

The Caravan of Summer

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Something of the real difference between pilgrim and tourist can be detected by comparing their effects on the places they visit. Changes in a place, a city, a shrine, a forest may be subtle, but at least they can be observed. The state of the soul may be a matter of conjecture, but perhaps we can say something about the state of the social.

Pilgrimage sites like Mecca may serve as great bazaars for trade and they may even serve as centers of production (like the silk industry of Benares) but their primary “product” is baraka or mana. These words (one Arabic, one Polynesian) are usually translated as “blessing”, but they also carry a freight of other meanings.

The wandering dervish who sleeps at a shrine in order to dream of a dead saint (one of the “people of the Tombs”) seeks initiation or advancement on the spiritual path; a mother who brings a sick child to Lourdes seeks healing; a childless woman in Morocco hopes the Marabout will make her fertile if she ties a rag to the old tree growing out of the grave; the traveler to Mecca yearns for the very center of the Faith, and as the caravans come within sight of the Holy City the hajji calls out, “Labaika Allahumma!” “I am here, O Lord!”

All these motives are summed up by the word baraka, which sometimes seems to be a palpable substance, measurable in terms of increased charisma or “luck.” The shrine produces baraka. And the pilgrim takes it away. But blessing is a product of the imagination and thus no matter how many pilgrims take it away, there’s always more.

In fact, the more they take, the more blessing the shrine can produce (because a popular shrine grows with every answered prayer.) To say that baraka is “imaginal” is not to call it “unreal.” It’s real enough to those who feel it. But spiritual goods do not follow the rules of supply and demand like material goods. The more demand for spiritual goods, the more supply. The production of baraka is infinite.

By contrast, the tourist desires not baraka but cultural difference. The tourist consumes difference. But the production of cultural difference is not infinite. It is not “merely” imaginal. It is rooted in languages, landscape, architecture, custom, taste, smell. It is very physical. The more it is used up or taken away, the less remains. The social can produce just so much “meaning,” so much difference. Once it’s gone, it’s gone.

The modest goal of this essay is to address the individual traveler who has decided to resist tourism. Even though we may find it impossible in the end to “purify” ourselves and our travel from every last taint and trace of tourism, we still feel that improvement may be possible.

Not only do we disdain tourism for its vulgarity and its injustice, and therefore wish to avoid any contamination (conscious or unconscious) by its viral virulency, we also wish to understand travel as an act of reciprocity rather than alienation. In other words, we don't wish merely to avoid the negatives of tourism, but even more to achieve positive travel, which we envision as a productive and mutually enhancing relationship between self and other, guest and host, a form of cross-cultural synergy in which the whole exceeds the sum of parts.

We'd like to know if travel can be carried out according to a secret economy of baraka, whereby not only the shrine but also the pilgrims themselves have blessings to bestow.

Before the Age of Commodity, we know, there was an Age of the Gift, of reciprocity, of giving and receiving. We learned this from the tales of certain travelers, who found remnants of the world of the Gift among certain tribes, in the form of pot latch or ritual exchange, and recorded their observations of such strange practices.

Not long ago there still existed a custom among South Sea islanders of traveling vast distances by outrigger canoe, without compass or sextant, in order to exchange valuable and useless presents (ceremonial art-objects rich in mana) from island to island in a complex pattern of overlapping reciprocities.

We suspect that even though travel in the modern world seems to have been taken over by the Commodity, even though the networks of convivial reciprocity seem to have vanished from the map, even though tourism seems to have triumphed. Even so, we continue to suspect that other pathways still persist, other tracks, unofficial, not noted on the map, perhaps even "secret" pathways still linked to the possibility of an economy of the Gift, smugglers' routes for free spirits, known only to the geomantic guerrillas of the art of travel.

Perhaps the greatest and subtlest practitioners of the art of travel were the Sufis, the mystics of Islam. Before the age of passports, immunizations, airlines and other impediments to free travel, the Sufis wandered footloose in a world where borders tended to be more permeable than nowadays, thanks to the trans nationalism of Islam and the cultural unity of Dar al-Islam, the Islamic world.

