

Aesthetics and Ethics of Islam: The Art of Being a Gay Muslim

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¹SHORT BIO

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the ways in which the aesthetic experience of Islam enables LGBTIQ Muslims to form and claim an Islamic identity, beyond the debate and contradictory views of the compatibility of homosexuality with Islam. The ethnography focuses on a gay Muslim artist from Cape Town, Igshaan Adams, whose life trajectory and artwork offer an insight into LGBTIQ Muslim's struggle and reconciliation of their religiosity and sexuality. Despite the freedom and equal rights that the post-apartheid secular constitution grants its citizens, LGBTIQ Muslims in Cape Town do not compromise their religiosity and their right to claim an Islamic identity. While historically, they have reconciled their religiosity and sexuality on the bases of "don't ask, don't tell" in post-apartheid South Africa, LGBTIQ Muslims in Cape Town have "gone public" and challenged the constraints of heteronormative interpretations of Islamic traditions, claiming a constitutive part of the debate, reasoning, knowledge, and history of Islamic discursive traditions. The formations of Islamic discursive traditions are marked with diversity, contradiction, contestation, disagreement, rupture, and transformation. While the compatibility of homosexuality with Islam is an open debate, aesthetic experiences of Islam offer LGBTIQ Muslims a technology of self-perfection that allows them a sense of being a Muslim and belonging to a Muslim community. This in turn empowers them to overcome the doubt of heteronormative interpretations of Islamic discursive traditions and to openly perform an Islamic identity.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetic; ethic; Islam; Sufism; Art; LGBTIQ Muslim

Introduction

In 1996, South Africa's secular constitution provided for the freedom of expression and an equal rights-based citizenship, free from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender. This enabled LGBTIQ Muslims to openly claim an Islamic identity, without the fear of persecution. Like other Muslim minority communities living in secular democratic nations after apartheid, many self-identified LGBTIQ Muslims in Cape Town were now free to enact their Islamic identity in public. However, an important distinction remained. LGBTIQ Muslims in Cape Town were neither fulfilled by secular freedom, nor with constitutional rights and recognition of their homosexual identity alone. Instead, many Muslims became concerned with reconciling their sexuality and religiosity. Historically, LGBTIQ Muslims in the Cape had reconciled their religiosity and sexuality on the bases of a "don't ask, don't tell" strategy,

which implied keeping their sexual identity private, so as not to offend other Muslims, in addition to avoiding persecution and prosecution.¹ In the post-apartheid era, however, many LGBTIQ Muslims in Cape Town went public, claiming a constitutive part of the debate, reasoning, knowledge, and history of Islamic discursive traditions. Various mosques, activists, and academics (Muslim and non-Muslim) in Cape Town supported LGBTIQ Muslims' public performance of Islamic identity and their claim to be part of Islamic discursive traditions.² Yet, other Muslims in Cape Town still disapproved of homosexuality as part of an Islamic discursive tradition. When LGBTIQ Muslims' religiosity went public, it became part of the debate, contestation, transformation, and formation of Islamic discursive traditions in Cape Town. This ongoing debate of compatibility of homosexuality with Islam can best be understood as an example of Shahab Ahmad's thesis of the incommensurable diversity and internal contradiction that constitute the Islamic discursive traditions.³ Although Ahmad focuses on the Muslim medieval societies, his exploration of the diversity and contradiction of Islamic traditions can be seen in modern Muslim societies.⁴ For Abdulkader Tayob, the formations of an Islamic discursive tradition do not merely include diversity and contradiction, but also witness, rupture, disagreement, and changes.⁵

In the recent decade, LGBTIQ Muslims in Cape Town have made a significant contribution to the debate and formations of an Islamic discursive tradition that is compatible with homosexuality. Two years after the new constitution, in 1998, LGBTIQ Muslims in Cape Town established the Al-Fitra Foundation, which was registered as The Inner

¹ Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflection on Qur'an, Hadith and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2016), 85.

² Pepe Hendricks, *Hijab: Unveiling Queer Muslim Lives* (Cape Town: African Minds, 2009); Pepe Hendricks, "Queer Muslim love: a Time for ijthad," *Theology & Sexuality* 22, no.1-2 (2016): 102-13; Siraj Al-Haqq, S. Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2010); Siraj Al-Haqq, S. Kugle, *Living Out Islam: Voice of Gay Lesbian and Transgender Muslims* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Mujahid Osman and Sa'diyya Sheikh, "Islam, Muslim and Politics of Queerness in Cape Town," *The African Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa* 33, no.2 (2017): 43-67.

³ Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being an Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016): 71-3.

⁴ Abdulkader Tayob, *Islam in South Africa: Mosque, Imam, and Sermons*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999.

⁵ Abdulkader Tayob, *Islamic Discourse: Language, Performance, and Rupture*. Forthcoming.

