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## **Some Linguistic Implications of Transferring Rituals Online: the case of *bay`ah* or allegiance pledging in Sufism**

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### **Abstract**

Within the growing body of research devoted to exploring digital religion (Campbell, 2013), there has been relatively less attention paid to the linguistic implications of religion moving online. In a study focusing on the online ritual of *bay`ah*, or allegiance pledging, in Sufism, this article presents findings that identify instances of language form and practice being modified and transformed when ritual moves online. Two aspects of linguistic change are considered. The first explores how an offline, predominantly orally-based ritual transfers to a predominantly visual and written mode of communication online. The second considers how ritual performativity is maintained, modified or reduced as a consequence of this transfer. Using a combination of multimodal discourse analysis and speech act theory, an analysis of the findings suggests a variety of approaches are used by designers of online ritual portals to address these linguistic challenges.

**Keywords:** ritual, online, language, linguistic, Sufism, transfer, orality, literacy

### **Introduction**

What happens to ritual linguistically when it moves from an offline context to an online one? The phenomenon of religious ritual of all kinds - and representing most major faith traditions - appearing in an online format is now a well-documented area in both the fields of religious experience (Helland, 2013; Krueger, 2004) and digital social and cultural practices (Ess et al., 2012). Much of this research has focused on the technical adaptation and transformation of ritual forms and practices (Casey, 2006; Radde-Antweiler, 2006; Vekemans, 2014; Sbardeletto, 2014); the perceived experience of worshippers and participants from the point of view of authority (Campbell, 2007; Cheong et al., 2011); authenticity (MacWilliams, 2006; Kluver, 2007); and notions of synchronicity (Jacobs, 2007). Less has been published so far on how the language of ritual might be affected when ritual moves online. Although 'scripturalisation' has been considered a handmaiden to many faiths' engagement with modernity (Olsson, 1998; van Bruinessen, 2009), the advent of the internet has added a novel dimension to the relationship between speaking and writing. Are online contexts which shape hitherto oral ritual practices into written ones a mere quantitative development in this relationship or are they something more qualitative in terms of a transformation in communicative

ritual practices? In Kreinath's terms (2004, p.267), are online ritual practices 'modifications' or 'transformations', a change *in* ritual or a change *of* ritual (ibid. p.268)? Given that much traditional, offline ritual has a predominant oral mode (even when texts are involved, they are often mediated orally and/or experienced aurally) and that, by contrast, much of our interaction with online context is via visual modes such as texts and images (multimedia content often employs text to support its communicative power, e.g. subtitles, captions, translation, transliteration, transcription, etc.), it should not surprise us when we identify instances where the language mode in a particular online ritual has been partially modified or significantly transformed. Miczek in her work on Second Life Christian services (2008) observes that the 'most striking changing process' in the transformation of communication modes has been the move from 'spoken language' to 'written chat' (p.167).

In this article, I present findings from a multimodal discourse analysis study that identifies instances of online language form and usage being modified and transformed to the extent that they impact on the language of the ritual itself, on the one hand, and that potentially impact on the experience of the ritual, on the other.

This study concerns a lesser reported ritual practice, from within the tradition of Sufi Islam, namely, the allegiance pledging or *bay`ah*<sup>1</sup> to a spiritual guide or teacher (variously known as *murshid*, *shaykh*, *pir*) within a *tariqah*, sometimes called an 'order' or 'path' (Trimingham, 1971).

## **Background**

### ***Bay`ah* or allegiance pledging in Sufism**

The ritual practice of pledging of allegiance by an aspirant to a Sufi guide has traditionally taken place in the physical presence, and usually with some form of physical contact, with the guide in question. This has therefore been an explicitly physical and material experience regardless of the spiritual benefits such a ritual intends to provide. Allegiance pledged in such a way binds the aspirant to his or her teacher, sometimes for a lifetime, and obliges them to follow their advice and practice in matters of the faith. This induction is claimed to be modelled on an original *bay`ah* given to the Prophet Muhammed by his Companions in 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia (Trimingham, 1971). Moreover, such rituals, importantly, also serve to construct or reinforce group identity particularly in contexts of plurality both locally and transnationally (Ozdalga et al., 1998). Ritual, as practice, maintains this identity by using meaning to create or reinforce structure in a "spiritual-social" world (Frishkopf, 2019). Ritual performance is the primary means of upholding social structure in the Sufi *tariqah* and

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<sup>1</sup> This article treats of *bay`ah* in the world of Islamic learning and spiritual development. There is another context for political *bay`ah* which is a less researched area but has had a resurgence of interest in recent years with the emergence of Islamic quasi-caliphates seeking legitimacy through both offline and online pledges of allegiance. This article is not about that form of *bay`ah*.

given that the latter must strive to render itself socially relevant and attractive in the face of alternative visions of the faith, the use of the internet to facilitate allegiance pledging is but one way of engaging with changing social contexts.

In most of the *turuq*<sup>2</sup>, the guide will induct an aspirant into the path via a ritual usually involving some sort of physical contact (grasping the hand, holding a walking stick or long scarf<sup>3</sup>) and the audible recitation by the guide of key texts. These may include the 10<sup>th</sup> verse of the 48<sup>th</sup> *sūra* ('chapter') of the Qur'an pertaining to the pledge of allegiance given to the Prophet Muhammed by his Companions on the occasion of the *Hudaybiyyah* treaty in CE 628 (Trimingham, 1971). Other recitations may relate to the particular path and the individual teacher. There may also be some choral repetition on the part of the aspirant and others in attendance. In the Naqshbandi-Haqqani path (Rosowsky, 2018), for example, this can be a very public affair involving not only the intended aspirant and the teacher but all others who might be in attendance. This can involve large numbers of people who may also be taking the opportunity of one individual's pledging allegiance to 'renew' their own pledges at the same time. In such a case, physical contact is made with everyone else present by individuals placing their hands on one another's shoulders to create a pledging human chain or circle emanating out from the teacher and the aspirant at the centre. Most, if not all, of this is performed orally and physically by the teacher – indeed the aspirant may say nothing or very little and, on occasion, understand little (if their knowledge of Arabic or the language of the ritual is non-existent or only rudimentary). The register of oral language deployed is usually formal, formulaic and archaic shaped by text and tradition. The materiality of the occasion is embodied by the physical presence of the teacher, the aspirant and others present. All this accords with the fact that in traditional ritual participants are usually co-present and occupying the same physical space (Thomas, 2004, p.116). It takes place at a particular time and place, usually in the home or teaching centre of the teacher, with aspirants sometimes having travelled long distances to arrive at the hand of their future guide. The expected 'multivocalic' (Helland, 2013, p.28) outcome of the pledging of allegiance is of a renewal, a commitment and publicly declared loyalty and affiliation to the teacher and the organisation (the *tariqah*) represented.

