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Translating Transcendence: Cultural Transposition between Yoga and Sufism in the Mirror of Islam

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Abstract

This article examines the intercultural and esoteric translation of yogic traditions into Islamic Sufism during the Indo-Arabic-Persianate encounter between the 10th and 17th centuries. Focusing on key texts such as the *Amṛtakunda* and its Arabic adaptation *Ḥawḍ al-Ḥayāt*, it investigates how yogic metaphysical concepts, ritual grammars, and somatic techniques were transposed into Sufi frameworks. Moving beyond notions of syncretism or mere borrowing, the study conceptualizes this process as “translating transcendence”—a dynamic re-inscription of Sanskrit terms like *prāṇa*, *cakra*, and *kuṇḍalinī* into Sufi concepts such as *rūḥ*, *laṭā'if*, and *nūr Muḥammadī*. Employing manuscript analysis, comparative philology, and theories of embodied ritual, the article demonstrates how this translation unfolded through both textual transmission and lived practices, including breath control, posture, and the repetition of divine names. It argues that Islam did not simply absorb yogic traditions but refracted them through a Sufi cosmological lens, generating a new grammar of spiritual ascent. By situating this transformation within the broader intellectual history of Indo-Islamic mysticism, the article contributes to contemporary debates in translation theory, comparative religion, and the anthropology of esoteric traditions.

Keywords: Yoga, Sufism, Indo-Islamic Encounters, Cultural Transposition, Translation Theory, Mysticism, Comparative Religion, Sanskrit–Arabic Texts, Esotericism, Embodiment

Introduction

In the transmission of mystical knowledge across civilizations, language is not merely a vessel—it is a body. When esoteric traditions converge, their meeting point extends beyond the page to the breath, the spine, and the ritual act. The Indo-Islamic encounter between yogic and Sufi traditions (10th–17th centuries) exemplifies one of the most intricate cases of such intercultural transposition. At its core lies a fundamental question: *How is transcendence translated across linguistic, metaphysical, and theological boundaries?*

The problem of cultural translation in esoteric traditions has often been obscured by textualist paradigms and doctrinal essentialism. Conventional approaches tend to frame such exchanges either as syncretism (a blending that erases difference) or as borrowing (implying unilateral influence). Both models fall short in capturing the dynamic, layered processes through which Sufism absorbed, reinterpreted, and ritualized yogic knowledge. This article proposes a more precise framework: transposition—an embodied translation in which metaphysical concepts, somatic techniques, and ritual grammars are recontextualized, not merely appropriated.

A striking example of this process is the textual migration of the *Amṛtakunda* (Pool of Nectar), a Sanskrit yogic treatise likely compiled



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between the 11th and 12th centuries. By the early 13th century, it was rendered into Arabic as *Ḥawḍ al-Ḥayāt* (The Pool of Life), possibly in the cosmopolitan centers of Gujarat or the Deccan (Ernst 2003, 45). Later Persian and Hindustani adaptations further disseminated this text, demonstrating how Sanskrit terms like *prāṇa* (breath), *cakra* (energy centers), and *kuṇḍalinī* (serpent power) were not merely translated but re-coded into Sufi and Qur'anic concepts such as *rūḥ* (spirit), *laṭā'if* (subtle centers), and *Nūr Muḥammadī* (the Light of Muḥammad) (Alvi 2021, 112–115).

A parallel case is the *Kitāb Bātanjal*, a 16th-century Persian adaptation of Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*. Though erroneously attributed to *al-Bīrūnī*, this text overlays *Sāṃkhya*-Yoga metaphysics with an Islamicized framework, equating *kaivalya* (liberation) with *tawḥīd* (divine unity) and reinterpreting yogic discipline (*abhyāsa*) through Sufi notions of servant-hood (*ʿubūdiyya*) (Pingree 1994, 67–70).

This article addresses the following research questions:

- i. *What happens when mystical systems migrate across religious boundaries?*
- ii. *How is transcendence translated—not only textually, but ritually, lexically, and somatically?*
- iii. *What does this reveal about shared structures of esoteric knowledge across traditions?*
- iv. To explore these questions, I employ three methodological frameworks:

Manuscript Philology

The study relies on comparative manuscript analysis, examining key sources such as:

- Bodleian MS Arab. e.163 (Oxford)
- British Library Add. 23,409 (London)
- Hyderabad MS 1786 (Salar Jung Museum)
- Süleymaniye MS Halvetī 342 (Istanbul)

These manuscripts are not static texts but living archives, where diagrams, marginalia, and terminological shifts reveal how yogic and Sufi concepts were dynamically reconfigured (Zadeh 2012, 89–93).

Comparative Religious Hermeneutics

Beyond lexical substitution, transposition involved hermeneutical reframing. Sufi metaphysics—rooted in Qur'anic revelation and Avicennian psychology—provided an interpretive lens that absorbed yogic elements without compromising Islamic theological integrity. For instance, Sufi terms like *naḥās* (breath), *qalb* (heart), and *sirr* (innermost secret) served as functional equivalents to yogic structures, enabling a re-inscription of the self as a vessel for divine ascent (Sviri 2002, 145–150).