Circle (TIC) in 2006.⁶ TIC promotes a progressive interpretation of the Qur'an that enables LGBTIQ Muslims, particularly in South Africa and internationally, to reconcile their sexual and religious identity. The founder of Al-Fitra Foundation, Muhsin Hendricks, the first openly gay Imam in South Africa, stressed that TIC's primary sources are the Qur'an, the Hadith, and Islamic traditions. In his article, he argues that the Qur'an is open to a variety of interpretations, with which he challenges and contests the mainstream religious authority of the South African Muslim community that, according to Hendricks, adheres to a heteronormative interpretation of the Qur'an.⁷ To counterbalance such orthodox heteronormative doctrine, TIC "seeks an Islam which does not discriminate against people on the basis of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity."⁸ TIC's approach draws on critical theorists of Islamic studies who have evaded an understanding of Islam as normative doctrine and instead paid keen attention to the historical realities and lived experiences of queer Muslims within Islamic traditions.⁹

While the compatibility of homosexuality and Islam remains an open and contested debate, this essay explores how aesthetic experiences of Islam enable LGBTIQ Muslims to form and claim an Islamic identity, beyond the contestation inherent in the formations of Islamic discursive traditions.¹⁰ The essay draws on an ethnography of a private and public performance of the identity politics of Islam and Muslims, of belonging and citizenship in post-apartheid Cape Town, which I conducted between 2011 and 2016.¹¹ This essay focuses in particular on a Cape-tonian gay Muslim artist, Igshaan Adams, whose life trajectory and art-

⁶ Moses Tofa, "The Narratives of Islam and Sexual Diversity: An Anatomy of Attitudes, Challenges, Opportunities and Trends in the South African Context" (Research Report) (Cape Town: The Inner Circle, 2014), ii.

⁷ Muhsin Hendricks, "Islamic Texts: A Source for Acceptance of Queer Individuals into Mainstream Muslim Society," *The Equal Rights Review* 5 (2010): 31-51.

⁸ Tofa, "The Narratives of Islam and Sexual Diversity," 1.

⁹ Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam*; Sa'diyya Shaikh, "A Tafsir of Praxis: Gender, Marital Violence, and Resistance in a South African Muslim Community," In *Violence Against Women in Contemporary World Religions: Roots and Cures*, eds. Dan Maguire and Sa'diyya Shaikh (Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2007): 66-89; Kugle, *Homosexuality in Islam*; Kugle, *Living Out Islam*; Nadeem Mahomed and Sa'diyya Shaikh, "Islam Between Margins: Reassessing Gender and Sexuality in Islam," *The Africa Journal of Gender and Religion* 44, no.2 (2018).

¹⁰ Ahmed, *What is Islam?*

¹¹ Ala R. Alhourani, "Performance of Muslim-ness in post-apartheid Cape Town: Authenticating cultural difference, belonging and Citizenship," PhD diss., University of Western Cape, (2017).

work offer an insight into LGBTIQ Muslims' struggle for recognition and their endeavour to reconcile their sexuality and religiosity. Abdulkader Tayob argues that Islamists' life trajectory is marked by competing ideas, not merely between religious and secular discourses or between good and evil, but rather between different interpretations of religious good.¹² For Tayob, the life trajectory for many Islamists in South Africa is often marked with blaming and admonishing directed at the self and others.¹³ In many cases the "Others" are other Islamic traditions. Although Tayob focuses on Islamists, his argument is also applicable to ordinary Muslims, such as Igshaan, whose lived experiences in Cape Town are marked with conflict, negotiation, reconciliation, appropriation, and reintegration of the Islamic tradition.¹⁴

Igshaan's lived experiences are therefore marked with uncertainty and a sense of alterity, influenced by his family background, religious identification, sexual orientation, and racial experiences in the art world. He clearly states the complexity of his own identity politics with the following words:¹⁵

I always felt out of place in every environment, no matter where. I was always othered by one aspect of my identity against the others. So, being Cape Coloured in the Art environment...for me it was the school at the time being so dominantly White and being gay and being Muslim and that not working so well, and being Muslim, but identifying also with being Christian or with a Christian environment. And so, being an artist and going back to the townships and I no longer fit in there anymore because now I am seen as a crazy person, as an artist. So, everything just kind of was against each other. So, I wanted to know where the hell do I belong? Where do I fit in? Who am I?

Igshaan's embodiment of his Islamic identity and of being a Cape Coloured, is a reoccurring theme in his artwork, illustrating how he openly engages with his experiences of being a gay Muslim, and being a

¹² Abdulkader Tayob, "Religion and Life Trajectories: Islamists Against Self and Other," in *Dynamics of Religion*, eds. Christoph Boehinger and Jorg Rup (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2017), 155-69.

¹³ Tayob, "Religion and Life Trajectories," 166-7.

¹⁴ Tayob, "Religion and Life Trajectories."

¹⁵ Ala R. Alhourani, Personal Conversation with Igshaan Adams, 20 August 2013, Woodstock.

lower-class Cape Coloured man.¹⁶ The following sections focus on Igshaan's life trajectory of being a gay Muslim and his journey of reconciling his sexuality and religion. Thereafter, I will discuss a few of the artworks in which he began to address his religiosity and sexual identity. It shows how the aesthetic experience of Islam offered Igshaan a sense of being Muslim, empowering him to claim an Islamic identity against the grain of this complexity. It shows how he found refuge in Sufism and art to confront, reconcile, transform, and narrate his identity struggles.

Igshaan Adams's Life Trajectory

Born in the Bonteheuwel Coloured township in Cape Town in 1982, Igshaan's Islamic identity was forged from childhood. He was born and raised a Muslim, despite being raised by his Christian grandmother.¹⁷ His father, Amien was a Muslim and his mother, Nafiesa was a Christian, who later converted to Islam. They lived in a room attached to his grandparents' house in Bonteheuwel. Igshaan was five years old when his parents moved to live in Lavender Hill and left him to live with his grandparents, along with his seven-year-old brother and a new-born sister. Although he grew up in a Christian family and neighbourhood, his grandmother raised him as a Muslim. She regularly invited various Imams to their home to teach Igshaan and his siblings the Qur'an, and she persuaded them to fast during the month of Ramadan. At the age of seven, Igshaan attended *Madrassa* (Islamic school) at the mosque in Bonteheuwel, where he started to practise prayer and to learn more of the Qur'an.