A number of Sufi paths have a global reach – and although the transnational character of the *turuq* predates modern notions of globalisation (Trimingham, 1971), the latter has, to a great extent,

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<sup>2</sup> Plural of *tariqah*. Some of the better known Sufi paths are the Naqshbandi, the Qadiri and the Shadhili paths, all of which have a transnational reach and, importantly for this study, have strong online presences (Malik & Hinnells, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> This is often how female aspirants pledge allegiance due to the constraints on male-female physical contact in Islam generally.

intensified this process. A specific outcome of the advent of transnational online Sufi communities is the phenomenon of aspirants pledging allegiance, *bay`ah*, to their teachers online.

### ***Online ritual, language and performativity***

In many ritual practices, the performative utterance is key to the authenticity and eventual success of the ritual in question. One of the challenges of moving offline ritual onto online spaces is how to retain, modify or lose the performative power of these utterances and acts. The examples explored in this article will draw on aspects of speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) to determine to what extent illocutionary force can apply in online ritual contexts.

As one of the felicity conditions<sup>4</sup> for a valid performative utterance are the credentials of those involved, tension can arise between those who claim online ritual is authentic and meaningful and those who compare it unfavourably with offline or traditional ritual practices. Disputes over the validity or authenticity of online practice can take place among ‘outsider’ researchers or institutional guardians of individual faiths (Pandharipande, 2018). Helland (2013) suggests that what makes meaning for ‘insider’ participants is what counts in terms of whether a ritual practice is valid or not regardless of official positions. In terms of *bay`ah*, can pledging allegiance take place without the physical presence of the guide?

Langer et al. (2006) suggest the impact of ritual transfer results either in modification or transformation (cf. Kreinath, 2004, p.267) arising from the interrelationship of the contextual change and the ‘internal dimensions’ (p.2) of the ritual. For example, alterations to space (geographical or virtual) and to media are contextual factors that can lead to modification or transformation of internal dimensions such as script, performance and performativity. These, and others, we will see below, are modifications arising from online *bay`ah*.

Transformation, invention and exclusion are potential consequences of the transfer of rituals. For example, in online spaces, we can consider the shift from orality to literacy as transformation, image clicking and form filling as invention and the removal of the need for physical presence and physical contact as the exclusion of internal dimensions. Therefore, it becomes a different ritual in terms of ‘what it is’. How much of this can be acceptable creates different opinions and positions among participants and non-participants.

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<sup>4</sup> In speech theory, felicity conditions are those contextual requirements that, if present, determine if a performative utterance has illocutionary force or not. In a marriage ceremony, for example, the performative utterance ‘I pronounce you man and wife’ is only valid if the person speaking has a license to perform marriage ceremonies and the participants recognise this authority.

Pandharipande's (2018) work on Hindu online rituals of *Satsang* and *Puja* suggests that when new 'signifiers' appear, a process has to take place for the connection between the new signifier and the signified to become established. In online *Satsang*, this has taken place reasonably quickly with some (but not all) teachers treating online space as suitably sacred for the purposes of communing with the Divine (*darshan*). The online environment is sanctified through the authority of the teacher with all online signifiers having a direct link to the sacred signified. On the other hand, *Puja* has a more complex set of relationships between signifiers and signified. The trappings of traditional *Puja* can involve oral or silent recitation in a variety of languages, the use of olfactory signifiers such as incense, the sound of bells, images or 3D embodiments of a deity and physical gesture and movement. These signifiers have traditionally been authenticated by custom which has granted them their sanctified relationship with the sacred signified. Pandharipande claims that online *Puja* has had difficulty in being accepted as an authentic Hindu practice because the relationship between the various signifiers and the sacred signified is more complex than that for *Satsang*.

Once a ritual is transposed online and its signifiers (its medium) are altered, it is also possible that the meaning of the signified is changed to a lesser or greater extent. This has been identified by Smith (1987) in his work on ritual which emphasises the situatedness of ritual practice which implies ritual may have different meaning depending on time, place and context. The move of ritual online therefore not only needs to be tracked for the transformation in signifiers (what it is), which appears fairly obvious, but also for its implications for the meaning of ritual (what it does). However, if it is more complex to determine change in meaning, it is self-evident that a change in the experience of ritual must occur. In online ritual practice, much that is passively 'unarticulated' in traditional ritual must become 'articulated' for the online ritual to proceed (Platvoet, 2004, p.251). Sufi aspirants pledging allegiance in a traditional offline context are often passive listeners. In online *bay`ah* they must articulate (even if silently) the relevant verbal signifiers for themselves.

Rosowsky (2018) presents the online ritual of *bay`ah* and reviews briefly the impact on language mode when a previously oral ritual goes online. Within a broader context of discussing the way language is selected and presented online in religious sites more generally, he shows how the 'wild west' (Levy, 2017) characteristic of much online communication (print technology, it must be remembered, had the opposite effect of standardising language use), manifests itself through varieties of register, lexical nuances, unstable conventions for transliteration/transcription of 'foreign' languages, varying qualities of translation, all evinced by the need to transfer orality to an online format. This 'multifaceted and complex' hybridity of mode, religious orientation, language and presentation interplay to develop dynamic and evolving new communicative genres, in this case, a genre which allows for online ritual. To what extent this hybridity, and its constituent parts,

impacts on religious concepts and practice is difficult to judge. There is a much clearer impact on the latter as the move to online spaces inevitably leads to instances of asynchronous and individualised practice. The present article, using a multimodal framework for analysing online context (Pauwels, 2012), and the example of allegiance pledging (*bay`ah*) in Sufi Islam, will address two specific questions: (1) how is the transfer of a ritual act from a predominantly oral mode to a written one handled by website designers and (2) how is the performativity of such a ritual act modified and transformed by the move online?

## Methodology

Adopting a partially participant observer approach to gathering data<sup>5</sup>, a multimodal discourse analysis follows of web pages from three websites offering online *bay`ah* portals. These were examined over a period of two years and are analysed using a combination of multimodal discourse analysis and aspects of speech act theory.

