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Letter writing as the mingling of souls: remote knowledge exchange among eighteenth-century Naqshbandis

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Abstract

Historians of Islamic intellectual practices in pre-colonial South Asia have long argued that authoritative knowledge was located in persons rather than books, and that religious texts were thus typically transmitted in the context of face-to-face meetings between teacher and student. While it has been noted that some early modern Sufi networks engaged in the remote transmission of authoritative knowledge by means of letters, with reduced emphasis on face-to-face meetings, the causes for this development are still debated.

Looking at the correspondence, theoretical treatises, and authorisations (*ijāzas*) produced in the circle of the celebrated eighteenth-century Naqshbandi reformer Shah Wali Allah of Delhi, this article argues that the willingness to engage in the transmission of remote knowledge was not simply a product of the changing material conditions of late-Mughal India, but rather was underwritten by emergent spiritual and psychological ideas about the nature of personhood. Because a person was not merely a *material* entity bounded by a corporeal (living) body, bodily proximity between two individuals was less valuable than their spiritual congruence. This congruence could be strengthened during periods of face-to-face companionship but could also be generated and maintained through letters alone. Indeed, these scholars sometimes assert the *superiority* of the letter over physical companionship because it allowed for a coming together of two spirits without the intrusion of the gross material body. Working within this intellectual framework, scholars in this network regularly exchanged books of all genres as well as *ijāzas* remotely (often over vast distances).

Keywords: Islam; Mughal India; early modernity; Shah Wali Allah; Naqshbandi

*Sir, more than kisses, letters mingle Soules;
For, thus friends absent speak.
John Donne, To Sir Henry Wotton*

وكم من فراق كان قريباً حقيقة
وكم من فراق كان للوصل جالباً

Shah Wali Allah to Muhammad Ashiq Phulati

Shortly after Ramazān in 1165 (August 1752), the great Islamic reformer of eighteenth-century Delhi, Shah Wali Allah (d. 1762), wrote to his closest disciple and brother-in-law Muhammad Ashiq Phulati (d. 1773) to inform him that he had nearly finished a draft of his Persian commentary on *Hizb al-bahr*, an apotropaic text written by the Maghribī Sufi, Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili (d. 1258).¹ The commentary had been written during the intense 40-day period of seclusion, fasting, and prayer that Wali Allah undertook every year. He wrote the text following a waking vision in which the face of Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili, pale and sparsely bearded, had appeared to him like a flash of lightning. In the vision, Wali Allah had been ‘placed in the spiritual station’ of al-Shadhili and was given access to knowledge previously disclosed only to him.² In the letter, Wali Allah mentions, almost in passing, that once the draft was finished, he would have another disciple produce a fair copy (*mubayyaz sāzand*) and that this would then be sent to Muhammad Ashiq (*firistāda khwāhad shud*) in Phulat, a village some 60 miles north-east of the imperial capital.³

Given that historians of pre-modern Islamic learning in South Asia have long argued for the centrality of the oral transmission of texts, what is notable here is not Wali Allah’s claim to rarefied spiritual states but that he considered it completely unexceptional to send a newly written book to his disciple without the need for a face-to-face meeting.⁴ This was not a one-off: the practice of sending books to trusted disciples by means of privately hired messengers (*qāsids*) and other intermediaries, often over vast distances, is mentioned repeatedly in Wali Allah’s letters and those of his circle but, perhaps because of the routine way it is discussed in primary sources, it has received little scholarly attention.⁵ These remotely transmitted books included works of *tasawwuf* and metaphysics, as well as logic, philosophy, Quranic commentaries, and poetry.⁶

¹ This late date for the commentary, entitled *Hawāmi*, is important as we reconstruct the trajectory of Wali Allah’s intellectual development. J. M. S. Baljon, assuming Wali Allah’s interest in ‘magic’ faded as he matured, dated it to 1735. J. M. S. Baljon, *Religion and Thought of Shāh Wali Allāh Dihlawī, 1703–1762*. Studies in the History of Religions 48 (Leiden, 1986), p. 6, fn. 20 and p. 150. For more on Muhammad Ashiq’s biography, see M. Hermansen, ‘Shāh Muḥammad ‘Āshiq Phulatī: the closest disciple of Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi’, *Oriente Moderno* 92.2 (2012), pp. 419–438.