At the age of 15, Igshaan personally acknowledged his own homosexual desire. At this stage, he totally abandoned his religiosity because, as he explained, "if I believed in God, then there would always be this weight of guilt, and not believing in God meant that I was free to explore my own

¹⁶ In 1950, the apartheid state passed the Population Registration Act that categorised all South Africans according to race. Initially this division was "White," "Coloured," and "Native" – with a fourth category, called "Asian," later added to identify Indians. To distinguish Muslims from Christians within the then Coloured community, the apartheid regime re-enacted distinct boundary lines for the Cape Malay Muslims (Gabebe Badenroo, *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-apartheid* [Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2014], 15).

¹⁷ Bonteheuwel is a township that was established in the 1960s in response to the Group Areas Act, and is located at the southeast of Cape Town. According to the 2001 national census, its population was 55,707. 95% were Cape Coloured people and 4% were Black (Fuller Center for Housing, "Identifying Our Communities in Need").

sexuality.” While side-lining his religiosity and exploring his sexual identity, he identified himself as an atheist for four years during the period 2005-2009. He explains,¹⁸

At this point, I’m really glad that I went through those four years because it also meant that I killed off any idea of God that I had before. And slowly I think I was reintroduced to a new idea of God and Islam that is very different from what I believed before. I could no longer after four years, deny that I believe in God.

Igshaan was introduced to new ideas about Islam and God by a Muslim woman, Ilhaam Behardien, one of his lecturers at Ruth Prowse School of Art. She treated him with “respect” and love and related to him as a Muslim. Igshaan describes his encounter with Behardien:¹⁹

I think for the first time I started seeing a different side of Islam and I had made the decision that I first wanted to know more. I found something so beautiful in Islam and I wanted to go to the extreme of being the best Muslim I could be. And in my head at the time, it meant that I had to conform.

Based on his understanding (at that time) that there was no way to reconcile being both gay and Muslim, this period in Igshaan’s life was by no means a peaceful time, as he felt the fear of God and of losing his Muslim family and friends. He also felt a need for spirituality and a lingering nostalgia of being a Muslim. In mid-2009, he joined TIC, where he started to learn Islamic traditions that offer the possibility of reconciling being both gay and Muslim. Members of TIC meet regularly on Thursday nights in the form of a *halqah* (study circle) to study and practise Islam.

TIC’s pedagogical approach includes teaching various Islamic interpretations of the Qur’an and hadith that promote a vision of Islam that does not discriminate against homosexuality, but rather considers it as part of Islamic discursive traditions. After a session, the participants conduct a

¹⁸ Alhourani, Personal Conversation with Igshaan Adams, 20 August 2013.

¹⁹ Alhourani, Personal Conversation with Igshaan Adams, 20 August 2013.

collective prayer, followed by a *dhikr*.²⁰ Igshaan attended the weekly TIC study circles and prayer, and joined their *dhikr*, for almost a year from mid-2009 to mid-2010. He also began to deepen his knowledge beyond TIC lessons to gain insight into the debate of the compatibility of homosexuality with Islam. He scanned through diverse Islamic theological traditions that emphasised a heteronormative discourse of Islamic ethics, based on which he understood as the mainstream local Muslim authority's disapproval of homosexuality. In his research on Islamic traditions, he found refuge in Sufism to form an ethical disposition and reconcile being a gay Muslim. His reading of the Sufi literature of Mullah Nasiruddin, Rumi, and Ibn al-Arabi introduced him to an Islamic discourse that accommodated diversity and difference and promoted tolerance, compassion, love, and acceptance of others.

Igshaan's pedagogy of being a Muslim was not limited to reading Islamic texts, but more importantly, he joined *dhikr* sessions regularly. In one of our conversations, he explained the way in which *dhikr* sensorially affected him:²¹

I felt a bit fearless, overwhelmed. I push myself internally, push beyond the boundaries of my fear and anxiety, and really allowed myself to let go. I had strange experiences: my body started vibrating, I felt I need to cough and at some point, I could not feel my hands. I get a very deep smell, it smells like incense but it's not, it is from inside – it was a familiar smell.

Igshaan went on to explain that with time and repetition of the *dhikr*, he began to let go of fears and anxieties. He felt "safe and free...powerful...[with] no doubts, empty, and clear."²² He explained that the *dhikr* "made me a strong Muslim in the sense that I don't get upset when someone tells me how you can be gay and Muslim. *Dhikr* is more important, is more powerful than *salah* [prayer]. *Dhikr* softened my soul and heart and made it easy to deal with the hardness of reality and people's judgements."²³ It is this aesthetic experience of *dhikr*, which

²⁰ *Dhikr* is a Sufi ritual, formed by repeated rhythmic Arabic-Islamic recitations that are performed in remembrance of God. This ritual is seen as a means to purify the self and forms a sensorial sense of pioussness amongst participants.

²¹ Ala R. Alhourani, Personal Conversation with Igshaan Adams, 3 December 2014, Woodstock.

²² Alhourani, Personal Conversation with Igshaan Adams, 3 December 2014.

²³ Alhourani, Personal Conversation with Igshaan Adams, 3 December 2014.

enhanced Igshaan's sense of being a Muslim and enabled him to form and enact an Islamic identity.