The three datasets are transcribed extracts and screenshot images from (a) seven web pages devoted to online *bay`ah* on the *Sultan Bahoo* website associated with the Sarwari Qadari *tariqah* based in Pakistan (<https://www.sultan-bahoo.com/declaration-of-bayat/>), (b) two web pages devoted to online *bay`ah* on *The Kasnazan Way* website associated with the Kasnazani-Qadiri *tariqah* based in Iraq (<http://kasnazanway.com/general/request-to-take-the-pledge/>) and (c) the online *bay`ah* web page of *The Muhammadan Way* website associated with the Naqshbandi-Nazimiya *tariqah* in Canada ([http://www.nurmuhammad.com/pbuh/?page\\_id=115](http://www.nurmuhammad.com/pbuh/?page_id=115)).

Henceforth, the three *bay`ah* portals will be referred to as *SB*, *TKW* and *TMW*.

These websites were accessed frequently during the years 2016-2018. Only the latest versions of the webpages accessed in March-April 2018 are utilised for the analysis. On two of the sites I personally participated in the online *bay`ah* ritual.

In the interest of clarity, the written data extracts (1, 2 & 3) below are transcripts of the words appearing on the screen. Unless it is necessary to discuss non-verbal signifiers this will suffice for our purposes. Where necessary, such as in the images that follow, direct screen shots are captured from the relevant websites.

All three websites are public-facing and, for the most part, examples of religion online, i.e. 'one to the many' in terms of orientation (Helland, 2013). The only interactive element to them is the facility

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<sup>5</sup> As a Muslim researcher sympathetic to Sufism I was personally interested in pledging allegiance for what are known as *barakah* ('blessings') purposes. There are two main forms of *bay`ah* in Sufism, one for spiritual guidance and one simply to partake in the blessings associated with an authorised teacher on the path (*tariqah*).

to pledge allegiance. No analysis has taken place of individuals taking part in this ritual though this is a potential future study. The owners of all three websites were contacted in November 2018 to seek permission to use the texts and screenshots used in the analysis. All three replied granting permission.

The analytical approach in this article adopts some of the principles of Pauwels' (2012, p.252) multimodal framework for analysing websites as cultural expressions. Rejecting hitherto culturally pre-determined social and cultural categories as represented by research drawing on Hofstede (2001), Pauwels' multimodal approach to cultural expression allows a researcher to consider semiotic resources of which language is only one element and accounts for how they might interplay with one another in order to 'decode/disclose the cultural information that resides both in the form and content and, crucially, the content of the form, of web sites' (p.248) at what Pauwels calls the 'level of the depicted' and the 'level of the depiction' (p.254). It is 'particularly concerned with texts which contain the interaction and integration of two or more semiotic resources – or 'modes' of communication – in order to achieve the communicative functions of the text' (O'Halloran & Smith, 2012, p.2). Pauwels' framework presents six phases for the analysis of any public-facing website. Whilst all phases are necessary for a complete and comprehensive analysis, for the purposes of this article only elements of Phase 3 will be employed directly<sup>6</sup>. This approach is encouraged by Pauwels who states that 'each research project using this framework will benefit from the development of a more customized model for selecting and codifying the most significant parameters for a specific research question or interest' (p.260).

Phase 3, 'In-depth analysis of content and stylistic features', provides, firstly, a list of 'types and signifiers' that help identify potential information that resides in separate modes (intra-modal analysis) and then, secondly, more general pointers of how to look at the complex forms of interplay between different modes (cross-modal analysis). In the analysis below, *Verbal/written signifiers*, *Typographic signifiers*, *Visual representational types and signifiers* and *Layout and design signifiers*, are considered as well as instances of cross-modal interplay. The analysis will employ these categories to reveal some of the explicit and implicit ways performative functionality is retained, modified or transformed, intentionally or unintentionally, in the multimodal features expressed and materialised on these online bay`ah portals.

A premise of the analysis is that in order to enact ritual previously only taking place offline in a material setting using predominantly oral modes of communication, online ritual needs to somehow

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<sup>6</sup> The other phases are: (1) Preservation of First Impressions & Reactions; (2) Inventory of Salient Features & Topics; (4) Embedded Point(s) of View or Voice; (5) Analysis of Information Organisation; (6) Contextual Analysis, provenance and Inference.

retain its performative function by using other modes of communication. Any perusal of online portals for ritual (this is actually Phase 1 of Pauwels' framework– 'Preservation of first impressions and reactions'), immediately conveys the multimodal approach taken by the website designers in their attempts to do this.

Two aspects of linguistic modification or transformation will be shared and analysed below. These match the two questions posed above. In the first section, all three online *bay`ah* portals demonstrate varying attempts to transpose a predominantly oral practice to a literacy-based one. A commentary will accompany this analysis highlighting the linguistic modifications or transformations taking place during this process and their related issues. In a second section, evidence for the modification or transformation of the performativity of the ritual will be presented and analysed.

## Findings 1

### *When oral ritual becomes literacy ritual*

The first challenge to designers of portals allowing for online *bay`ah* is transposing the script of a predominantly oral ritual to a predominantly visual medium located on and framed usually by a device's electronic screen. These new configurations of the ritual online require attention to 'the processes of performance and enactment' (Murray, 1989, p.195). Internal dimensions (Langer et al., 2006) of the transferred ritual such as script, performance, performativity and aesthetics (presentation) can be either retained, modified, transformed or lost.

The rites of the traditional offline *bay`ah* are collective, oral/aural, involve physical contact or at least presence, and take place in real time in a real physical location. How many of these aspects of the orality-oriented 'sensorium' (Ong, 1967) survive the move to an online setting either intact, modified, transformed or at all? Firstly, and obviously, the ritual becomes a private and individualised experience. What is said, recited, performed offline in a public and collective manner (there are always at least two participants – the teacher and the aspirant – but often many more) is transposed into a mode where the aspirant performs the ritual alone. This generally requires the words of the ritual to be on the screen with the requirement to read silently or out loud or merely learn them. The aspirant therefore needs to be literate and able to read, or at least decode, what is written - something not necessary for traditional *bay`ah*. They may also have to do this in an unfamiliar language and often in more than one language. Online ritual here requires greater autonomy and active involvement with the script of the ritual. In offline *bay`ah*, aspirants take part passively by listening to the teacher's recitation and supplications and active participation may be limited to a word or gesture of assent.

Portal designers thus have to decide which language(s) to adopt. Some adopt a bilingual approach (*TKW* and *TMW*) and others a multilingual one (*SB*). One linguistic consequence of such mediascapes (Appadurai, 1996) is the emergence of English as a *de facto lingua franca* for these portals. In both the *TKW* and *TMW* portals there is a webpage presenting the words that have to be learnt and recited as part of the online *bay`ah* (see **Data Extracts 1 & 2**). These are in Classical Arabic which is presented on screen in Classical Arabic script with accompanying Roman transliteration and English translation.