The great medieval Moslem travelers, like Ibn Battuta and Naser Khusraw, have left accounts of vast journeys, Persia to Egypt, or even Morocco to China, which never set foot outside a landscape of deserts, camels, caravanserais, bazaars, and piety. Someone always spoke Arabic, however badly, and Islamic culture permeated the remotest backwaters, however superficially. Reading the tales of Sinbad the Sailor (from the 1001 Nights) gives us the impression of a world where even the terra incognita was still, despite all marvels and oddities, somehow familiar, somehow Islamic. Within this unity, which was not yet a uniformity, the Sufis formed a special class of travelers. Not warriors, not merchants, and not quite ordinary pilgrims either, the dervishes represent a spiritualization of pure nomadism.

According to the Koran, God's Wide Earth and everything in it are "sacred," not only as divine creations, but also because the material world is full of "waymarks," or signs of divine reality. Moreover, Islam itself is born between two journeys, Mohammad's hijra or "flight" from Mecca to Medina, and his hajj, or return voyage. The hajj is the movement toward the origin and center for every Moslem even today, and the annual Pilgrimage has played a vital role, not just in the religious unity of Islam, but also in its cultural unity.

Mohammad himself exemplifies every kind of travel in Islam; his youth with the Meccan caravans of Summer and Winter, as a merchant; his campaigns as a warrior; his triumph as a humble pilgrim. Although an urban leader, he is also the prophet of the Bedouin and himself a kind of

nomad, a “sojourner” an “orphan.” From this perspective travel can almost be seen as a sacrament. Every religion sanctifies travel to some degree, but Islam is virtually unimaginable without it.

The Prophet said, “Seek knowledge, even as far as China.” From the beginning, Islam lifts travel above all “mundane” utilitarianism and gives it an epistemological or even Gnostic dimension. “The jewel that never leaves the mine is never polished,” says the Sufi poet Saadi. To “educate” is to “lead outside,” to give the pupil a perspective beyond parochiality and mere subjectivity.

Some Sufis may have done all their traveling in the Imaginal World of archetypal dreams and visions, but vast numbers of them took the Prophet’s exhortations quite literally. Even today dervishes wander over the entire Islamic world but as late as the 19th century they wandered in veritable hordes, hundreds or even thousands at a time, and covered vast distances. All in search of knowledge.

Unofficially, there existed two basic types of wandering Sufi: the “gentleman-scholar” type, and the mendicant dervish. The former category includes Ibn Battuta (who collected Sufi initiations the way some occidental gentlemen once collected Masonic degrees), and on a much more serious level the “Greatest Shaykh” Ibn Arabi, who meandered slowly through the 13th century from his native Spain, across North Africa, through Egypt to Mecca, and finally to Damascus.

Ibn Arabi actually left accounts of his search for saints and adventurers on the road, which could be pieced together from his voluminous writings to form a kind of rihla or “travel text”: (a recognized genre of Islamic literature) or autobiography. Ordinary scholars traveled in search of rare texts on theology or jurisprudence, but Ibn Arabi sought only the highest secrets of esotericism and the loftiest “openings” into the world of divine illumination; for him every “journey to the outer horizons” was also a “journey to the inner horizons” of spiritual psychology and gnosis.

On the visions he experienced in Mecca alone, he wrote a 12-volume work (*The Meccan Revelations*), and he has also left us precious sketches of hundreds of his contemporaries, from the greatest philosophers of the age to humble dervishes and “madmen,” anonymous women saints and “hidden Masters.”

Ibn Arabi enjoyed a special relation with Khezr, the immortal and unknown prophet, the “Green Man,” who sometimes appears to wandering Sufis in distress, to rescue them from the desert, or to initiate them. Khezr, in a sense, can be called the patron saint of the traveling dervishes and the prototype. (He first appears in the Koran as a mysterious wanderer and companion of Moses in the desert.)

Christianity once included a few orders of wandering mendicants (in fact, St. Francis organized one after meeting with dervishes in the Holy Land, who may have bestowed upon him a “cloak of initiation” the famous patchwork robe he was wearing when he returned to Italy), but Islam spawned dozens, perhaps hundreds of such orders.

As Sufism crystallized from the loose spontaneity of early days to an institution with rules and grades, “travel for knowledge” was also regularized and organized. Elaborate handbooks of duties for dervishes were produced which included methods for turning travel into a very specific form of meditation. The whole Sufi “path” itself was symbolized in terms of intentional travel.