Since Igshaan only speaks Afrikaans and English, and not Arabic, it was precisely the aesthetic force of hearing and reciting, which triggered a synesthetic sensory experience that vibrated in his body and evoked his sense of smell. It was these experiences which allowed him to transcend his uncertainty and enabled him to encounter and overcome his feelings of fear and anxiety. His sensory engagement with the *dhikr* is a technology of self-perfection that purified and healed Igshaan in a way that he perceived as integral to the removal of his doubts around him being a gay Muslim and belonging to Islam. The *dhikr* recitation and hearing embodied for Igshaan and for other participants, their shared Islamic identification and belonging to their *dhikr* groups and the Muslim community at large. Being part of the *dhikr* group allowed him to form, mediate, and perform for himself and for others an Islamic identity and belonging. The *dhikr* empowered Igshaan to confidently claim an Islamic identity and to overcome perceptions of alterity within the Muslim community. He confidently expressed that he is now less "concerned with people's approval" and their "judgement."²⁴

Igshaan's sensory experience with *dhikr* is shared among most of my research interlocutors. Throughout my ethnographic fieldwork, I participated in numerous *dhikr*'s at various mosques in Cape Town.²⁵ Sufi spiritual exercises such as *dhikr*, *ratiep*,²⁶ and the *Mawlid Al-Nabi*,²⁷ are vital Islamic practices in Cape Town. Sufi traditions and customs in Cape Town are visible by the presence of various *karamats*²⁸ that mark the landscape of the Cape Peninsula, which have now been listed as heritage sites. Sufism has played a crucial role in the formation of the Muslim community in Cape Town and facilitated the conversion of runaway slaves and free Black people to Islam.²⁹ Historically, Muslims in

²⁴ Alhourani, Personal Conversation with Igshaan Adams, 3 December 2014.

²⁵ Ala R. Alhourani, "Performance of Muslim-ness in Post-apartheid Cape Town: Authenticating Cultural Difference, Belonging and Citizenship" (PhD diss., University of Western Cape, 2017).

²⁶ This is a Sufi ritual that includes recitations, *ghoema* beat, and dancing with swords.

²⁷ This is the annual celebration of the birth of the Prophet Muhammed.

²⁸ These are tombs of Muslim saints.

²⁹ Achmat Davids, *The Mosque of Bo-Kaap* (Athlone: The South African institute of Arabic and Islamic Research, 1980): 37-8. Abdulkader Tayob, *Resurgence in South Africa: The Muslim Youth Movement* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 1995): 40-2.

Cape Town coalesced around Sufi Shaykhs such as the Orang Cuyen, Yusuf Al-khalwati, Tuan Said Aloewie, and Abdullah Kadi Abdus Salaam.³⁰ From the 1660s until the end of the slave trade in the 1790s, these Sufi practices aided the Muslim community in enduring the brutality of slavery and colonialism.³¹ During this time, the Dutch colonial rule prohibited Islamic practices, and Sufi teaching took place in private spaces at the periphery of Cape Town. Since 1804, when the British colonial rule granted Cape Muslims religious freedom to conduct public religious performances, Sufi practices have become institutionalised through the opening of the first Madrasah and mosque in the Bo-Kaap. This entailed the growth of the Muslim community in terms of both its members and its public visibility.³²

Although the Sufi tradition continues to flourish in Cape Town, amidst social, political, and economic changes, the presence and practice of Sufism in Cape Town have been challenged by transnational influences. With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, many Cape Muslims enrolled at Islamic schools in Egypt, Damascus, or in Saudi Arabia where they pursued degrees in Islamic jurisprudence. Most of the imams who were trained in Islamic jurisprudence in the Middle East began to contest Cape Muslims' Sufi practices such as the *ratiep*.³³ This resulted in contested diversifications of Cape Muslim Islamic traditions. The mass public appeal and solid foundation of Sufi traditions in Cape Town, forced its opponents, such as the Salafis to not merely accept Sufism, but claimed that Salafis should also adhere to Sufism.³⁴ This demon-

³⁰ John E. Mason, "A Faith for Ourselves: Slavery, Sufism, and Conversion to Islam at the Cape," *South African Historical Journal* 46, no.1 (2002): 3-24.

³¹ John Mason, "A Faith for Ourselves," 7; Andrew Bank, "Slavery Without Slaves: Robert Shell's Social History of Cape Slave Society," *South African History Journal* 33 (1995): 182-93.

³² Robert C.-H. Shell, "From Rites to Rebellion: Islamic Conversion, Urbanization, and Ethnic Identities at the Cape of Good Hope, 1797 to 1904," *Canadian Journal of History* 28 (1993): 409-57.

³³ Achmat Davids, "My Religion is Superior to the Law: The Survival of Islam at the Cape of Good Hope," *Kronos* 12 (1987): 63.