**Data Extract 1** (transcription from the *TMW* website)

*Arabic script*

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُبَايِعُونَكَ إِنَّمَا يُبَايِعُونَ اللَّهَ يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ ۖ فَمَنْ نَكَثَ فَإِنَّمَا يَنْكُثُ عَلَىٰ نَفْسِهِ ۖ وَمَنْ أَوْفَىٰ بِمَا عَاهَدَ عَلَيْهُ اللَّهُ  
فَسَيُؤْتِيهِ أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا

*Transliteration/transcription*

Innal ladheena yubayi'oonaka innama yubayi'on Allaha yadullahi fawqa aydeehim, faman  
nakatha fa innama yankuthu 'ala nafsihi, wa man awfa bima 'ahada 'alayhu Allaha fasayu teehi  
ajran 'azheema

*English translation*

Indeed, those who give Baya (pledge allegiance) to you, [O Muhammad] – they are actually  
giving Baya (pledge allegiance) to Allah. The hand of Allah is over their hands. So he who  
breaks his pledge/word only breaks it to the detriment/Harm of himself. And he whoever  
fulfills their (Bayat) that which he has promised Allah – He will grant him a great reward.

**Data Extract 2** (transcription from the *TKW* website)

*Classical Arabic*

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُبَايِعُونَكَ إِنَّمَا يُبَايِعُونَ اللَّهَ يَدُ اللَّهِ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ ۖ فَمَنْ نَكَثَ فَإِنَّمَا يَنْكُثُ عَلَىٰ نَفْسِهِ ۖ وَمَنْ أَوْفَىٰ بِمَا عَاهَدَ عَلَيْهُ اللَّهُ  
فَسَيُؤْتِيهِ أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا

*Transliteration*

'inna lladhīna yubāyi'ūnaka 'innamā yubāyi'ūna llāha yadu llāhi fawqa 'aydīhim fa-man nakatha  
fa-'innamā yankuthu 'alā nafsihī wa-man 'awfā bi-mā 'āhada 'alayhu llāha fa-sa-yu'tīhi 'ajran  
'azīma

*English translation*

Those who pledge their allegiance to you [O, Muḥammad!] are in fact pledging their allegiance  
to Allah; the Hand of Allah is above their hands. So whosoever breaks his pledge he breaks it  
only to his soul's harm, and whosoever keeps his covenant with Allah He will bestow on him a  
great reward." (48.10)

On the *SB* portal, on the other hand, the words of the script to be recited are in English, Urdu and  
Classical Arabic (see Figures 1 & 2). Instructions are in English and Urdu. Unlike *TKW* and *TMW*, there  
is no transliteration or transcription to assist someone who does not read Classical Arabic or Urdu.

As reading some Arabic formulas is a key element of the ritual, this might preclude some from participation.

*Figure 1 - Second page (of six) of the SB bay`ah portal*

*(screenshot reproduced with kind permission from <https://www.sultan-bahoo.com/declaration-of-bayat/>)*

*Figure 2 – Third page (of six) of the SB bay`ah portal*

*(screenshot reproduced with kind permission from <https://www.sultan-bahoo.com/declaration-of-bayat/>)*

In Pauwels' framework, such omissions are covered by the analytical category 'In-depth "inverted" analysis: significantly missing or incomplete content, arguments and formal choices'. Thus, one immediate implication of the move from an oral medium to a written one is the potential to exclude potential aspirants. Although elsewhere (on the first page of the *SB bay`ah* portal) there is a statement that the portal is for 'Muslims living outside Pakistan', and thus acknowledges the transnational character of this Sufi tariqah, the lack of transliteration or translation, suggests a presumption of Arabic and Urdu literacy on the part of any online aspirant.

The Arabic words chosen for the online ritual also vary between the three portals.

Whilst *TKW* emphasises the scriptural origin of the *bay`ah* ritual by presenting verse 10 of *sūra* 48 from the Qur'an (this is a feature of many other online *bay`ah* portals), this verse is missing from the script for *SB* which instead emphasises formulaic supplications of forgiveness and repentance in Urdu, their English translations and certain well-known creedal formulas in Arabic (the *kalimahs*).

In the *TMW* portal, English and Classical Arabic are used with Arabic script and transcription. Unlike in *TKW*, the Arabic is transcribed informally - and contains omissions - rather than transliterated using a conventional system of transliteration. For example, it avoids diacritic marks on vowels, and includes English conventional punctuation such as commas. Although this presents itself as a possibly easier approach for non-Arabic readers, the informal system adopted does not necessarily preserve faithfully the spoken equivalent.

For example, the transcription of the Arabic in the *TMW* portal with double letters [oo] and [ee] for long vowels rather than the diacritically marked Roman letters such as [ā] and [ī] in *TKW* reveals an oral orientation to the written script whereas the transliterated vowels in *TKW* indicate a decision

(and knowledge) on the part of the page designer to remain faithful to the original Arabic written script. Having said that, there are significant complex issues connected to the transliteration and transcription of Arabic in general which are beyond the remit of this article (Holes, 2004).

For the purposes of this analysis however, it is relevant that uncertainties in this area can often be related to either oral or literacy orientations on the part of the web page designer(s) and represent different attempts to make the oral script transparent on the screen. Decisions about which verse and which language to present on screen (the verbal signifiers), and how to present them (the typographical signifiers), also involve taking a position on the validity and appropriateness of presenting Arabic script via Roman transcription. On the one hand, the sanctified nature of the Arabic script through its association with the sacred text of the Qur'an suggests its *sine qua non* status on the screen. On the other hand, the motivation to make the text accessible to non-Arabic readers competes with the sanctity of the sacred script. This cross-modal interplay involving language and script reinforces the transnational nature of the website. In Pauwels' terms, each online portal is taking a different approach to rendering culturally specific meanings in the *bay`ah* ritual that reside in the visual properties of the written texts. *TKW*'s precise and conventional transliteration suggests both a familiarity with the written language and expectation that this would not be problematic for potential aspirants. *TMW*'s oral-oriented transcription (rather than a transliteration) appears to suggest potential aspirants may not know Classical Arabic script and would benefit from a Roman script which approximates the oral recitation of the verses. Whether or not this is always conscious decision-making is hard to evaluate. The 'inverted analysis' encouraged in Pauwels' framework allows us to reflect that the omissions or inaccuracies appearing on these online *bay`ah* portals may be the result of deliberate choices influenced by contrasting responses to the challenge of transferring ritual from an oral mode to a written one. Alternatively, they may reflect the expertise or knowledge of the different website designers.