² For the context of this visionary encounter, see Muhammad Ashiq Pulati, *al-Qawl al-jalī fī zikr āsār al-walī* (Delhi, 1989), p. 204. It was, he writes, ‘the kind of commentary that has not come to anyone else’s mind because the divine self-disclosure that is the orientation of the spiritual aspiration of the Shaykh [al-Shadhili] and the relation that he has [with the unseen world]...were clarified [only to me]’. Shah Wali Allah to Muhammad Ashiq, Letter 127, *Makātīb-i Hazrat Shāh Walī Allāh Muhaddis Dihlawī*, (ed.) Mufti Nasim Ahmad Faridi Amrohawi, 2 vols (Rampur, 2004), vol. 2, p. 390.

³ Wali Allah to Muhammad Ashiq, Letter 127, *Makātīb*, vol. 2, p. 390. Phulat was Wali Allah’s natal village and home to his mother’s extended family.

⁴ For an influential articulation of the centrality of oral knowledge transmission in pre-colonial South Asia, see F. Robinson ‘Crisis of authority: crisis of Islam?’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 19.3 (July 2009), pp. 339–354, p. 343.

⁵ These *qāsids* were not always easily available. Shah Wali Allah would not infrequently blame the scarcity of messengers for delays in sending responses to letters. In one letter from the 1750s, he says that he did not respond to one letter from Muhammad Ashiq because there was ‘no messenger available’ (*nā yāft-i qāsid*). Letter 128, *Makātīb*, vol. 2, p. 391. The governmental *dāk* postal system of the Mughal state was limited to government correspondence and intelligence reports. Most letters sent by private individuals were transmitted by privately hired, professional foot couriers. I. Habib, ‘Postal communications in Mughal India’, *Proceedings of Indian History Congress* 46 (1985), pp. 236–252, p. 243. For a useful overview of the scholarship on long-distance information networks in this period, see G. D. S. Sood, ‘The informational fabric of eighteenth-century India and the Middle East: couriers, intermediaries and postal communication’, *Modern Asian Studies* 43.5 (September 2009), pp. 1085–1116.

⁶ It is not insignificant that a major textual genre of this time was the short treatise or *risāla*, a word that can also mean ‘epistle’. These texts, discussing issues of metaphysics, law, poetry, and hadith, often began as written responses to questions that were sent by distant students and then later circulated as independent works. For an overview of the *risāla*, see A. Gully, *The Culture of Letter-Writing in Pre-Modern Islamic Society* (Edinburgh, 2008),

Collections of letters of this time also reveal that multi-volume hadith works, the genre most commonly understood as reliant on various modes of oral/aural transmission, were sometimes sent by mail.⁷ It should not surprise us, then, that one of the earliest extant manuscripts of Wali Allah's masterpiece on the 'secrets of hadith', *Hujjat Allāh al-bāligha*, was originally commissioned by his son Abd al-Aziz (d. 1822) and sent to the scion of an illustrious scholarly family in Lucknow in 1799 along with other books of various genres.⁸ Although this article primarily focuses on Shah Wali Allah's inner circle, references to the remote exchanges of books of various genres are found in a range of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Naqshbandi epistolographic sources.⁹ The evidence that we have for these exchanges, primarily in the form of brief remarks in letters, is necessarily fragmentary and we cannot enumerate with any precision the scale of such practices. Nevertheless, in an environment where private, silent reading was a significant feature of intellectual life, the routine nature of these remote exchanges suggests the limitations of models of textual transmission in Islamate South Asia that exclusively focus on questions of oral transmission in the context of extended periods of face-to-face companionship between teacher and student.¹⁰

This willingness to transmit books remotely should be seen in a broader context in which we see an intensification of long-distance communication among South Asian Sufis affiliated with various Sufi ways (*tariqas*).¹¹ Questioning the notion that the adoption of the lithographic press in the early decades of the nineteenth century represented a moment of profound intellectual rupture, Nile Green has argued that the eighteenth century witnessed a broad transition from an Islamic epistemology rooted in embodied

pp. 3–5. We see this blurring of generic boundaries in the circulation of Wali Allah's *Maktūb-i Madanī*, his famous work on *wahdat al-wujūd*, and *wahdat al-shuhūd*, as an independent treatise. So too was Wali Allah's letter to his eldest son Shaykh Muhammad instructing him on grammatical issues circulated as an independent educational treatise. Wali Allah to Farzand-i Akbar Shaykh Muhammad, Letter 151, *Makātīb*, vol 1, pt. 2, pp. 225–226. For details, see Nur al-Hasan Rashid Kandhlawi, 'Shāh Walī Allāh ke ajād-i girāmī (taḥqīqī ma'lūmāt)', *Fikr-o-nazar* 25.1 (1987), pp. 93–146.