³⁴ Salafism is a reform movement within Islam that places emphasis on the literal meaning of the Qur'an and Hadith as the original sources of Islam, based on its affirmation of an anti-rational approach to theology, and it considers any context-driven interpretation of Islam as innovation (Yunus Dumbe and Abdulkader Tayob, "Salafis in Cape Town in Search of Purity, Certainty and Social Impact," *Die Welt des Islams* 51 [2011]: 188-90.

strated how the local Cape Islamic discursive traditions had the power to transform the transnational imposition of Islamic discourses.³⁵

The social entanglement and aesthetic experiences of Sufi practices and its associated sensorial effect in the formations of Islamic virtue ethics, underpin the observations and analysis of this essay. What is most significant, is the understanding that Sufism offers a technology of purifying and disciplining the self, in which a spiritual exercise and inner perfection are applicable to everyone regardless of one's gender.³⁶ In her book, Sa'diyya Shaikh forwards "religious anthropology" as a methodological approach to study Islam through Muslim sentiment, lived experience, and engagement of Islamic tradition.³⁷ She challenges and contests an understanding of Islam as an authoritarian normative doctrine. Similarly, Cyrus Zargar champions a virtue ethics-based interpretation of Islam over an authoritarian orthodox interpretation of Islam.³⁸ In his study of virtue ethics in Islamic traditions, including philosophy and Sufism, Zargar argues that Sufi spiritual exercises such as the *dhikr*, are best understood as a field of experiential knowledge that is a pathway to self-purification, inner perfection, and the completion of the intellect.³⁹ He stresses that the Sufi practice as a field of experiential knowledge must not be relegated as merely supportive rather than essential to the completion of the intellect and the refinement of character traits. For Zargar, Sufi spiritual exercises not only rival philosophy, demonstrative knowledge, and discursive learning, but surpasses it.⁴⁰ His study of the aesthetic values in Islamic traditions contributes to an emerging aesthetic approach to the study of religion and virtue ethics.

In the last few decades, scholarly critique to the Enlightenment's over-emphasis on rationality has reclaimed a central role for aesthetics in religious experience. The aesthetic approach to the study of religion connects the rational and aesthetic as both constitutive of sensorial knowledge, cognition, perception, imaginations, relating to the external

³⁵ Tayob, *Islam in South Africa*, 34.

³⁶ Sa'diyya Shaikh, *Sufi Narrative of Intimacy: Ibn Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

³⁷ Shaikh, *Sufi Narrative of Intimacy*, 6-10.

³⁸ Cyrus A. Zargar, *The Polished Mirror: Storytelling and the Pursuit of Virtue in Islamic Philosophy and Sufism* (London: Oneworld Academic, 2017).

³⁹ Zargar, *The Polished Mirror*, 145.

⁴⁰ Zargar, *The Polished Mirror*, 132.

world and forming the self, community, and ethical disposition.⁴¹ Importantly, the recent shift of focus to aesthetics in the study of religion marks a departure from the emphasis on the dominant power of social moral values toward Aristotelian virtue ethics and Foucault's technology of the self.⁴² Accounting for the aesthetic experiences of religion encompasses sensational forms such as body, dance, objects, images, sounds, smells, and its associated interior sensory experiences, feelings, emotions, perceptions, and imaginations. The persuasive force of aesthetic forms indicates its sensational effect and thus its power in forming a personal and collective connection to the divine, generating social networks amongst human beings, and binding and bonding people together around a shared aesthetic style of an imagined community.⁴³ Alexandra Grieser and Jay Johnston offer an aesthetic approach that

⁴¹ Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Birgit Meyer, "Introduction: From Imagined Communities to Aesthetic Formations: Religious Mediation, Sensational Form, and Styles of Binding," in *Aesthetic Formation; Media Religion and Senses*, ed. Birgit Meyer (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 1-31; Birgit Meyer, "Mediation and Immediacy: Sensational Forms, Semiotic Ideologies and the Question of the Medium," *Social Anthropology* 19 no.1 (2011): 23-39; Birgit Meyer, "Mediation and the Genesis of Presence: Towards a Material Approach to Religion," Inaugural Lecture presented at Universiteit Utrecht, 9 October 2012; Webb Keane, "On the Materiality of Religion," *Material Religion* 4, no.2 (2008): 230-1; Brent Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Religion, Aesthetic: Rethinking Religion Through the Art* (New York: Routledge, 2005); David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); David Morgan, "The Material Culture of Lived Religions: Visually and Embodiment," In *Mind and Matter*, ed. Johanna Vakkari (Helsinki: Society of Art History, 2010), 14-31; David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Alexandra K. Grieser and Jay Johnston, "What is an Aesthetics of Religion? From the Senses to Meaning – and Back Again," in *Aesthetics of Religion: A Connective Concept*, ed. Alexandra K. Grieser and Jay Johnston (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2017), 1-50; Sally M. Promey, "Religion, Sensation and Materiality: An introduction," in *Sensational Religion: Sensory Culture in Material Practice*, ed. Sally M. Promey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 1-23. Anne Koch and Katharine Wilkens, "Introduction," In *The Bloomsbury Handbook of the Cultural and Cognitive Aesthetic of Religion*, ed. Anne Koch and Katharine Wilkens (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 1-10.

⁴² Shaikh, *Sufi Narrative of Intimacy*; Zargar, *The Polished Mirror*; James Laidlaw, *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom* (University of Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Didier Fassin, "Introduction: Toward a Critical Moral Anthropology," in *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, ed. Didier Fassin (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Michael Lambek, "Introduction," in *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action*, ed. Michael Lambek (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

⁴³ Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*; Meyer, "Introduction."

studies religion as “connective concept” and does not oppose or exclude a semiotic or rational approach.⁴⁴ Rather, the notion of connectivity emphasises the mutual engagement of aesthetics and semiotics as both constitutive of cognition, perception, and sensorial knowledge. Using the same line of thought, Anne Koch and Katharine Wilkens take as a point of departure, Baumgarten’s notion of “sensorial knowledge” to renounce the mind-body hierarchical dichotomies and re-evaluate aesthetics, sensory, and bodily ways of knowing as “embodied cognition” – that is, not merely resulting from the brain and neurological activities, but which entail the synthesis of multisensory bodily experiences.⁴⁵