Embodiment Theory

Theories of embodied memory (Connerton 1989) and performative repertoire (Taylor 2003) underscore that spiritual knowledge is transmitted not only through texts but through bodily practices—gestures, breath control, and silence. Yogic techniques like *prāṇāyāma* (breath regulation) and *āsana* (posture) found resonance in Sufi practices such as *ḥabs al-dam* (breath retention) and ritual *adab* (comportment). These should be



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understood not as borrowed techniques but as translated grammars of transcendence, perpetuated through kinesthetic memory (Samuel 2008, 211–215).

By reconceptualizing this Indo-Islamic encounter as cultural transposition, we restore agency to both traditions. Sufism neither passively absorbed yoga nor merely mimicked its techniques. Instead, it recast yogic insights through a *Qur'anic* lens, transforming Sanskrit metaphysics into an Arabic grammar of divine proximity.

The following sections trace this transposition across four dimensions:

1. **Lexical Adaptation** (how terms were reconfigured)
2. **Ritual Syntax** (how practices were reinterpreted)
3. **Theological Grafting** (how metaphysics were aligned)
4. **Embodied Practices** (how techniques were performed)

Together, these layers reveal that transcendence was not just translated—it was performed, rewritten, and remembered in new theological idioms.

Lexical Transpositions: From *Prāṇa* to *Rūḥ*

Language is not merely a medium for metaphysical ideas—it is the architecture in which those ideas take shape. In the Indo-Islamic encounter between yogic and Sufi traditions, the transposition of esoteric lexicons demanded more than translation; it required epistemic realignment. When Sanskrit terms migrated into Arabic and Persian manuscripts, they were not passively adopted but ritually and theologically reframed. The term *prāṇa*, for instance, underwent not only phonetic adaptation but metaphysical re-inscription, reinterpreted as *rūḥ* (spirit) or *nafas* (breath) depending on theological context.

This section examines the semantic conversions in the intercultural exchange of mystical vocabularies. Drawing on the *Amṛtakunda* and its Arabic adaptation *Ḥawḍ al-Ḥayāt*, alongside Persian commentaries and Ottoman manuscripts, we analyze how yogic terminology—*prāṇa*, *cakra*, *kuṇḍalinī*, *bīja*, *tattva*—was assimilated into Sufi discourse through *Qur'anic* and Avicennian frameworks. These were not arbitrary substitutions but deliberate reconfigurations, aligning Indic metaphysics with Islamic cosmology and psychology.

Prāṇa → *Rūḥ* / *Nafas*: The Breath as Spirit

In yogic tradition, *prāṇa* denotes not merely breath but the vital force animating the *nāḍīs* (energy channels), linked to cosmic cycles and consciousness. The Arabic *Ḥawḍ al-Ḥayāt* renders *prāṇa* as *rūḥ* (spirit) or *nafas* (breath), each term rooted in distinct Islamic registers:

Rūḥ (Q 17:85: "They ask you about the Spirit...") رُوحِي رَّبِّي
Translation: "They ask you about the Spirit. Say, 'The Spirit is part of my Lord's domain'" (Abdel Haleem, 2004), signifies a divine command (*amr*), breathed into Adam (Q 15:29), فَإِذَا سَوَّيْتُهُ وَنَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحٍ
Translation: 'When I have fashioned him and breathed My Spirit into him' (Abdel Haleem, 2004), marking the boundary between created and uncreated realms (Chittick 1989, 145–148).

Nafas, in Sufi psychology (e.g., al-Qushayrī's *Risāla*), denotes the self's subtle fluctuations, subject to spiritual discipline (Ernst 2016, 89–92).



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In Bodleian MS Arab. e.163 (fol. 7r), the term *barāḥa* (a phonetic approximation of *prāṇa*) is glossed as *al-naḥs al-muṭma'inna* ("the tranquil soul," cf. Q 89:27). This overlay imposes a Sufi teleology: *prāṇa* becomes the soul's journey toward serenity (*sakīna*), transforming a yogic concept into an Islamic theological construct (Zadeh 2012, 93).

***Cakras* → *Laṭā'if*: Energetic Centers and Subtle Faculties**

In *haṭha* yoga texts like the *Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā*, *cakras* are spinal energy vortices linked to *bīja* mantras and elemental principles. The Sufi analogue, articulated in texts like *Risāla al-Ḥabs* and *Naqshbandī* commentaries, is the *laṭā'if*—subtle faculties (*qalb*, *sirr*, *khafī*) mapped to *Qur'anic* loci (Sviri 2002, 145–150).

The Hyderabad MS 1786 (fol. 15v) diagrams breath cycles alongside divine names at bodily loci, mirroring yogic *cakra* systems. *Süleymaniye MS Halvetī* 342 (fol. 18r) further aligns each *laṭīfa* with a *Qur'anic* verse (e.g., *qalb* → Q 24:35: "Allāh is the Light of the heavens and the earth"), transposing yogic psycho-cosmology into Islamic sacred geography (Alvi 2021, 114–117).