⁷ Garrett Davidson has shown that the ideal of purely oral transmission of hadith was, from a very early period, functionally impossible. Garrett Davidson, *Carrying on the Tradition: A Social and Intellectual History of Hadith Transmission across a Thousand Years*. Islamic History and Civilization. Studies and Texts, vol. 160 (Leiden and Boston, 2020).

⁸ The remotely transmitted books, including Abd al-Aziz's own Quranic commentary, *Fath al-'Aziz*, were sent to Amir Haydar al-Wasiti (d. 1802), grandson of the famous scholar Ghulam Ali Azad Bilgrami (d. 1786), with an apology that none had been collated with their originals. Shah 'Abd al-Aziz to Amir Haydar al-Wasiti, Letter 78, *Rasā'il al-Shaykh al-Shah Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī wa awlādihī wa mu'āsirihi*, (ed.) Shah Abdus Salam (Lucknow, 2007), pp. 108–111.

⁹ For example, in a series of letters from the late 1760s, Mirza Jan-i Janan, then resident in Delhi, wrote to Sana Allah Panipati to complain about the delay in sending books, which had been caused by a shortage of paper. The books he requested included a copy of Sana Allah's recently completed refutation of the Shia *Sayf-i maslūl*. Letters 44 and 83, *Makātīb-i Mirzā Mazhar Jān-i Jānān* (Bombay, 1966), pp. 60–61, 123–124. Similarly, in the seventeenth century, the Javanese scholar Abd al-Rauf Sinkili (d. 1693), wanting to know about which hadith supported the practice of *zīkr*, sent a letter to his old teacher Ibrahim al-Kurani (d. 1690) in Madina requesting a copy of his *Kashf al-muntazar*, which he duly received. Azymardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu, 2004), p. 75.

¹⁰ It should be noted that these methods of remote transmission occurred alongside time-honoured modes of study circles and face-to-face textual transmission by which a student would read a text in front of a teacher to ensure the accuracy of their own copy of a text. There is evidence of this practice in the colophons of some early manuscripts of *Hujjat Allāh al-bāligha*. See Nur al-Hasan Rashid Kandhlawi, 'Hujjat Allāh al-bāligha (makhtūtāt, tabā'āt, takhrij, hawāshī, tarājim)', *Fikr-o-nazar* 39.2 (2001), pp. 57–90, p. 59.

¹¹ N. Green, 'The uses of books in a late Mughal takiyya: Persianate knowledge between person and paper', *Modern Asian Studies* 44.2 (March 2010), pp. 241–265.

practices towards one of private textual study.¹² He argues that the increased bureaucratisation and centralisation of the state in the late-Mughal period was a major catalyst for 'the transformation of bodily into bookish knowledge, of corporeal and oral knowledge into the written record'.¹³

This article accepts the idea that embodied intellectual practices began attenuating long before the widespread adoption of print. At the same time, it suggests that the Naqshbandi networks' embrace of remote transmission of knowledge did not simply stem from imperial bureaucratisation.¹⁴ On the one hand, the political volatility of the eighteenth century appears to have rendered remote transmission of knowledge more attractive. Letters from this period include numerous complaints about the dangers of travel as well as the declining availability of patronage that would have made possible lengthy sojourns in distant cities.¹⁵ But, in addition, we must also take into account intellectual trends that played a central role in this transformation. While scholars in these networks were aware that their practices differed from idealised norms of face-to-face communication, they made sense of their practices by drawing on long-standing Sufi epistemological and psychological theories about the relationship between the material and non-material aspects of self.¹⁶ These scholars would not, for example, have accepted the idea that the increasing willingness to send books by courier represented a shift from 'anthropocentric' to 'bibliocentric' modes of knowledge transmission.¹⁷ Rather, their writings challenge the idea that person-to-person transmission relies on the physical proximity of two individuals because, in their view, a 'person' is not merely, or even primarily, a *material* entity bounded by a corporeal (living) body.¹⁸

In decoupling personhood from bodily materiality, Wali Allah and others in his circle argued that companionship did not necessarily require the coming together of two gross material bodies but was, in its ideal form, the communion of two spirits.¹⁹ As a result, face-to-face companionship and letter writing were not completely distinct modes of communication. Rather, both served as the means for creating and invigorating bonds between the spirits (*arwāh*, sing. *rūh*) of two individuals. As with their contemporaries in early modern Europe, they felt that letters could substitute for conversations and

¹² The debate over the impact of print in the context of South Asian Islam has its origins in the foundational article by F. Robinson, 'Technology and religious change: Islam and the impact of print', *Modern Asian Studies* 27.1 (February 1993), pp. 229–251.