These aesthetic experiences of Islam enabled Igshaan to form and claim an Islamic identity, beyond the contestation of the compatibility of homosexuality with Islam, that is inherent in the discursive formations of Islamic traditions. In our last conversation, he expressed, “I know I’m protected by the constitution and I’m definitely prepared to claim my rights as a gay South African. I do feel safe enough to live a queer life out in the open, but ultimately claiming my Islamic identity comes from wanting to live authentically.”⁴⁶ His sense of authenticity is fundamentally based on being a Muslim and belonging to Islam. His self-realisation of being a Muslim and his sense of authenticity is not monological, but fundamentally dialogical with, and strives for a recognition from other Muslims, whom for Igshaan, are the “significant others.”⁴⁷ He was not satisfied with the post-apartheid constitutional recognition of his equal rights. He sought religiosity and a sense of being and belonging to an imagined community of Muslims. Empowered by the aesthetic experience of Sufism, he initiated a dialogue through art to bond with other Muslims. As he indicated in our conversation, his decision to deliberately rely on art, stems from his awareness of the aesthetic force and performative ability of art to transform normative traditions.⁴⁸ Indeed, the transformative power of performance and art serves to transform religious tradition and practices.⁴⁹ Aesthetic formations, such as those employed in Igshaan’s art practices, reflect Alfred Gell’s notion of art as a

⁴⁴ Grieser and Johnston, “What is an Aesthetics of Religion?”

⁴⁵ Koch and Wilkens, “Introduction.”

⁴⁶ Ala R. Alhourani, Personal Conversation with Igshaan Adams, 3 November 2015, Skype.

⁴⁷ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1991), 33-5.

⁴⁸ Alhourani, Personal Conversation with Igshaan Adams, 20 August 2013.

⁴⁹ Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Religion, Aesthetic*.

technology of enchantment through which an individual strives to secure acquiescence in the network of sociality in which they are enmeshed.⁵⁰ Igshaan's aesthetic formation of being a Muslim is vividly illustrated in his art installations, *I Am You* (2011), *In Between* (2012), and in the performance, *Please Remember Me II* (2013), as well as his more recent woven installations. These artworks, which are discussed below, are best understood as non-site-specific fieldwork that embodies an imaginary scene of social drama that is formed through aesthetic compensations.⁵¹

The Art of Being a Gay Muslim

In December 2011, Igshaan exhibited an art installation entitled, *I Am You* in the Stevenson Gallery group exhibition, *What we talk about when we talk about love*, curated by Federica Angelucci. Igshaan's installation consisted of a circular maze structure made up of fabric suspended from the ceiling, hung in such a way that allowed the viewers to see and hear Igshaan, yet gently set him apart. He sat in the centre of the structure, seen behind a transparent fabric, wearing a white garb and a *fez*, softly chanting Qur'anic verses as he would recite it in his participation in the *dhikr* ritual. There, Igshaan's bodily formations and the sound of Qur'anic recitation mediated an aesthetic of Islam and embodied a symbolic enactment of his Islamic identification. This art installation exhibited Igshaan's technology of self-formation and his search for inner perfection. Although most people who knew him at the time, were aware that he is gay, many of them did not know about his spiritual experiences and attachment to Islam. In this artwork, Igshaan performed his religiosity in public to announce that he is a Muslim. He was confident to claim an Islamic identity and to initiate a dialogue through which he sought recognition from the larger Muslim community.

Igshaan's spiritual exercises have not merely enabled him to cultivate and claim an Islamic identity, but equally have inspired him to contest the Muslim discrimination against LGBTIQ Muslims. In 2012, he exhibited an art installation titled, *In Between*, in which he created an Islamic sacred space by covering the floor with a range of Islamic prayer mats, stitched together, facing the direction of Mecca. Having embodied an Islamic

⁵⁰ Alfred Gell, "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology," in *The Art of Anthropology*, ed. Eric Hirsch (London: The Athlone Press, 2006), 137-59.

⁵¹ George E. Marcus, "Contemporary Fieldwork Aesthetics in Art and Anthropology: Experiments in Collaboration and Intervention," *Visual Anthropology* 23 (2010): 273.

sacred space, he juxtaposed it with a snake that cut into and across the floor prayer mats. For him, the snake served as an antagonist to the Islamic sacred environment. This artwork stemmed from a dream that he had two years before, in particular on the twenty-seventh night of Ramadan, known as *Laylat Al-Qadr*.⁵² In the dream, he was accompanied by another child who grew up into a teenager and helped him to encounter and combat the snake fearlessly. In my conversation with Igshaan, he explained that this dream had triggered his fear and anxiety of being rejected by his Muslim friends and family.⁵³ He perceived this dream as a revelation to counterbalance his anxiety and to confront those Muslims who might reject it, to accept homosexuality as compatible with Islam. For him, the snake that appears in his dream symbolises those Muslims who are antagonistic toward LGBTIQ Muslims. Based on his understanding of Sufism, he was content and confident that Islamic traditions accommodate homosexuality. His fear was not driven by a doubt of him being a good Muslim, but rather of a lack of intimacy with, and ties to his family and Muslim friends.