***Bīja* → *Asmā' Allāh*: From Seed Sound to Divine Names**

Yogic *bīja* mantras (*Om*, *Hrīm*) condense metaphysical realities into sonic forms. In Sufism, *dhikr* (invocation of *asmā' Allāh*) serves a parallel function. The *Ḥawḍ al-Hayāt* replaces *Om* with "Yā Hayy" (O Living One, Q 40:65), embedding *Qur'anic* epithets into breath-synchronized repetition (Ernst 2016, 94; Currie 2017, 112).

Here, sonic mysticism is preserved but theologically redirected: vibrations no longer evoke Brahman but affirm *tawḥīd* (divine oneness).

***Kuṇḍalinī* → *Nūr Muḥammadī*: Vertical Ascent, Recast**

The yogic *kuṇḍalinī*—a coiled serpent whose ascent brings awakening—lacks a direct Islamic analogue. Yet Sufi theorists, particularly *Ibn al-ʿArabī*'s school, reconfigured it as the *Nūr Muḥammadī* (Light of Muḥammad), a primordial radiance that descends (*tanazzul*) and is re-ascended (*mi'rāj*) through spiritual stations (Ibn al-ʿArabī, *Futūḥāt* I.295; Chittick 1989, 102–108).

This transposition shifts the goal from self-awakening to self-annihilation (*fanā'*) in divine light, exemplifying how Islamic esotericism "translated" yogic concepts without syncretism.

Ritual Syntax: Breath, Posture, and *Dhikr*

The transmission of mystical knowledge between yogic and Sufi traditions extended beyond lexical exchanges to encompass embodied ritual practices - a process where somatic techniques were not merely translated but ritually re-inscribed within new theological frameworks. This section offers a comprehensive analysis of how three core yogic practices - breath control (*prāṇāyāma*), posture (*āsana*), and sound vibration (mantra) - were systematically adapted into Islamic mystical traditions as *ḥabs al-dam* (breath retention), *adab al-julūs* (sitting postures), and *dhikr* (invocatory remembrance). Drawing on manuscript evidence, performative theory, and comparative ritual studies, we demonstrate how these adaptations preserved the functional



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efficacy of yogic techniques while thoroughly Islamizing their cosmological foundations and theological justifications.

From *Prāṇāyāma* to *Ḥabs al-Dam*: The Mysticism of Breath

The transformation of yogic breath control into Sufi practice represents one of the most sophisticated adaptations. In classical *haṭha* yoga texts like the *Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā*, *prāṇāyāma* serves to regulate vital energy (*prāṇa*) through specific breathing patterns such as *nāḍī śodhana* (channel purification) and *kumbhaka* (retention), with precise ratios (often 1:4:2 for inhalation:retention:exhalation) designed to activate subtle energies (Vasu 1914, 45-48). The Arabic *Ḥawḍ al-Ḥayāt* transforms these techniques into *ḥabs al-dam* (lit. "blood retention"), reframing breath control as a means to discipline the *naḥs* (ego) and awaken the *rūḥ* (divine spirit) (Ernst 2016, 97).

Key aspects of this adaptation include:

Theological Recontextualization: Where *prāṇāyāma* aims to unite *prāṇa* (ascending energy) and *apāna* (descending energy), Sufi manuals like *Risāla al-Qushayriyya* reinterpret this balance through an Islamic lens as harmonizing *naḥs al-raḥmānī* (divine breath) and *naḥs al-shayṭānī* (egoic breath) (Chittick 1989, 156). The 15th-century *Kashf al-Mahjūb* further elaborates this as achieving *istiḳāma* (straightness) of the soul (Hujwīrī 1911, 213).

Liturgical Synchronization: The *Ḥawḍ* replaces yogic breath counts with repetitions tied to Islamic prayer cycles. Bodleian MS Arab. e.163 (fol. 12v) prescribes breath retention durations corresponding to recitations of *Subḥān Allāh* (33x), *Alḥamdulillāh* (33x), and *Allāhu Akbar* (34x) - the standard post-prayer *dhikr* (Green 2012, 178).

Physiological Reinterpretation: *Süleymaniye* MS Halveti 342 (fol. 15r) contains diagrams mapping breath cycles to the *laṭā'if* system, where retention activates specific "subtle centers" corresponding to *Qur'anic* concepts: the *qalb* (heart) during inhalation, *rūḥ* (spirit) during retention, and *sirr* (secret) during exhalation (Alvi 2021, 120-123).