For example, if we move back from Pauwels's 'level of depiction' (the how) to the 'level of the depicted' (the what), the rather awkward expression in the *TMW* English translation perhaps suggests a 'homemade' translation whilst the more coherent *TKW* translation has more in common with published print translations. For example, the expression in the *TMW* translation 'And he whoever fulfills their ([sic] Bayat) that which he has promised Allah' handles the relative pronouns 'whoever' and 'that' awkwardly, misspells 'fulfills', struggles with the appropriate agreement between 'he' and 'their' and elsewhere uses capital letters inconsistently. It has been observed (Rosowsky, 2018) that on other online *bay`ah* portals, English translation which originates in parts of the world with a tradition of vernacular Englishes (such as South Asia – part of Kachru's [1992] outer circle) can reflect the local linguistic tradition whereas translation from Kachru's Inner Circle English-

speaking world might expect more idiomatic expression (or at least something approximating to Standard UK or US English for example). In this example, the opposite is true, with the North American *TMW* translation comparing a little unfavourably with the Iraqi-based *TKW* in terms of syntax, grammar and the lexicon. This again relates to the lack of stability many transnational ritual online sites using English as a *lingua franca* display and is also possibly a consequence of diaspora-based websites. The analytical category ‘*significantly missing or incomplete content*’ (Pauwels, p. 256) is important here in identifying this lack of stability.

Clearly one cannot assume that website creators are fully aware or knowledgeable of all aspects and effects of combining different communication elements ... In that respect the overall meaning of the resulting website may transcend the conscious intentions of the (different) creator(s). Websites may well contain very hybrid and even contradictory cultural expressions. (Pauwels, 2012, p.256).

This also relates to the ‘wild west’ (Kiberd, 2017) character of the internet and how there has yet to merge a standard or standards of linguistic consensus. Androutsopoulos (2011, p.10), in his review of language change and the internet, reminds us of how ‘[f]or the first time after the standardisation of national languages, at least in Europe, a massive amount of publicly available written language escapes editorial control’. ‘De-standardisation’ (Auer (1997) in Androutsopoulos, 2011, p.11) and ‘whateverism’ (Baron, 2008, p.166) are other terms used to try and denote the impact of online communication on language varieties. The *TMW* online *bay`ah* portal displays a writing style that to an extent matches these terms. The uncertainty and inconsistency involved in the move from offline orality to online written performance in online ritual would tend to exacerbate these issues.

In Langer et al.’s (2006) definition, ritual script is more than the mere words or language used in a ritual act. It also includes other rules such as actions, gesture and symbols. In offline *bay`ah*, physical contact with the hand is essential either directly between aspirant and teacher or via a proxy such as an extended walking stick or long scarf. In the online ritual, this is naturally excluded though there are attempts to convey this contact in a multimodal way. In an earlier version of a Naqshbandi-Haqqani *bay`ah* portal reported in Rosowsky (2018), there was an instruction to mouse click on a collage of images of real time, offline, *bay`ah* rituals. This mouse click (both a visual representational signifier and a layout and design signifier in Pauwels’ terms) moves the aspirant on to the next stage of the online ritual. On the SB portal, this is more modestly managed by asking the aspirant to mouse click ‘Next’ at the bottom of the screen. Similarly, Pandharipande (2018) describes the online functionality of mouse clicking bells and ‘lighting’ virtual candles as part of online *Puja*.

*Figure 3 – Text and image from TMW bay`ah portal*

*(screenshot reproduced with kind permission from [http://www.nurmuhammad.com/pbuh/?page\\_id=115](http://www.nurmuhammad.com/pbuh/?page_id=115))*

In *TMW*, the aspirant is asked to raise his or her right hand when reciting the words of the ritual (Figure 3). One acknowledged but perhaps understandable limitation of Pauwel's framework is that he limits the modes in his multimodal approach to the visual and the auditory, assuming the technology, though multifaceted within and across these two modes, cannot incorporate other modes such as the tactile, the olfactory and the gustatory (Pauwels, p.250). The incorporation of the mouse click mentioned above and the instruction to the aspirant to raise a hand to accompany the recitation in *TMW* suggests the possibility of a rudimentary tactile mode being at least potentially present in the online ritual. This gesture may suggest to the aspirant the importance of 'giving their hand' to their teacher. In the *TKW* and *SB* portals there is no attempt to transfer the hand contact element of the script. As Langer et al. (2006) suggest, during the transfer of ritual from one context into another not only can there be modification or transformation of internal dimensions, but there is also the potential for their loss.

In the next section, we analyse how designers of *bay`ah* portals manage the transfer of the performative act when moving the ritual online.

## **Findings 2**

### ***How is performativity retained in an online environment?***

Traditionally, the teacher does most of the speaking during *bay`ah* with oral and memorised recitation of sacred texts and certain supplications. The aspirant may take part in any choral repetitions and might briefly affirm their *bay`ah* at the end of the ritual. However, it would not be unusual for the aspirant to say nothing at all. The performativity is validated in general through certain felicity conditions<sup>7</sup>. These would include the teacher being authorised and to have established a reputation for spiritual guidance in order for him<sup>8</sup> to accept pledges of allegiance. The

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<sup>7</sup> See note 5.

<sup>8</sup> Almost all teachers on Sufi paths are men. However, there are female Shaykhas and aspirants. To my knowledge, none of these publicly accept pledges of allegiance off- or online.

words uttered by the teacher would carry an illocutionary force through his authority and the sacred nature of the conventional verses uttered and supplications made.

The three online *bay`ah* portals handle this internal dimension of the transfer of ritual (Langer et al., 2006) in different ways.

In *TKW*, the aspirant is first of all asked to learn or become familiar with the script of the *bay`ah* ritual. Here is an extract of about 10% of the script appearing on the screen.