¹³ Green, 'The uses of books', p. 256.

¹⁴ If the shift to writerly culture was purely based on increased bureaucratisation and state centralisation, it seems curious that such changes would occur in a period when the bureaucratic sinews of the empire were visibly weakening.

¹⁵ For a stark illustration of the difficulties of travel by the 1760s, see Mirza Mazhar Jan-i Janan, Letter 33, *Maktūbāt-i Mirzā Mazhar Jān-i Jānān Shahīd ma'a sawānih-i 'umrī*, (ed. and trans.) Khaliq Anjum (Lahore, 1997), pp. 45–46.

¹⁶ Ahmed El Shamsy has argued that similar forms of what he terms post-classical 'esotericism' were connected to 'subjugation of book learning' and the 'devaluation of books'. In this context, however, such epistemological theories served to underpin a vigorous book culture rather than undermine it. Ahmed El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition* (Princeton and Oxford, 2020), pp. 41–54.

¹⁷ Green, 'The uses of books', p. 254.

¹⁸ For a critique of the assumptions that underlie modern approaches to questions of embodiment, see Michael Radich, 'Perfected embodiment: a Buddhist-inspired challenge to contemporary theories of the body', *Refiguring the Body: Embodiment in South Asian Religions*, (eds) B. A. Holdrege and Karen Pechilis (New York, 2016), pp. 17–57.

¹⁹ The two spirits were often those of two living persons but, in certain circumstances, a living person could even commune by means of dreams or visions with the spirit of an individual long dead.

were thus, in Dena Goodman's memorable phrase, 'an absence made present'.²⁰ Generally, these figures argued that bodily proximity was more efficacious—it was, after all, commonly said that 'written correspondence is equal to half a meeting (*al-mukātabāt nisf al-mulāqāt*)'.²¹ In certain cases, however, they claim epistolography to be superior to face-to-face companionship as an exchange of letters might make perceptible the spiritual traces of the writers while circumventing the sensuous materiality of bodies.²² And while speech and writing were generally a necessary means for generating companionship between two spirits, two individuals whose spirits were predisposed to harmonious union could, in certain circumstances, commune over vast distances (and even times) without any external aids at all.

Taking the small and close-knit circle of Shah Wali Allah as a case study, this article investigates the implications of this novel early modern theoretical framework on epistolographic practices. It shows that because scholars understood letters exchanged between trusted friends and disciples as a form of spiritual companionship, they were willing to circulate draft manuscripts as well as finished books, send one another authorisations to transmit texts, and even work on long-distance collaborative book projects. In so doing, it suggests that historians must consider the embedded and contextual nature of reading practices of particular socio-textual communities in pre-colonial India.

Letter writing as a Sufi practice

It has often been argued that the focus on orality in the Islamic world arose from a fundamental scepticism towards the written word and a fear that unguided reading could lead to epistemic chaos.²³ We must note, however, that Sunni scholars of North India, even in the pre-Mughal period, did not distrust texts quite as much as such accounts suggest. In jurisprudential contexts, for example, the remote transmission of legal opinions via mail was sanctioned, albeit guardedly, by Hanafi jurists as early as the twelfth century. In the preface to his manual on *fiqh* that was widely circulated in pre-colonial Hindustan, the jurist Qazi Khan (d. 1196) argued that if a mufti who is a *muqallid* (that is to say, a jurist who lacks the requisite capacity for independent judgement or *ijtihad*) encountered an issue for which the available textual sources offered no ruling, he should 'follow the view of the person who has, according to him, the greatest expertise in *fiqh* (*yakhudhu bi-qawl man huwā afqah al-nās 'indihi*)'. Were that person to live in another city, however, 'he should have recourse to him by writing (*yarja' ilayhi bi'l-kitāb*), and should not speculate for fear of attributing a falsehood to God (*iftirā' 'alā allāh*) in making the permissible prohibited'.²⁴ While clearly not ideal, the remote transmission of legal knowledge was considered tolerable and certainly better than the alternative.

²⁰ D. Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca and London, 1994), p. 143. The exchange of letters often seems to be an extension of face-to-face meetings: Wali Allah often tells his disciples that he will explain complex concepts further when they meet in the future or urges them to recall his teachings from previous periods of face-to-face companionship.