On 8 November 2013, he performed *Please Remember Me II* as part of the exhibition, *Three Abdullahs: A Genealogy of Resistance*.⁵⁴ At the opening of the exhibition, guests gathered in the foyer before entering the CAS Gallery. Here, we were welcomed with a piece of vanishing art made up of *koe'sisters*, pies, and samosas, which, as items of Cape Malay cuisine, served as a symbolic enactment of Muslimness, strategically performed by Igshaan as part of his artistic performance, *Please Remember Me II*. He included the *koe'sisters* to contest the Muslims who perceived homosexuality as incompatible with Islamic values, whom he depicted metaphorically as having a “*koe'sister* mentality,” that is stereotypically known among Capetonians to be fixed and unchanging.

⁵² *Laylat Al-Qadr* is the Night of Decree or the Night of Power on which, according to Muslim tradition, God's first revelation of the Qur'an was revealed to Prophet Muhammad.

⁵³ Alhourani, Personal Conversation with Igshaan Adams, 20 August 2013.

⁵⁴ The exhibition was curated by Justin Davy as a final project for his Honours degree of curatorship at the University of Cape Town, in which he aimed to bring to the fore various aesthetics and politics of Muslim resistance to colonialism and apartheid, through recalling Imam Abdullah Qadi Abdu Salam, respectively known as Tuan Guru, Imam Abdullah Haron, and musician Abdullah Ibrahim. Davy also aimed to demonstrate continuity and a shift of Muslim resistance in the post-apartheid era, through an artistic performance of three young Capetonian artists, Weaam Williams, Igshaan Adams, and Haroon Gunn-Salie, each of whom spotted a light on contested sociocultural issues concerning the Muslim community in Cape Town.

As we proceeded to enter the venue, we stood a few metres away from Igshaan's naked body, covered with a small light-blue towel as he lay silently on a table covered with a white cloth. Behind the table, Amien Adams, Igshaan's father, stood to perform an Islamic ritual of cleansing Igshaan's body in preparation for burial. Amien wore a tall grey dress, a Palestinian scarf (*Kufiya*), and a *fez*. He opened the performance by reciting Al-Fatiha Qur'anic verses, facing us with both hands raised to appeal to God to bless Igshaan body.⁵⁵ He started to wash Igshaan body with a little water, while still quietly reciting Qur'anic verses, moving around the table to reach and turn Igshaan's body, washing and turning it back again. After he washed and dried each part of Igshaan's body, Amien Adams then gently rubbed his son's face, shoulders, arms, hands, and feet with an *ittar*,⁵⁶ then he wrapped Igshaan's body within the white cloth on the table, under which appears a green cloth ornamented by golden Qur'anic verses. Igshaan's wrapped body was then left on the table, immobile and still, positioned as though it was a corpse.

The performance drew attention to Igshaan's conflicting sense of being gay and Muslim. A critical engagement with his performance reveals an attempt to strategically evoke religious sentiments by enacting a symbolic embodiment of the artist's death, whilst intimately celebrating his own "rebirth" as a gay Muslim. In our conversation, he explained that his performed death implies a "death of inner fear and conflict of how and who to be and a celebration of a reconciliation of being a gay Muslim."⁵⁷ Igshaan has aspired to this sentiment of death and of being reborn through Sufi practices and learning, which for him embodied a refinement of his inner-self.⁵⁸

A few days before Igshaan performed *Please Remember Me II* at the *Three Abdullahs* exhibition, I visited him at Greatmore Studios in Woodstock.⁵⁹ We walked to a nearby coffee shop to sit and talk. After ordering

⁵⁵ *Al-Fatiha* means the opening; it is the first verse of the Qur'an.

⁵⁶ *Halal* is a perfume without any additives.

⁵⁷ Alhourani, Personal Conversation with Igshaan Adams, 20 August 2013.

⁵⁸ Cf. Ilhaam Behardien, "Dying and Become Through the Art of Igshaan Adams," in *Igshaan Adams: When Dust Settles*, ed. Ilhaam Behardien (Cape Town: Blank Projects, 2018), 123-33.

⁵⁹ Greatmore Studios was established in 1998. In 2007, it was registered as a non-profit organisation. It provides a studio for local and international artists to work freely and develop their skills. Cf. Greatmore Studios, "Let's Work Together," Greatmore Studios Home Page, n.d.

coffee, he explained his aspiration toward healing the rift that was created between him and his family, his friends, and the Muslim community, as a result of his sexuality. Knowing that a performance of his death would implicate his father in a sensory experience, he instigated a reconnection with his father by purposely simulating the rituals and feelings emerging from the loss of his son. Igshaan's aesthetic politics of simulating death and its corresponding religious rituals indeed served to generate the missing link between him and his father. After the performance of the *Three Abdullahs*, Igshaan asked me if I could provide a lift for his father and mother to the Bonteheuwel Township. We drove for about 40 minutes, during which Igshaan's parents discussed and reflected on their feelings around their son's performative death. His mother enjoyed the performance and clearly articulated her pride around the "strong personality" of her son. His father pointed out that it was his first time performing the Islamic cleansing and wrapping ritual and expressed that, "I fear losing my son...he is a good son, he works hard...I try to understand him and accept him as he is."⁶⁰ Therefore, whilst the performance aided in Igshaan overcoming his fear of being rejected and excluded, it also facilitated a feeling of fear in his father around the loss of his son. The significant shift in dynamics between father and son was revealed to me when I met Igshaan and his father at the 2014 Grahamstown National Art Festival, before they again performed *Please Remember Me II* (renamed *Bismillah*) as part of The Blind Spot art project (figure 1).⁶¹ There, his father had not only accepted the fact that Igshaan is gay but was also open to meeting his boyfriend.