### **Data Extract 3** (transcriptions from the *TKW* website)

#### *Classical Arabic*

أَسْتَغْفِرُ اللَّهَ الْعَظِيمَ مِنْ كُلِّ ذَنْبٍ. تُبْتُ وَبَايَعْتُ وَعَاهَدْتُ يَدَا بِيَدٍ عَلَى يَدِ اسْتَاذِ الطَّرِيقَةِ الْحَاضِرِ حَضْرَةَ السَّيِّدِ الشَّيْخِ الْغَوْثِ مُحَمَّدِ الْمَحْمَدِ الْكَسْنَزَانِ، وَقَبِلْتَهُ اسْتَاذِي وَمُرْشِدِي فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ، وَاللَّهُ عَلَى مَا أَقُولُ شَهِيدٌ

#### *Transliteration*

Astaghfiru Allah al-‘Aẓīm min kulli dhanb. Tubtu wa bāya‘tu yadan biyad ‘alā yadi Ustādh aṭ-Ṭarīqa al-hādir as-Sayyid ash-Shaikh al-Ghawth Muḥammad al-Muḥammad al-Kasnazān. Wa qabiltuhu ustāthī wa murshidī fī ad-dunyā wal-ākhirā wa Allah ‘alā mā aqulu shahīd

#### *English translation*

I ask Allah the Great for forgiveness for every sin. I repent and pledge allegiance, hand in hand by the hand of the present Master of Ṭarīqa Sayyid Shaikh Ghawth Muḥammad al-Muḥammad al-Kasnazān and I accept him as my Master and guide in this life and the hereafter and Allah is the witness on what I have just said.

The performative utterances ‘[I] pledge’ and ‘I accept’, if uttered by the aspirant (and this is not always necessary) in a traditional *bay`ah* setting, would be carried out in front of at least the teacher but often in front of other witnesses too (see Figure 4).

*Figure 4 Image from the TKW of traditional bay`ah taking place, with the authorised guide on the right*

*(screenshot reproduced with kind permission from <http://kasnazanway.com/tariqa/the-baya-pledge-tariqa-kasnazaniyya/>)*

Online, the performative utterances cannot obviously be given their illocutionary force by the physical presence of the teacher. On the other hand, these are official and authorised websites of the teachers involved. The portals for accepting pledges of allegiance are there with, we must assume, their approval. Similarly to the way online *Satsang* can be validated by the person of the Hindu teacher authorising the ritual (Pandharipande, 2018), these *bay`ah* portals achieve some of their illocutionary power through the authorisation of the online portal by the teacher. For example, in another online *bay`ah* portal from the large collection of websites linked to the Naqshbandi-Haqqani *tariqah*, this time based in Sri Lanka, the following statement is displayed (Figure 5)<sup>9</sup>.

*Figure 5 Example of authorisation of an online bay`ah portal*

*(screenshot reproduced with kind permission from <http://www.sheiknazim2.com/Bayyath.html>)*

Unlike offline *bay`ah*, where the teacher's physical presence provides one of the felicity conditions for the performative utterances each and every time the ritual occurs, online, the teacher's authorisation is a once and forever act which renders the individual's utterances, even when uttered alone and privately, their illocutionary force.

However, other elements of the ritual script contribute to the felicity conditions for the performativity of the ritual act. For example, the texts on screen are sanctified by their association and/or provenance (usually from the Qur'an or from the tradition of the *tariqah*) and their place in the ritual provides the illocutionary force necessary for the sacred purpose of the *bay`ah*. Authority here is thus communicated in a cross-modal manner. The verbal signifiers are important to denote not only the content of the ritual (the verses and formulas analysed in the previous section), the 'level of depicted' but also the sacred language of the ritual, Classical Arabic, the 'level of depiction'. Even when the aspirant is limited to only being able to recite the transliteration or the transcription, the Classical Arabic script is present on the screen to typographically denote authority.

Furthermore, in all three portals, visual representational signifiers (Pauwels 2012, p.254) are used to represent the teacher in question. An image is placed centrally on the screen accompanied, in one case, (*TMW*) by the instruction to focus on the image of the teacher when carrying out the online

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<sup>9</sup> The word '*bayyath*' is the same as *bay`ah*. The different transliteration illustrates the point made in the previous section about linguistic inconsistency across similar transnational websites using English as a lingua franca.

ritual – “Look at the picture given above (Moulana<sup>10</sup> was specific about this particular photograph)”. This instruction attempts to represent the felicity condition of the teacher’s presence through the electronic image (Figure 6) and adds performative authority through the words ‘Moulana was specific about this particular photograph’.

*Figure 6 Image of teacher on TMW portal*

*(screenshot reproduced with kind permission from <http://www.sheiknazim2.com/Bayyath.html>)*

Although the present analysis cannot do justice to Pauwels’ Phase 4, ‘Embedded point(s) of view or “voice” and implied audience(s) and purposes’ (2012, pp.256-7), it is apparent here that the verbal and typographical signifiers represented by the on-screen scripts and, in part, the visual representational signifiers such as the screen images of the guide, are linked to the embedded ‘voice’ or point of view’ that the website designers seek to project, in this instance consciously. The direct instruction from the guide about the photograph to the website designer conveys an authority from the former to the latter which only adds to the felicity condition of authority. Without the felicity conditions provided by this ‘voice’, the performativity of the ritual act of *bay`ah* is potentially weakened, possibly doubted or even annulled.

On some *bay`ah* portals, perhaps as a recognition that an individual performing online *bay`ah*, despite all the well-intentioned multimodality, does not have sufficient illocutionary force, further performativity is provided by the availability of an online form to be filled in by the aspirant once the ritual has taken place. This can provide contact details for merely receiving instructions on teaching and practices as in *SB*. In *TKW*, it is implied that the online *bay`ah* is provisional until a phone call takes place sealing the performative force of the ritual (see Figure 7).

*Figure 7 Online form on TKW website*

*(screenshot reproduced with kind permission from <http://kasnazanway.com/general/request-to-take-the-pledge/>)*

In *TMW*, the online ritual is authorised provisionally “Until you can take the Hand of [sic] a Authorized Representative of Naqshbandia Tariqa”. Of the three portals, *SB*, with its prosaic

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<sup>10</sup> Lit. ‘our master’, a common term for teachers in the Islamic world.

'Congratulations' greeting at the end of its six stage (screen) process (Figure 8), unambiguously signals the validity of the online act and the illocutionary force of its elements.

*Figure 8 - The final screen of the online bay`ah portal on the SB website*

*(screenshot reproduced with kind permission from <https://www.sultan-bahoo.com/declaration-of-bayat-6/>)*

In these different ways, the three online bay`ah portals demonstrate varying approaches to the validity of the ritual act. The online contact mechanism provided on *SB* (Figure 8) is not to confirm the *bay`ah* but to provide instructions for the student's future practice. *TMW* designs its portal so that the ritual has a provisional illocutionary force which can be superseded by a later physical *bay`ah* with the teacher or one of his representatives. However, there is no limitation set to this provisionality which, in theory, could last for ever if circumstances precluded such a meeting. In *TKW*, the script for the *bay`ah* ritual is presented to learn or at least become familiar with and the actual ritual is carried out over the phone (or Skype or Viber or WhatsApp) once an online contact form (Figure 7) has been completed and submitted. *TKW*, therefore, still requires some sort of real time communication via social media to cement the illocutionary force of the performative utterances.