In some cases itineraries were fixed (e.g. the Hajj); others involved waiting for “signs” to appear, coincidences, intuitions, “adventurers” such as those which inspired the travels of the Arthurian knights. Some orders limited the time spent in any one place to 40 days; others made a rule of never sleeping twice in the same place. The strict orders, such as the Naqshbandis, turned travel into a kind of full-time choreography, in which every movement was preordained and designed to enhance consciousness.

By contrast, the more heterodox orders (such as the Qalandars) adopted a “rule” of total spontaneity and abandon “permanent unemployment” as one of them called it an insouciance of bohemian proportions a “dropping-out” at once both scandalous and completely traditional. Colorfully dressed, carrying their begging bowls, axes, and standards, addicted to music and dance, carefree and cheerful (sometimes to the point of “blameworthiness”!), orders such as the Nematollahis of 19th century Persia grew to proportions that alarmed both sultans and theologians. Many dervishes were executed for “heresy.”

Today the true Qalandars survive mostly in India, where their lapses from orthodoxy include a fondness for hemp and a sincere hatred of work. Some are charlatans, some are simple bums, but a surprising number of them seem to be people of attainment...how can I put it?...people of self-realization, marked by a distinct aura of grace, or baraka.

All the different types of Sufi travel we’ve described are united by certain shared vital structural forces. One such force might be called a “magical” world view, a sense of life that rejects the “merely” random for a reality of signs and wonders, of meaningful coincidences and “unveilings.” As anyone who’s ever tried it will testify, intentional travel immediately opens one up to this “magical” influence.

A psychologist might explain this phenomenon (either with awe or with reductionist disdain) as “subjective”; while the pious believer would take it quite literally. From the Sufi point of view neither interpretation rules out the other, nor suffices in itself, to explain away the marvels of the Path. In Sufism, the “objective” and the “subjective” are not considered opposites, but complements. From the point of view of the two-dimensional thinker (whether scientific or religious) such paradoxology smacks of the forbidden.

Another force underlying all forms of intentional travel can be described by the Arabic word “adab”. On one level “adab” simply means “good manners,” and in the case of travel, these manners are based on the ancient customs of desert nomads, for whom both wandering and hospitality are sacred acts. In this sense, the dervish shares both the privileges and the responsibilities of the guest.

Bedouin hospitality is a clear survival of the primordial economy of the Gift — a relation of reciprocity. The wanderer must be taken in (the dervish must be fed) but thereby the wanderer assumes a role prescribed by ancient custom and must give back something to the host. For the Bedouin this relation is almost a form of clientage and the breaking of bread and sharing of salt constitutes a sort of kinship. Gratitude is not a sufficient response to such generosity. The traveler must consent to a temporary adoption, anything less would offend against “adab”.

Islamic society retains at least a sentimental attachment to these rules, and thus creates a special niche for the dervish, that of the full-time guest. The dervish returns the gifts of society with the gift of baraka. In ordinary pilgrimage, the traveler receives baraka from a place, but the dervish reverses the flow and brings baraka to a place. The Sufi may think of himself (or herself) as a permanent pilgrim but to the ordinary stay-at-home people of the mundane world, the Sufi is a kind of preambulatory shrine.

Now tourism in its very structure breaks the reciprocity of host and guest. In English, a “host” may have either guests or parasites. The tourist is a parasite for no amount of money can pay for hospitality. The true traveler is a guest and thus serves a very real function, even today, in societies where the ideals of hospitality have not yet faded from the “collective mentality.” To be a host, in such societies, is a meritorious act. Therefore, to be a guest is also to give merit.

The modern traveler who grasps the simple spirit of this relation will be forgiven many lapses in the intricate ritual of “adab” (how many cups of coffee? Where to put one’s feet? How to be entertaining? How to show gratitude? etc.) peculiar to a specific culture. And if one bothers to master a few of the traditional forms of “adab”, and to deploy them with heartfelt sincerity, then both guest and host will gain more than they put into the relation and this more is the unmistakable sign of the presence of the Gift.

Another level of meaning of the word “adab” connects it with culture (since culture can be seen as the sum of all manners and customs): In modern usage the Department of “Arts and Letters” at a university would be called Adabiyyat. To have “adab” in this sense is to be “polished” (like that well-traveled gem) but this has nothing necessarily to do with “fine arts” or literacy or being a city-slicker, or even being “cultured.” It is a matter of the “heart.”