²¹ G. D. S. Sood, "'Correspondence is equal to half a meeting': the composition and comprehension of letters in eighteenth-century Islamic Eurasia", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 50.2–3 (2007), pp. 172–214. Wali Allah himself used this aphorism in his own letters. See Shah Wali Allah to Muhammad Ashiq, Letter 36, *Makātīb*, vol. 2, pp. 273–274.

²² Adrian Gully has suggested that 'the idea of immediate, intimate communication through the epistle' is a French Romantic idea adopted by modern Arab thinkers. Gully, *The Culture of Letter-Writing*, pp. 8–9. This article suggests instead that such an analysis may be ignoring trends within the Islamic tradition itself that were parallel to, rather than derivative of European Romanticism.

²³ Robinson, 'Crisis of authority', p. 343.

²⁴ Fakhr al-Din al-Hasan b. Mansur Qadi Khan al Farghani, *Fatāwā Qādī Khān wa al-fatāwā al-sirājīyya*, (ed.) Muhammad Lama'an al-Haq al-Laknawi (Lakhnaw, 1293). For a brief discussion of this issue, see Burhan

In Sufi circles, too, we find an early and widespread turn to the use of remote written communication. As Ahmet Karamustafa notes, *all* of the extant writings of Junayd al-Khazzaz (d. 910), the ninth-century Sufi of Baghdad, ‘belong to the category of correspondence with fellow Sufis’.²⁵ In South Asia, as early as 1346, the Suhrawardi Sharaf al-Din b. Yahya Maneri (d. 1381) famously wrote his ‘Hundred Letters’ to Qazi Shams al-Din, the governor of Chausa, over the course of a year, precisely because Shams al-Din was unable to attend his study circle.²⁶ These letters were then circulated as an independent work. His disciple Shams al-Din Balkhi (d. 1400) is, likewise, noted for his letter writing both to scholars and to political figures.²⁷ The famous sixteenth-century Chishti of Gangoh, in the Upper Doab, Abd al-Quddus (d. 1537), had his letters collected in two volumes.²⁸

By the late seventeenth century, we see an intensification of these trends. The letters of the famous Naqshbandi and *mujaddid* of the second millennium, Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624), who maintained a vigorous correspondence with his disciples throughout his life, were circulated widely and became models for emulation.²⁹ Collecting and editing the letters of one’s spiritual master became a central part of the Naqshbandi tradition of discipleship.³⁰ These letter collections were themselves circulated and studied independently, and their contents formed the subject of further epistolary exchanges within the *tariqa*.³¹ Later in the seventeenth century, Sirhindi’s son, Muhammad Masum was, likewise, an avid letter writer.³² In the eighteenth century, the Naqshbandi Mirza Jan-i Janan (d. 1781) and his disciple Sana Allah Panipati regularly exchanged letters;³³ Faqir Allah Shikarpuri (d. 1781), a Naqshbandi from Sindh, maintained correspondence with

al-Din al-Farghani al-Marghinani, *al-Hidāyah: The Guidance*, (trans.) Imran Ahsan Khan Nyazee, 2 vols (Bristol, 2006), vol. 1, p. xxi, fn. 27.

²⁵ He notes that these letters were meant to be read only by the spiritual elect and not by the general population. A. T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2007), p. 18.

²⁶ P. Jackson, ‘Introduction’, in Sharafuddin Maneri, *The Hundred Letters*. Classics of Western Spirituality (New York, Ramsey and Toronto, 1980), pp. 2–3.

²⁷ S. H. Askari, ‘Correspondence of the two 14th century Sufi saints of Bihar with the contemporary sovereigns of Delhi and Bengal’, *Proceedings of Indian History Congress 19* (1956), pp. 208–224.

²⁸ S. H. Askari, ‘Hazrat Abdul Quddus Gangohi’, *Patna University Journal* 11.1–2 (1957), pp. 1–31.

²⁹ For translations of some of these letters, see A. F. Buehler, *Revealed Grace: The Juristic Sufism of Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624)* (Louisville, 2011). Waleed Ziad has demonstrated the centrality of Sirhindi’s collected letters to Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi pedagogical practices, in particular, training manuals that were key to the *tariqa*’s success in spreading beyond Hindustan. Waleed Ziad, *Hidden Caliphate: Sufi Saints beyond the Oxus and Indus* (Cambridge and London, 2021).