Although beyond the scope of this article it is worth briefly mentioning that Pauwel's Phase 5, 'Analysis of dynamic information organization and spatial priming strategies', allows for the analysis of a website's navigational properties and, as in this example, what he calls the 'outer-directed features' which exercise a degree of control over the site's users. Here, the aspirants in *TKW* can perform the ritual of allegiance pledging online only to a degree. The final 'seal' of their successful pledge only comes after the completion of an online form which is sent on to the website's manager. There is, for the aspirant at least, then a moment of uncertainty which lasts until a subsequent communication (via email, phone call or text message) of the success of the pledge.

## Conclusion

Using elements of a multimodal approach (Pauwels, 2012) to analysing websites, this article has focused on two questions relating to the linguistic implications of ritual moving online. In respect of the first, 'How is the transfer of a ritual act from a predominantly oral mode to a written one handled by website designers?', the analysis has shown how designers of online ritual portals respond differently when tasked with the challenge of transposing a predominantly oral ritual into an online setting. Although this almost inevitably leads to what was predominantly an oral and aural experience becoming a predominantly written and visual one, how this is achieved contrasts from one online portal to another. An analysis of the multimodal resources selected for this purpose, and the manner in which they interplay, can reveal both explicit and implicit, both conscious and unconscious, orientations and dispositions on the part of the designers. In terms of Langer et al.'s (2006) matrix for understanding contextual change and its impact on the modification, transformation and loss of the internal dimensions of ritual, the move from orality to literacy entails all three of these processes to varying extents. The analysis shows how verbal signifiers do not function in isolation from other signifiers in a multimodal text. Although a traditionally oral performance of the ritual of *bay`ah* would also deploy a range of communicative modes, the predominant mode would be the spoken word. In an online context, the verbal signifiers have to work with other signifiers to retain the meaning of the ritual act. The use of verbal signifiers such as the original sacred language and corresponding translations combine with typographic signifiers such as scripts and transcriptions to make the language element of the ritual more transparent. These, in turn, combine with signifiers such as visual representations of authority and process to make the ritual suffused with the meaning necessary for an authentic ritual act. The aspirant has to navigate his or her way between original text, transliteration or transcription and translation, none of which are concerns in traditional offline *bay`ah*. The need to 'articulate' (Platvoet, 2004) in a context which has traditionally been one of 'inarticulation', at least for the aspirant, is a significant transformation in the experience of ritual. Although it is more difficult to predict or identify transformation in ritual meaning once ritual moves online, it is clear that the experience of ritual is transformed significantly.

The second aspect addresses the second question, 'How is the performativity of such a ritual act modified and transformed by the move online?' In terms of speech act theory, the validity of pledging allegiance is determined by the necessary felicity conditions. The transfer of ritual from one context to another impacts significantly on these felicity conditions. The felicity conditions prevailing offline generally need to be transformed in some way in order for the performative acts and

utterances to achieve the illocutionary force necessary for the ritual to be valid. Offline, the physical presence of the authorised teacher and his performance of accepting allegiance from an aspirant via certain recitations and supplications guarantees the illocutionary force necessary to make the *bay`ah* valid. Online, these felicity conditions are modified and transformed. The physical presence of the teacher is transformed into a one-time authorisation of the online portal given to those running it by the teacher in question. In addition, in all three cases, the actual utterances to be recited by the aspirant, which differ from one another, receive their illocutionary force through their sanctified origin and their association with the *tariqah*. Once uttered, the verbal and other signifiers which purport to induct the aspirant into the *tariqah*, are provided with their performative weight not by the utterer (who in this case is the aspirant and not, as in offline *bay`ah*, the guide), but by the embedded 'voice' (Pauwels, 2012, p. 256) of the guide who has authorised the website for this purpose.

The use of Pauwels' framework for multimodal analysis of websites, therefore, can account for how performativity in an offline context can be re-created online through a cross-modal interplay of different website features. The combination of textual signifiers (in all their different guises) with visual representational signifiers can help transfer the illocutionary force of their offline counterpart by the transformation of felicity conditions. This obviously modifies significantly what ritual *is* in terms of experience. Further study is necessary to determine whether the nature of the ritual is altered to the extent where what the ritual *does* is transformed.

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Figure 1

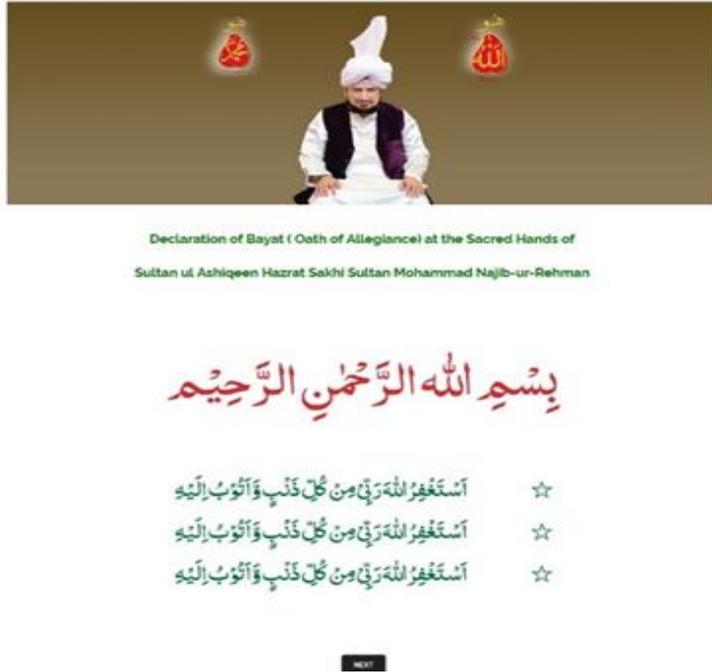


Figure 2



1. O Allah I repent of infidelity (Kufr) O Allah I repent of polytheism (Shirk) O Allah I repent of theft. O Allah I repent of lie. O Allah I repent of slander. O Allah I repent of all prohibited and unlawful acts. O Allah I repent of adultery. O Allah I repent of backbiting and complaining. O Allah I repent of all the sins
2. O Allah I repent of infidelity (Kufr) O Allah I repent of polytheism (Shirk) O Allah I repent of theft. O Allah I repent of lie. O Allah I repent of slander. O Allah I repent of all prohibited and unlawful acts. O Allah I repent of adultery. O Allah I repent of backbiting and complaining. O Allah I repent of all the sins
3. O Allah I repent of infidelity (Kufr) O Allah I repent of polytheism (Shirk) O Allah I repent of theft. O Allah I repent of lie. O Allah I repent of slander. O Allah I repent of all prohibited and unlawful acts. O Allah I repent of adultery. O Allah I repent of backbiting and complaining. O Allah I repent of all the sins