Āsana as Adab: The Posture of Presence

The adaptation of yogic postures (*āsana*) into Sufi practice reveals a complex process of Islamic embodiment. While *haṭha* yoga texts like the *Haṭhapradīpikā* detail numerous postures (*padmāsana*, *siddhāsana*) for energy cultivation (Muktibodhananda 1998, 289-315), Sufi manuals reconfigure these as *adab al-julūs* (rules of sitting) with distinct theological rationales:

Prophetic Precedent: The 13th-century Jawāmi' al-Ladhdhāt describes sitting positions for *dhikr* that closely mirror *bhadrāsana* (gracious pose) but justifies them through ḥadīth literature about the Prophet's sitting manners (Alvi 2021, 118). The text emphasizes keeping the spine "straight as an arrow" (*qāma sawiyyan*), echoing yogic emphasis on *suṣūmṇā nāḍī* activation while invoking *Qur'anic* language (Q 76:4) about proper bearing before God.



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Cosmological Alignment: British Library MS Add. 23,409 contains illustrations showing *dhikr* circles with practitioners in positions resembling *vajrāsana* (thunderbolt pose), annotated with notes about directing attention to the qibla of the heart (Foltz 2013, 92). The accompanying text explains this as maintaining *khusū'* (humility) while allowing *nūr* (divine light) to ascend through the subtle centers.

Ritual Hybridization: The 16th-century *Bahjat al-Asrār* describes a composite posture used in *Khalwatī* circles - one leg folded (*ardhapadmāsana*), one knee raised - said to combine the stability of *āsana* with the alertness recommended in *ḥadīth* about night prayers (Trimingham 1998, 204-206).

Mantra to *Dhikr*: The Sonic Bridge

The transformation of *bīja* mantras into Islamic invocations represents perhaps the most profound ritual synthesis. Where yogic tradition employs sacred syllables (*Om*, *Hrīm*) as condensations of cosmic energy, Sufism developed parallel techniques through *asmā' al-ḥusnā* (divine names):

Phonetic Theology: The *Ḥawḍ al-Ḥayāt* replaces *Om*'s tripartite resonance with the triple repetition of "*Yā Hayy*" (O Living One), grounding the vibratory practice in *Qur'anic* divine attributes (Q 40:65). Hyderabad MS 1786 (fol. 19r) shows how each syllable was assigned to different breath phases: *Yā* on inhalation, *Hayy* during retention, *Yā Qayyūm* on exhalation (Ernst 2016, 101).

Esoteric Correspondences: *Naqshbandī* manuals like *Maqāmāt-i Mazharī* detail how specific *dhikr* formulas activate the *laṭā'if* system much like *bīja* mantras awaken *cakras*:

Lā ilāha illā Allāh for the *qalb*

Allāh for the *rūḥ*

Huwa for the *sirr* (Buehler 1998, 134-137)

Breath-Sound Coordination: The development of *dhikr khafī* (silent remembrance) in the *Naqshbandī* order replicated *ajapa japa* (unvoiced repetition) techniques, with internalized recitation synchronized to natural breath rhythms (Algar 1976, 45-48).

Manuscript Evidence and Ritual Continuity

The depth of these adaptations emerges clearly in manuscript traditions:

Bodleian MS Arab. e.163: Contains detailed diagrams showing breath cycles paired with *laṭā'if* activation points, annotated with *Qur'anic* verses (fol. 14v-17r).

Süleymaniye MS Halvetī 342: Includes marginal notes correcting postures during *khalwa* (retreat), specifying exact angles for knee placement and spinal alignment (fol. 21v-23r).

Hyderabad MS 1786: Preserves a unique "breath-genealogy" (*silsilat al-naḥas*) chart mapping specific *dhikr* formulas to times of day and lunar phases (fol. 25r),



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demonstrating how yogic *tithi* (lunar day) practices were Islamized.

The Grammar of Embodied Translation

This analysis reveals that the Sufi adoption of yogic techniques constituted neither simple borrowing nor syncretism, but rather a ritual translation operating at three levels:

Functional Preservation: Maintaining the psychosomatic efficacy of breath, posture, and sound techniques.

Theological Reinscription: Grounding practices in *Qur'anic* cosmology and Prophetic precedent.

Cosmological Reorientation: Redirecting energy flows from *kuṇḍalinī* awakening to *fanā' fi Allāh* (annihilation in God).

The resulting synthesis represents one of history's most sophisticated examples of interreligious somatic dialogue - where bodies themselves became sites of sacred translation.

Theological Grafting: Recasting Metaphysics

The transposition of yogic techniques into Sufi ritual, though deeply embodied, did not occur in a metaphysical vacuum. To fully integrate Indic esotericism into Islamic thought, Sufi scholars engaged in a sophisticated act of theological grafting—embedding Sanskrit cosmological concepts into *Qur'anic* and Avicennian frameworks while maintaining Islamic doctrinal integrity. This section examines three core dimensions of this intellectual synthesis: (1) the mapping of *cakras* onto *laṭā'if*, (2) the reinterpretation of yogic *bindu* as *nūr Muḥammadī*, and (3) the conceptual shift from *kaivalya* (liberative isolation) to *fanā'* (annihilation in the Divine). Through manuscript evidence and comparative metaphysics, we demonstrate how Sufi thinkers preserved the structural logic of yogic systems while reorienting their theological foundations.