“Adab” is sometimes given as a one-word definition of Sufism. But insincere manners (ta’arof in Persian) and insincere culture alike are shunned by the Sufi. “There is no ta’arof in Tassawuf [Sufism],” as the dervishes say; “Darvishi” is an adjectival synonym for informality, the laid-back quality of the people of the Heart and for spontaneous “adab”, so to speak. The true guest and host never make an obvious effort to fulfill the “rules” of reciprocity they may follow the ritual scrupulously, or they may bend the forms creatively, but in either case, they will give their actions a depth of sincerity that manifests as natural grace. “Adab” is a kind of love.

A complement of this “technique” (or “Zen”) of human relations can be found in the Sufi manner of relating to the world in general. The “mundane” world of social deceit and negativity, of usurious emotions, unauthentic consciousness (“mauvaise conscience”), boorishness, ill-will, inattention, blind reaction, false spectacle, empty discourse, etc. etc. all this no longer holds any interest for the traveling dervish. But those who say that the dervish has abandoned “this world”, “God’s Wide Earth” would be mistaken.

The dervish is not a Gnostic Dualist who hates the biosphere (which certainly includes the imagination and the emotions, as well as “matter” itself). The early Muslim ascetics certainly closed themselves off from everything. When Rabiah, the woman saint of Basra, was urged to come out of her house and “witness the wonders of God’s creation,” she replied, “Come into the house and see them,” i.e., come into the heart of contemplation of the oneness which is above the manyness of reality. “Contraction” and “Expansion” are both terms for spiritual states. Rabiah was manifesting Contraction: a kind of sacred melancholia which has been metaphorized as the “Caravan of Winter,” of return to Mecca (the center, the heart), of interiority, and of asceticism or self-denial. She was not a world-hating Dualist, nor even a moralistic flesh-hating puritan. She was simply manifesting a certain specific kind of grace.

The wandering dervish, however, manifests a state more typical of Islam in its most exuberant energies. He indeed seeks expansion, spiritual joy based on the sheer multiplicity of the divine generosity in material creation. (Ibn Arabi has an amusing “proof” that this world is the best world. For, if it were not, then God would be ungenerous which is absurd. Q.E.D.) In order to appreciate the multiple waymarks of the wide earth precisely as the unfolding of this generosity, the Sufi cultivates what might be called the theophanic gaze: The opening of the “Eye of the Heart” to the experience of certain places, objects, people, events as locations of the “shining-through” of divine light. The dervish travels, so to speak, both in the material world, and in the “World of Imagination” simultaneously. But for the eye of the heart, these worlds interpenetrate at certain points.

One might say that they mutually reveal or “unveil” each other. Ultimately, they are “one” and only our state of tranced inattention, our mundane consciousness, prevents us from experiencing this “deep” identity at every moment. The purpose of intentional travel, with its “adventures” and its uprooting of habits, is to shake loose the dervish from all the trance-effects of ordinariness. Travel, in other words, is meant to induce a certain state of consciousness or “spiritual state” that of Expansion.

For the wanderer, each person one meets might act as an “angel,” each shrine one visits may unlock some initiate dream, each experience of nature may vibrate with the presence of some “spirit of place.” Indeed, even the mundane and ordinary may suddenly be seen as numinous (as in the great travel haiku of the Japanese Zen poet Basho) : a face in the crowd at a railway station, crows on telephone wires, sunlight in a puddle.

Obviously one doesn’t need to travel to experience this state. But travel can be used, that is, an art of travel can be required to maximize the chances for attaining such a state. It is a moving meditation, like the Taoist martial arts.

The Caravan of Summer moved outward, out of Mecca, to the rich trading lands of Syria and Yemen. Likewise, the dervish is “moving out” (it’s always “moving day”), heading forth, taking off, on “perpetual holiday” as one poet expressed it, with an open heart, an attentive eye (and other senses), and a yearning for meaning, a thirst for knowledge. One must remain alert, since anything might suddenly unveil itself as a sign. This sounds like a bit of paranoia although “metanoia” might be a better term and indeed one finds “madmen” amongst the dervishes, “attracted ones,” overpowered by divine influxions, lost in the Light.