⁶⁰ Ala R. Alhourani, Personal Conversation with Igshaan Adams' father and mother, 8 November 2013, Woodstock.

⁶¹ The Blind Spot was a collaborative art project curated by art historian, Ruth Simbao. It included four site-specific performances from well-known South African artists, including *Barongwa* by Mohau Modisakeng, *Bismillah* by Igshaan Adams, *Everse* by Simone Heymans, Ivy Kulundu, Chiro Carolyn Nott, and Joseph Coetzee, and *What difference does it make who is speaking?* by Mbali Khoza.



Figure 1: "Please Remember Me II," performance stills at *Three Abdullahs: A Genealogy of Resistance*, 8 November 2013 (personal archive).



Figure 2: *Surah Al-Fatiha* 2016 (Courtesy of the artist and blank projects, Cape Town).

In our last conversation, Igshaan stated that, “I’m done with identity,” in which he explained that he feels no doubt that his search for identity had reached a satisfactory conclusion of inner-peace, self-knowledge, acceptance, and recognition.⁶² He still finds pleasure in joining the *dhikr*, the prayer Friday at the mosque, and in fasting during the month of Ramadan, yet he admits that he is not yet a fully committed Muslim. He continues exploring Sufi literature which inspires most of his current artworks. His aesthetic formation of Islam has been carried into his more recent collections of woven installations, most of which are given titles from Qur’anic verses, such as *Surah al’Ikhlas II* (2015), *Surah al-Fatiha* 2016 (figure 2), *Ayatul Kursi 1* (2016), *Ayatul Kursi II* (2016), *Takbir* (2016), *Al Wadud II* (2016), *Surah al-Kafiroon III* (2016), and *Unseen II* (2018).⁶³ In these woven installations of Qur’anic verses, Igshaan does not appear to be reconciling any uncertainty, or appealing for recognition, but he rather expresses his confidence in being “Muslim enough” to exhibit such sacred Islamic texts. He performs his Islamic identity through carefully chosen aesthetic forms and rituals: the woven Qur’anic verses, the enactment of *dhikr*, the naming of works, such as *Bismillah* (in the name of God); the sound of his father reciting the Al-Fatiha Qur’anic verses, adorning himself with a Palestinian scarf (*Kufiyah*) and a *fez*, the green cloth ornamented by Qur’anic verses, written in gold, and the Islamic perfume. All these aesthetic forms embody a symbolic enactment of Islam to which Igshaan affirms his belonging and identification with the Muslim community.

The post-apartheid’s politics of equal citizenship have granted the right to LGBTIQ Muslims to freely express their sexual identity. Although LGBTIQ Muslims need a secular state to be a Muslim,⁶⁴ yet the freedom and rights that a secular constitution provides were not entirely fulfilling for them. They did not want to compromise their religious identity and their right to openly enact an Islamic identity. LGBTIQ Muslims in Cape Town are concerned about their faith, their relation to God and belonging to an imagined Muslim community. Aesthetic experiences of Islam offered Igshaan a sensorial religious experience of being a Muslim; brought him closer to God; formed his ethical disposition; and affirmed

⁶² Ala R. Alhourani, Personal Conversation with Igshaan Adams, 3 November 2015, Woodstock.

⁶³ Igshaan Adams’ artworks can be viewed on <https://blankprojects.com/Igshaan-Adams>.

⁶⁴ Cf. Abdullah A. An-Nai’im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari’a* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

his Islam identity and belonging to the Muslim community. Aesthetic experiences of Islam empowered him to negate the judgement of other Muslims' heteronormative interpretation of the Islamic tradition. Igshaan's artwork pushes the limits of and transforms the heteronormative religious restraints on Muslim identity politics. His life trajectory and artwork are not to be understood merely as reflections on his personal narrative, his artwork rather embodies the social dramas lived by LGBTIQ Muslims in Cape Town and elsewhere. His life trajectory and artwork offer an insight into an ongoing individual and collective engagement with, and appropriation of Islamic traditions. His artworks have received remarkable local and global attention in the artwork through various solo and collective exhibitions all over the world, as a cutting edge of the intersectionality of class, race, religion, and gender. The artworks of Igshaan and other Muslim artists in Cape Town, seen as aesthetic formations of Islam, serve as a transformative force to Muslim identity politics and religiosity. Simultaneously these aesthetic formations of Islam inspire a sense of authenticity and coherence within and across diverse, contradictory Islamic traditions.⁶⁵ Igshaan's artwork clarifies the potential role of art to generate a space of self-formation – in this instance, a space that allows LGBTIQ Muslims to re-imagine a social reality and relationship beyond the authoritarian normative interpretations of Islam and the constraints of a prescribed social identity. Here we see the potential of art, not only to represent Islam, but rather to enter the debate and to contribute to the formation and transformation of Islamic discursive traditions. The formations of Islamic discursive traditions are dynamic in ways that make it possible for LGBTIQ Muslims to become a constitutive part of Islamic discourses in Cape Town. While the compatibility of homosexuality with Islam is an open debate, aesthetic experiences of Sufism offer LGBTIQ Muslims a technology of self-perfection that enables them to form and enact an Islamic identity beyond the doubt of heteronormative interpretations of Islamic discursive traditions.

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⁶⁵ Ala R. Alhourani, "Aesthetics of Muslim-ness: Art and the formation of Muslim Identity Politics," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 48 (2019).

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