From *Cakras* to *Laṭā'if*: Cosmological Substitution

In *haṭha* yoga, *cakras* are subtle energy centers arranged along the spine, each governing elemental, psychological, and cosmic domains. The *Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā* (17th century) describes six primary *cakras*, culminating in the *sahasrāra* (thousand-petaled lotus), the seat of transcendent consciousness (Birch 2019, 92–96). These centers are activated through *prāṇāyāma*, mantra, and visualization, facilitating the ascent of *kuṇḍalinī* energy toward liberation.

Sufi metaphysics transposed this framework into the doctrine of *laṭā'if* (subtle faculties)—spiritual organs of perception articulated in texts like *Najm al-Dīn Kubrā's Fawā'ih al-Jamāl* (13th century). The *Naqshbandī* sequence (*qalb, rūḥ, sirr, khafī, akhfā*) mirrors the vertical alignment of *cakras* but reinterprets them through Islamic theology:

Qalb (Heart): Corresponds to *anāhata cakra* but is associated with *Qur'anic* light metaphysics rather than elemental air (Alvi 2021, 112–115).



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("Allāh is the Light of the heavens and the earth," Q 24:35) **اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ**, Translation: 'Allāh is the Light of the heavens and the earth' (Abdel Haleem, 2004), mapping yogic *cakras* to Islamic illuminative cosmology.

Sirr (Secret): Analogous to *ājñā cakra* (third eye), now linked to the divine command (*amr*) and the invocation "Huwa" (He), a pronoun of transcendence (Currie 2017, 115).

Akhfā (Most Hidden): Parallels *sahasrāra* but is framed as the locus of *fanā* (annihilation) rather than *kaivalya* (Buehler 1998, 137–140).

Manuscript evidence reveals this transposition visually. Hyderabad MS 1786 (fol. 15v) and *Süleymaniye MS Halveti* 342 (fol. 18r) contain anatomical diagrams superimposing *laṭā'if* onto a human figure, annotated with *Qur'anic* verses—a direct adaptation of *tantric cakra* charts. The *Ḥawḍ al-Hayāt* further prescribes *dhikr* formulas to "awaken" each *laṭīfa*, much like *bīja* mantras activate *cakras* (Ernst 2016, 104–107).

Key Difference: While *cakras* emphasize *śakti* (immanent energy), *laṭā'if* are vessels for *nūr* (divine light), reflecting Islam's emphasis on transcendence over immanence.

Bindu and Nūr Muḥammadi: Reconfiguring Ontological Origins

In *tantric yoga*, *bindu* (lit. "point" or "drop") represents concentrated essence—the seed of consciousness located in the *sahasrāra*. The *Yogatārāvali* describes it as the residue of cosmic sound (*nāda*) and the goal of meditative absorption (Mallinson 2020, 45–48).

Sufi cosmology reconceptualizes this as *Nūr Muḥammadi*—the primordial Light of Muḥammad, which *Ibn al-Arabī* identifies as the first creation (*Al-Haqīqa al-Muḥammadiyya*) and the ontological blueprint of existence (*Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* I.295). This light is not spatially fixed but emanates through all levels of being, from the divine throne (*ʿarsh*) to the human heart (Chittick 1989, 102–108).

Ottoman commentaries on the *Ḥawḍ al-Hayāt* (e.g., *Süleymaniye MS Halveti* 342, fol. 20v) merge these concepts. A diagram titled "*Silsilat al-Anwār*" (Chain of Lights) depicts light ascending from the *qalb* to the *laṭā'if*, culminating in *nūr al-anwār* (Light of Lights)—a clear analogue to *sahasrāric* illumination. However, the Sufi model inverts the yogic directionality: where *bindu* is realized through upward energy (*kuṇḍalinī*), *Nūr Muḥammadi* descends as grace (*faḍl*) to the purified seeker (Algar 1976, 50–53).

Theological Implications

Yogic bindu: Achieved through somatic mastery (*haṭha*).

Sufi Nūr: Received through divine self-disclosure (*tajallī*).

This distinction underscores Islam's emphasis on divine agency over human effort.



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Kaivalya vs. Fanā': Liberation Reimagined

Classical yoga, as articulated in *Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras*, culminates in *kaivalya*—the isolation (*viyoga*) of *puruṣa* (pure consciousness) from *prakṛti* (material nature). This is a state of witnessing detachment, free from relationality (Bryant 2009, 510–515).

Sufism, by contrast, envisions *fanā'*—the annihilation of the ego (*nafs*) in God. Unlike *kaivalya*, this is an ecstatic union, described by *al-Junayd* as "the passing away of attributes in the Divine Attributes" (Sells 1996, 83). The *Kitāb Bātanjāl*—a Persian adaptation of the *Yoga Sūtras*—attempts to reconcile these paradigms by interpreting *kaivalya* through *tawhīd* (divine unity). The text states:

"What the yogis call kaivalya, the people of truth [Sufis] name fanā'—but know that true solitude is solitude in God, not from God." (Pingree 1994, 71)

The *Ḥawḍ al-Ḥayāt* further reframes liberation through *Qur'anic* metaphors of servant-hood (*'ubūdiyya*) and love (*'ishq*). Where yogic texts speak of *mokṣa* (release) as transcendence of the body, Sufi manuals describe *baqā'* (subsistence) as embodied worship—the perfected human as a "polished mirror" of divine attributes (Chittick 1989, 210–215).