In the Orient, the insane are often cared for and admired as helpless saints, because mental illness may sometimes appear as a symptom of too much holiness rather than too little “reason.” Hemp’s popularity amongst the dervishes can be attributed to its power to induce a kind of intuitive attentiveness which constitutes a controllable insanity, herbal metanoia. But travel itself in itself can intoxicate the heart with the beauty of theophanic presence. It’s a question of practice, the polishing of the jewel, removal of moss from the rolling stone.

In the old days (which are still going on in some remote parts of the East), Islam thought of itself as a whole world, a wide world, a space with great latitude within which Islam embraced the whole of society and nature. This latitude appeared on the social level as tolerance. There was room enough, even for such marginal groups as mad wandering dervishes. Sufism itself, or at least its austere orthodox and “sober” aspect occupied a central position in the cultural discourse. “Everyone” understood intentional travel by analogy with the Hajj, everyone understood the dervishes, even if they disapproved.

Nowadays, however, Islam views itself as a partial world, surrounded by unbelief and hostility, and suffering internal raptures of every sort. Since the 19th century Islam has lost its global consciousness and sense of its own wideness and completeness. No longer therefore, can Islam easily find a place for every marginalized individual and group within a pattern of tolerance and social order. The dervishes now appear as an intolerable difference in society. Every Muslim must now be the same, united against all outsiders, and struck from the same prototype.

Of course, Muslims have always “imitated” the Prophet and viewed his image as the norm and this has acted as a powerful unifying force for style and substance within Dar al-Islam. But “nowadays” the puritans and reformers have forgotten that this “imitation” was not directed only at an early medieval Meccan merchant named Mohammad, but also at the insan al-kamil (the “Perfect Man” or “Universal Human”), an ideal of inclusion rather than exclusion, an ideal of integral

culture, not an attitude of purity in peril, not xenophobia disguised as piety, not totalitarianism, not reaction.

The dervish is persecuted nowadays in most of the Islamic world. Puritanism always embraces the most atrocious aspects of modernism in its crusade to strip the Faith of “medieval accretions” such as popular Sufism. And surely the way of the wandering dervish cannot thrive in a world of airplanes and oil-wells, of nationalistic/chauvinistic hostilities (and thus of impenetrable borders), and of a Puritanism which suspects all difference as a threat.

The Puritanism has triumphed not only in the East, but rather close to home as well. It is seen in the “time discipline” of modern too-late-Capitalism, and in the porous rigidity of consumerist hyper-conformity, as well as in the bigoted reaction and sex-hysteria of the Christian Right. Where in all this can we find room for the poetic (and parasitic!) life of “Aimless Wandering”, the life of Chuang Tzu (who coined this slogan) and his Taoist progeny, the life of Saint Francis and his shoeless devotees, the life of (for example) Nur Ali Shah Isfahani, a 19th century Sufi poet who was executed in Iran for the awful heresy of meandering-dervishism?

Here is the flip side of the “Problem of Tourism”: The problem with the disappearance of “aimless wandering.” Possibly the two are directly related, so that the more tourism becomes possible, the more dervishism becomes impossible. In fact, we might well ask if this little essay on the delightful life of the dervish possesses the least bit of relevance for the contemporary world. Can this knowledge help us to overcome tourism, even within our own consciousness and life? Or is it merely an exercise in nostalgia for lost possibilities, a futile indulgence in romanticism?

Well, yes and no. Sure, I confess I’m hopelessly romantic about the form of the dervish life, to the extent that for a while I turned my back on the mundane world and followed it myself. Because of course, it hasn’t really disappeared. Decadent, yes, but not gone forever. What little I know about travel I learned in those few years I owe a debt to “Medieval accretions” I can never pay and I’ll never regret my “escapism” for a single moment. But I don’t consider the form of dervishism to be the answer to the “problem of tourism.” The form has lost most of its efficacy. There’s no point in trying to “preserve” it (as if it were a pickle, or a lab specimen) there’s nothing quite so pathetic as mere “survival.”

But beneath the charming outer forms of dervishism lies the conceptual matrix, so to speak, which we’ve called intentional travel. On this point we should suffer no embarrassment about “nostalgia.” We have asked ourselves whether or not we desire a means to discover the art of travel, whether we want and will to overcome “the inner tourist,” the false consciousness which screens us from the experience of the Wide World’s waymarks. The way of the dervish (or of the Taoist, the Franciscan, etc.) interests us, not the key, perhaps but...a key. And of course it does.

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