of Sufism in Australia.

A close reading of historical documents with a focus on Sufi practice and expression will necessitate a rereading of primary sources. Stevens asserts “only one Afghan in Australia is documented to have a claim to Sufism,” citing “one ‘Soofi [*sic*] Abdul Karam’ [who] worked with camels in north of WA.”⁶³ If correct, this is explicit evidence for documenting the history of Sufism in Australia. However, there is disagreement regarding the contents of these documents. Library staff “didn’t have any success” searching for “Sufism, Sufis and Dervishes” in the catalogue and of the document in question stated,

I found a reference on our catalogue to the record that you cited - ACC 262A. It is a collection of records related to Afghan Traders in Australia between [189-] - 1915. I had a look through these papers and they really just relate to the camel business such as camel licences, bills associated with the business etc. There are approximately forty pieces of varied documentation in this collection.⁶⁴

An explicit reference to a practitioner of Sufism among the cameleers would be a key piece of evidence for exploring and documenting the history of Sufism in Australia. The conflicting views open two possibilities. If the librarian is correct, Stevens’ view can be dismissed. This would be verifiable through re-examining the source documents. If Stevens is correct, the re-examination of these source documents would necessitate a re-reading of primary documents of the cameleers with a focus on, and knowledge of, Sufism. If Stevens is correct, there is a further challenge around accessing the documents of the cameleers, as these are dispersed along their travel routes and libraries across Australia. Either way, this requires further investigation and highlights the importance of reassessing the dispersed primary documents to obtain a fuller understanding.

Another point from which insight into Sufism in Australia can be gleaned is the use of titles among early Australian Muslims. It is documented in research on early Australian Muslims that the use of the title “Haji” is indicative of a Muslim who has performed the pilgrimage to Mecca. Reports on this title are evident in an 1894 newspaper report on Haji Mulla Mehrban (d. 1897), who led moves to construct Adelaide Mosque. This newspaper article acknowledged “he has made the ‘hajj’, or pilgrimage to Mecca, which gives him the right to his first title.”⁶⁵ Similarly, a 1913 newspaper article stated “the yearly pilgrimage to Mecca is a great event in the life of the devout Mahometan, as until he has visited that sacred spot he cannot tack on to

⁶² Ian Murray, Phil Bianchi, Maria Bloomfield, and Peter Bridge, “*The Afghan Problem*” and *their Camels* (Carlisle: Hesperian Press, 2008), 107.

⁶³ Stevens, *Tin Mosques*, 198.

⁶⁴ Pena Atanasoff (Client Services Librarian at State Library of Western Australia), email to author, July 26, 2018.

⁶⁵ “The Haji Mulla,” *South Australian Chronicle*, September 1, 1894, 6.

his name the title ‘haji’.”⁶⁶ While further examples could be used, these quotes sufficiently identify there was an awareness of “Haji” being a title. However, there are instances in lists of cameleers where the title “Haji” has been conflated as a first name.⁶⁷ Similarly, the use of “Syed,” as a title indicative of an individual “who is a descendent of the Holy Prophet,”⁶⁸ has been used as a first name.⁶⁹ If more common titles such as these can be conflated as first names, then other, lesser known, titles could easily be passed over without sufficient investigation. For instance, individuals such as Peer Dost, Peer Mahomed, and Sheik Mahomet⁷⁰ could easily be overlooked without an understanding of titles used within Islam generally and Sufism in particular. Shaykh is “from the Arabic for ‘elder’” and, within Sufism, “the term refers especially to individuals entrusted with the critical aspect of spiritual guidance ... or with leadership of an order.”⁷¹ Pir is “the Persian equivalent” of Shaykh.⁷² Transliteration practices have changed over time and this can account for the shift from Peer to Pir and Sheik to Shaykh. While it is possible these terms are names, as with the conflation with Haji and Seyed, it is more likely they are titles. Even if it is accepted that these terms refer to titles, it still is not definitive proof these individuals had specific connections to Sufism, as they may have been used as terms of respect. However, given the importance such titles take on within Sufism, it provides another area from which to explore evidence of the history of Sufism in Australia.

CONCLUSION

The history of Sufism in Australia is not readily evident. However, as this article shows, there are multiple areas from which this history can be gleaned. These areas include the major intersections between Islam and Australia. In glancing at the available materials on Makassan engagements with Indigenous Australians, Australia’s cameleer records, and 19th and early 20th century newspaper reports, it becomes apparent there is significant evidence from which to study Australia’s Sufi heritage. The diversity of knowledges required for explicating this strand of Australian history makes it a challenging, but not insurmountable, task. To achieve this, disparate sources and documents will need to be examined, and in some cases re-examined, in light of an acute and nuanced understanding of Sufi orthopraxy. The intention of this article has been to highlight it is an area of significance that deserves greater scholarly attention than it has received to date. It is hoped this article provides some of the preliminary steps required for a deeper study into the history of Sufism in Australia so its contributions to the development of Australia generally and Australian Islam specifically can be understood.

⁶⁶ “Pilgrims to Mecca. Making a Haji,” *The Sun*, October 28, 1913, 5.

⁶⁷ Jones and Kenny, *Australia’s Muslim Cameleers*, 175.

⁶⁸ Mohamed Hasan Musakhan, ed., *History of Islamism in Australia from 1863 – 1932* (Adelaide: Mahomet Allum, 1932), 36–37.

⁶⁹ Jones and Kenny, *Australia’s Muslim Cameleers*, 187.

⁷⁰ Roberta J. Drewery, *Treks, Camps, & Camels: Afghan Cameleers, their Contribution to Australia* (Rockhampton: R. J. Bolton, 2008), 94–96.

⁷¹ Renard, *Historical Dictionary of Sufism*, 283.

⁷² *Ibid.*

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