Manuscript Evidence

Bodleian MS Arab. e.163 (fol. 24r) contrasts yogic *samādhi* with Sufi *ḥāl* (mystical state), emphasizing the latter's relational dimension.

Hyderabad MS 1786 (fol. 30v) includes marginal notes equating *puruṣa* with *al-insān al-kāmil* (the Perfect Human), a distinctly Islamic ideal.

Metaphysical Convergence Without Syncretism

Theological grafting between yoga and Sufism was neither syncretism nor superficial borrowing. Rather, it was a hermeneutical recalibration that:

Preserved Functional Equivalences

(*cakras* ≈ *laṭā'if*, *bindu* ≈ *nūr*, *kaivalya* ≈ *fanā'*).

Reoriented Metaphysical Foundations (from *śakti* to *tawhīd*, ascent to descent, autonomy to servanthood).

Embedded practices in Islamic cosmology through *Qur'anic* and Prophetic frameworks.

This synthesis allowed Sufism to assimilate yogic techniques while maintaining theological coherence—a model of intercultural exchange that prioritized both fidelity and adaptation.

Embodied Archives: The Body as Scriptural Medium

While texts, diagrams, and glosses record fragments of esoteric knowledge, the human body remains the most enduring and responsive archive of spiritual transmission. In the Indo-Islamic encounter between yogic and Sufi traditions, the body functioned not merely as the instrument of practice but as a medium of



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theological signification—what Diana Taylor terms the “repertoire”: a site of embodied memory, performative repetition, and transgenerational transmission (Taylor 2003, 20–25). This section explores how Sufi practitioners internalized and reanimated yogic techniques through the body, creating a hybrid somatic theology. Three interrelated processes are foregrounded: (1) the ritual grammar of bodily practices, (2) embodied memory and apprenticeship, and (3) choreographed transcendence as devotional ascent.

Ritual Grammar and the Scriptural Body

In both *haṭha* yoga and *tantric* systems, the human body is conceived as a microcosmic cosmos (*piṇḍa*), traversed by subtle channels (*nāḍīs*), energy vortices (*cakras*), and resonant syllables (*bīja*). Texts such as the *Śiva Saṃhitā* (15th–17th c.) and the *Gheraṇḍa Saṃhitā* (17th c.) articulate a ritual grammar composed of *āsanas* (postures), *mudrās* (seals), *bandhas* (locks), and *prāṇāyāma* (breath regulation), designed to harmonize bodily energies and awaken transcendental consciousness (Mallinson 2020, 34–38).

When these embodied techniques entered Islamic esoteric contexts, their external forms were often retained, but their symbolic and theological meanings were recalibrated. In Persian and Ottoman Sufi manuscripts, these gestures and postures are framed through *Qur’anic* hermeneutics and Prophetic models of comportment. Hyderabad MS 1786 (fol. 12r–14v), for example, presents a series of seated postures nearly identical to lotus and *siddha* positions, yet justifies them through *ḥadīth* about the Prophet’s *adab al-julūs* (manner of sitting) in prayer and retreat (Alvi 2021, 116–118).

Similarly, Süleymaniye MS Halvetī 342 (fol. 9v) replaces classical *mudrās* with detailed illustrations of *adab al-yadayn*, ritual hand configurations symbolizing *tawḥīd* (divine unity). In one marginal note, the placement of the thumb and forefinger is likened to the Arabic letter *alif*, suggesting divine transcendence (Green 2012, 181). Thus, while the structural grammar of yogic embodiment persisted, its syntax was rewritten through Islamic theology—*śakti* (immanent energy) gave way to *niyya* (intention) and *ḥuḍūr* (presence before God), overlaying physical acts with *Qur’anic* resonance.

This process created a palimpsest body: a layered script in which yogic forms and Islamic meanings coexisted. The body itself became an interpretive text—simultaneously preserving, translating, and enacting the metaphysical claims of both traditions.

Embodied Memory and the Repertoire of Transmission

The migration of techniques from yoga into Sufism was not solely a matter of textual transmission but depended on embodied apprenticeship. Just as classical yoga required *guru-śiṣya* (teacher-disciple) lineages to transmit the nuances of *āsana*, *kumbhaka*, and *dhāraṇā*, Sufi *ṭarīqas* relied on *silsilas*—initiatory chains where techniques were imparted through intimate instruction, correction, and imitation.

This pedagogical mode is evident in numerous manuscript marginalia. Süleymaniye MS Halvetī 342 (fol. 11r) contains annotations correcting the disciple’s spine curvature and exhalation rhythm during *dhikr*, mirroring yogic guru adjustments. A note instructs: “Straighten the vertebra as if a string is drawn upward from the crown to the ‘*arsh* (divine throne), for illumination



descends only upon alignment.” Such phrasing fuses yogic *suṣumṇā nāḍī* alignment with Islamic cosmology of descent (*tanazzul*) from the divine realm.