- ☆ یا اللہ تو ہے کفر سے، یا اللہ تو ہے شرک سے، یا اللہ تو ہے چوری سے، یا اللہ تو ہے جھوٹ سے، یا اللہ تو ہے بہتان سے، یا اللہ تو ہے حرام سے، یا اللہ تو ہے زنا سے، یا اللہ تو ہے عیبت گلہ گوئی سے، یا اللہ تو ہے ہر گناہ سے۔
- ☆ یا اللہ تو ہے کفر سے، یا اللہ تو ہے شرک سے، یا اللہ تو ہے چوری سے، یا اللہ تو ہے جھوٹ سے، یا اللہ تو ہے بہتان سے، یا اللہ تو ہے حرام سے، یا اللہ تو ہے زنا سے، یا اللہ تو ہے عیبت گلہ گوئی سے، یا اللہ تو ہے ہر گناہ سے۔
- ☆ یا اللہ تو ہے کفر سے، یا اللہ تو ہے شرک سے، یا اللہ تو ہے چوری سے، یا اللہ تو ہے جھوٹ سے، یا اللہ تو ہے بہتان سے، یا اللہ تو ہے حرام سے، یا اللہ تو ہے زنا سے، یا اللہ تو ہے عیبت گلہ گوئی سے، یا اللہ تو ہے ہر گناہ سے۔

Figure 3

### Steps to Giving Baya (Pledge Allegiance) Online

1. Put Your Right Hand Up
2. Recite the following Verse (48:10) of holy Quran with the intention to Give Baya/Pledge Allegiance:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُبَايِعُونَكَ إِنَّمَا يُبَايِعُونَ اللَّهَ تَعَالَى اللَّهُ فَوْقَ أَيْدِيهِمْ  
فَمَنْ كَفَرَ فَإِنَّمَا يُكَلِّفُ عَلَى نَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ أَوْفَى بِمَا عَاهَدَ  
عَلَيْهِ اللَّهُ فَسُؤْدَاتِهِ جُزْءًا عَظِيمًا ﴿١٠﴾



Figure 4



Figure 5

**BAYYATH THROUGH  
THE WEBSITE**

We the administrators of [www.sheiknazim.com](http://www.sheiknazim.com) visited Moulana Sheikh Nazim in Lefke, Cyprus in February - March 2006. We told Moulana Sheikh Nazim that many people were asking us as to how they could take bayyath from Moulana Sheikh Nazim as they did not have Naqshabandi Centers in their country or that they were residing very far away from the Naqshabandi Centers and as such it was very difficult for them to take bayyath and enter the Most Distinguished Naqshabandi Tariqat. We asked Moulana Sheikh Nazim for an alternative method through which these people could take Bayyath. Moulana Sheikh Nazim gave very good tidings by giving a method of taking bayyath through this website, [www.sheiknazim.com](http://www.sheiknazim.com) itself. This method is as given below.

Figure 6

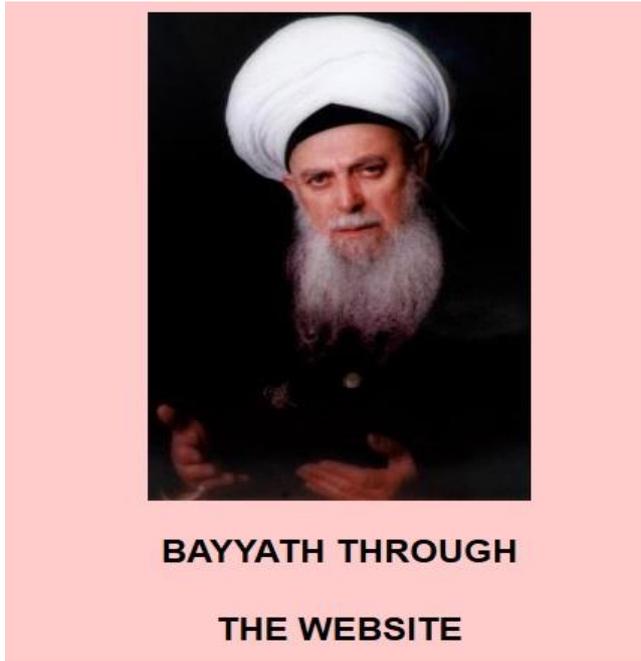


Figure 7

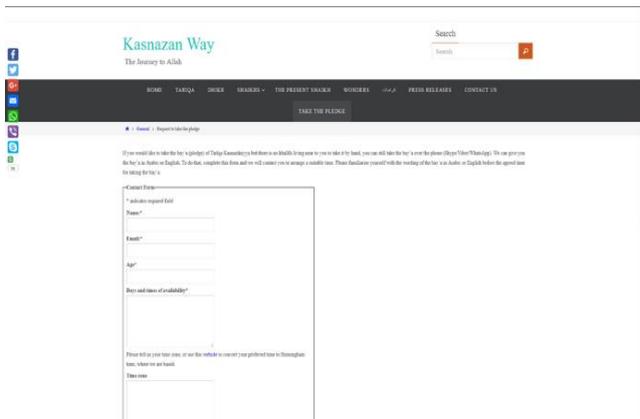


Figure 8



### Congratulations

**Now your Bayat is complete!**

Recite one tasbeeh of Kalma Tayyaba **كَلِمَةُ إِلهِ مُحَمَّدٍ رَسُولِ اللهِ** and one tasbeeh of Darood-e-Pak after every prayer. For spiritual sanctity and elevation, we will send you the Zikr (invocation) and Tasawur (Contemplation) of Ism-e-Allah Zaat (The Personal Name of Allah) by post at your given address. When you receive Ism-e-Allah Zaat, please contact at the numbers given below, we will guide you about the way to perform the Zikr and Tasawur  
 Naseem Abbas Sarwari Qadri # +92 321 450 7000  
 Mohammad Moghies Afzal Sarwari Qadri # +92 300 473 7507