The practice of *ḥabs al-dam* (breath retention), derived from yogic *kumbhaka*, offers a particularly rich example. In Bodleian MS Arab. e.163 (fol. 7r), the practitioner is guided to synchronize breath phases with sacred utterances: inhalation on “*Yā Allāh*,” suspension on “*Yā Hayy*,” and exhalation on “*Yā Qayyūm*.” This repurposing retains the physiological depth of *prāṇāyāma* while embedding it in Islamic vocal theology (Ernst 2016, 99–101).

Moreover, the rhythmic discipline of breath was mapped onto Islamic sacred temporality. Hyderabad MS 1786 (fol. 25r) preserves a *silsilat al-naḥas* (“chain of breath”)—a ritual calendar correlating breath patterns with lunar phases (*tithis*) and divine names (*asmāʾ al-ḥusnā*). This adaptation echoes yogic *prāṇāyāma* charts while situating them within the cosmology of the Islamic lunar calendar. Through this mnemonic device, the body memorized sacred time, internalizing metaphysical cycles as physiological rhythms.

Thus, embodied memory became the locus of continuity. The Sufi adept did not merely learn the techniques of yoga; he re-inscribed them into the sensory ecology of Islamic piety—learning with the lungs, joints, and diaphragm as much as with the intellect.

Transcendence as Choreography

The fusion of yoga and Sufism also occurred on a performative axis—through the choreography of devotional movement. Where yoga maps the ascent of *kuṇḍalinī* through spinal centers toward the *sahasrāra*, Sufi manuals depict *sulūk* (spiritual journey) through *maqāmāt* (stations) tied to the *laṭāʾif* (subtle faculties). In hybrid manuscripts, these pathways converge in kinetic diagrams where postural shifts, breath control, and divine names form an ascensional grammar.

A striking instance appears in Bodleian MS Arab. e.163 (fol. 14v), which portrays a practitioner in a modified *āsana-julūs* pose, with arrows tracing the flow of *nūr* (divine light) upward through *laṭāʾif* loci. Each station is inscribed with a *Qurʾānic* verse and a *dhikr* formula:

Qalb (Heart): Aligned with Q 24:35—“Allāh is the Light of the heavens and the earth”—framing the heart as the first chamber of illumination (Chittick 1989, 145–148).

Rūḥ (Spirit): Connected to Q 17:1 (the Prophet’s night journey), rendering the soul’s ascent as a mirroring of the Prophet’s *miʾrāj* (Ernst 2016, 104–107).

Sirr (Secret): Marked by the utterance “*Huwa*” (He), the pronoun of divine singularity, evoking the ineffable presence of God beyond all attributes (Sells 1996, 83).

This ascent is choreographed through breath-synchronized movements in *Naqshbandī* practice. For instance, during *dhikr khafī* (silent remembrance), a subtle bow on “*Yā Hayy*” activates the *qalb*, while straightening the spine on “*Yā Qayyūm*” engages the *rūḥ*. These postural shifts mirror yogic spinal activation but serve a theocentric teleology—orienting the seeker not toward liberation



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from the cosmos, but annihilation in God (*fanāʾ*) and subsistence through Him (*baqāʾ*).

The *Halvetī* and *Shattārī* orders incorporated more dynamic gestures. In the *Bahjat al-Asrār* (17th c.), the practitioner is described as entering retreat (*khalwa*) in a composite pose: one leg folded in half-lotus, the other extended for alertness—said to maintain bodily vigilance while preparing for divine *tajallī* (self-disclosure). These choreographies do not mimic yogic rituals but realign their performative vectors toward *Qurʾānic* cosmology and Prophetic example.

Here, choreography becomes theology in motion. The sequence of postures, breaths, and invocations forms not only a ritual but a mode of exegesis—an interpretation of divine realities enacted through the body.

The Somatic Logic of Transposition

The Indo-Islamic synthesis of yogic and Sufi practices reveals that the transmission of esoteric knowledge cannot be fully captured through linguistic or doctrinal analysis alone. Rather, it demands an attentiveness to embodiment—to how bodies preserve, adapt, and perform sacred traditions across religious boundaries.

In this synthesis, the body operated as:

A Translated Scripture: Yogic forms were retained but reinscribed with *Qurʾānic* meaning.

A Mnemonic Archive: Breath cycles, postures, and gestures served as vessels of esoteric memory, coordinated with lunar and liturgical rhythms.

A Choreographed Text: Ritual movements became vectors of theological ascent, synchronizing metaphysical truths with physical acts.

Through this embodied hermeneutics, Sufi adepts did not merely imitate yoga—they transposed it. The result was a devotional body attuned not to *śakti* but to *nūr*, not to liberation from being but to annihilation in the Real. In this body, transcendence was no longer abstract—it was practiced, remembered, and lived.

Conclusion

The intercultural encounter between yogic and Sufi traditions from the 10th to 17th centuries reveals that translation was never a static act of linguistic equivalence. Rather, it was a performative transposition—a dynamic, embodied process wherein techniques, metaphysical systems, and ritual grammars were recast across theological boundaries. The result was neither syncretism nor mimicry, but an intentional reconfiguration: the transformation of Indic esotericism into Islamic spiritual idioms, without loss of structural depth or experiential resonance.

Re-framing Translation as Performance

The translation of practices such as *prāṇāyāma*, *āsana*, and *cakra* visualization into Sufi contexts was not confined to textual glosses. These transformations occurred within the repertoire—the domain of embodied memory and ritual reenactment. Postures like *padmāsana* became legible within prophetic



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devotional frameworks; *kumbhaka* was retained as *ḥabs al-dam*, now coordinated with *Qur'anic* recitation and divine names; and the upward ascent of *kuṇḍalinī* was re-imagined through the descent and return of Nūr Muḥammadi. Following Diana Taylor's insight that cultural memory is often "stored in the body," we find that Indo-Islamic mystical practice created a choreography of translation—one that relied not on semantic equivalence, but on ritual substitution, mnemonic rhythm, and theological resonance. The body thus became an instrument of spiritual reconfiguration, enacting meanings that surpassed what could be captured in text.

Transposition, Not Syncretism

To describe this phenomenon as "syncretism" risks mischaracterizing its precision. Syncretism suggests amalgamation without discrimination, whereas what occurred here was a careful metaphysical grafting—a **transposition**—where structural elements from yogic systems were preserved but invested with new theological intent. This can be seen in the core metaphysical shifts:

Cakra → Laṭā'if: Where *cakras* once represented vortices of *śakti*, they were transposed as *laṭā'if*, subtle faculties illuminated by divine light, each aligned with *Qur'anic* loci and cosmological functions.

Bindu → Nūr Muḥammadi: The concentrated yogic *bindu*, signifying latent consciousness, became the primordial Light of Muḥammad—the first ontological reality in *Akbarian* cosmology.

Kaivalya → Fanā': The goal of liberation shifted from isolation of pure consciousness (*kaivalya*) to annihilation of the self in God (*fanā'*), echoing the *Qur'anic* imperative of servant-hood and relational transcendence.

These substitutions were not merely symbolic; they reoriented entire systems of cosmology, soteriology, and ritual embodiment toward the axis of *tawḥīd* (divine oneness) and *Qur'anic* revelation. What was retained was ritual efficacy; what changed was metaphysical ontology.

The Body as Comparative Theology

Perhaps the most remarkable legacy of this encounter is methodological: the human body itself became the site of comparative theology. Manuscripts like *Hyderabad MS 1786* and *Süleymaniye Halveti 342* do not simply document textual transmission; they record adjustments in breathing sequences, postural gestures, and corporeal diagrams, where even a finger's placement became an index of divine unity.

This suggests that esoteric knowledge is often not transcribed but **performed**—an insight with implications for the study of other inter-religious exchanges. What if, instead of reading translations solely as textual artifacts, we approached them as ritual technologies? What if theological transformation could be traced through gesture, timing, intention, and breath, as much as through grammar and vocabulary?



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Future Directions for Research

This framework invites a series of inquiries that can expand the field of **comparative esotericism** and **embodied philology**:

Diagrammatic Theologies: How were *yantras*, *cakra-mandalas*, and cosmo-grams visually re-inscribed in Persian and Ottoman manuscripts? What do these visual palimpsests tell us about the cognitive migration of esoteric ideas?

Acoustic and Sonic Mysticism: What theological shifts occurred when *bīja mantras* (e.g., *Om*, *Hrīm*) were replaced with *Qur'anic* epithets like *Yā Hayy* or *Allāh*? How do sonic vibrations construct different ontological assumptions about divinity, presence, and reality?

Esoteric Pedagogy and Secrecy: What role did oral transmission, initiation protocols, and embodied rehearsal play in the preservation or transformation of these hybrid practices? How did secrecy and teacher–disciple dynamics regulate cross-cultural transmission?

These questions not only deepen our understanding of the yoga–Sufism encounter but also challenge broader models of translation, embodiment, and religious boundary-making. They call for an interdisciplinary methodology—one that brings together philology, performance studies, comparative theology, manuscript archaeology, and phenomenology.

Closing

To translate transcendence is not merely to transpose terms, but to re-embody their meaning—to let the breath of one tradition inhabit the lungs of another, without erasure or collapse. The Sufi adept practicing *ḥabs al-dam* and the yogi performing *kumbhaka* do not mirror one another, but they inhabit parallel postures of longing. Their techniques differ; their cosmologies diverge. Yet, they converge in the shared aspiration to enact presence, purification, and union through the body.

This embodied convergence offers a model for understanding religious difference not as separation, but as variation in sacred articulation—a performance of the One through the diverse choreography of the many.

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