³⁰ In 1025/1616, Muhammad Jadid Badakhshi Talaqani collected 313 letters written by his spiritual guide Ahmad Sirhindi. The number 313 corresponded to the number of Muslims who fought at the Battle of Badr. Buehler, *Revealed Grace*, p. 58 Ahmad Sirhindi’s son, Muhammad Masum directed Abd al-Hayy b. Khwajah Chakar Hisari to compile a second volume of his father’s letters. This practice of collecting letters should be viewed against the wider Persianate courtly practice of preserving important or aesthetically pleasing letters in ‘scrapbooks’ (*muraqqa*). Emma Flatt has suggested that courtly figures may have collected letters that they received in order to emphasize their social standing by ‘demonstrating friendships and acquaintances with powerful individuals’. E. J. Flatt, *The Courts of the Deccan Sultanates: Living Well in the Persian Cosmopolis* (Cambridge, 2019), p. 174.

³¹ Shah Wali Allah, for example, received a letter from his disciple Muhammad Amin Kashmiri asking for his interpretation of a controversial letter written by Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi in which he claimed for himself an extremely high spiritual station, and Wali Allah responded in a way that was critical of Sirhindi’s claim. As well as providing evidence for internal debates among Naqshbandis, the exchange shows that Muhammad Amin was reading Sirhindi’s collected letters by himself and would write to ask only about particular issues that he found hard to understand or accept. Wali Allah to Muhammad Amin Kashmiri, Letter 84, *Makātīb*, vol. 1, pp. 145–149.

³² Khwaja Muhammad Masum, *Maktūbāt-i Hazrat Khwāja Muhammad Ma’sūm*, 3 vols in 1 vol. (Karachi, 1977).

³³ Mirza Mazhar Jan-i Janan, *Maktūbāt-i Mirzā Mazhar Jān-i Jānān*.

a wide range of Sufis and scholars across the subcontinent;³⁴ Shah Ahl Allah, the brother of Shah Wali Allah, collected the letters of his father, Shah Abd al-Rahim (d. 1719);³⁵ and Shah Wali Allah's letters were collected by Muhammad Ashiq and his son, Abd al-Rahman (d. 1755). This enthusiasm for letter writing is also found among contemporary Chishtis: Kalim Allah Jahanabadi (d. 1729) maintained contact with disciples in the Deccan via letters.³⁶ Indeed, one of the most salient features of eighteenth-century North India was the significant volume of Sufi correspondence that flourished despite and, sometimes because of (given the difficulty of travel), the fragmentation and decentralisation of the Mughal imperial order. Naqshbandi discussions of hadith and law, as well as philosophy and metaphysics, were often carried on with individuals beyond the boundaries of the dwindling Mughal state, and even the subcontinent.

Like many of their contemporaries in the Sunni intellectual world, Naqshbandi *shaykhs* from the seventeenth century onwards had embraced the idea that students should engage in independent study or 'deep reading' (*mutāla'a*) of texts and their commentaries.³⁷ While some Indian scholars were beginning to argue that a student with a good grasp of Arabic linguistic sciences might do without a teacher entirely, the Naqshbandis did not generally favour entirely unguided reading.³⁸ However, they often encouraged the independent, or at least semi-independent, study of texts that had been approved by one's *shaykh* using a set of embodied techniques that would allow the student to derive the greatest spiritual and ethical benefit from the text.³⁹ Shah Abd al-Rahim of Delhi, Shah Wali Allah's father, for example, wrote a letter in which he advised one of his disciples that one ought to 'study independently (*mutāla'a*) the books of the mendicants (*darwīshān*) because it strengthens the intention of the student'. As the student read the text, he was told 'to study (*mutāla'a*) your own heart and hold your breath (*habs-i dam*)'.⁴⁰ Clearly, this was an instruction to practise independent, silent reading—the oral recitation of text while holding one's breath would have been impossible—but, most importantly for our purposes, this willingness to guide students' study by means of letters suggests that Naqshbandis of this period were less sceptical of remotely guided reading than we might expect.

Naqshbandi reading

In his letters to his disciples, Wali Allah makes it clear that exchanges of letters served as a form of companionship. He repeatedly asserts that correspondence (*mukātaba*) is a kind (*naw'*) of companionship (*istihāb*) or direct address (*mukhātaba*) that occurs despite the

³⁴ Shah Faqīr Allah Alawi Shikarpuri, *Maktūbāt* (Lahore, n.d.).

³⁵ Shāh Abd al-Rahim, *Anfās-i rahīmīyya* (Delhi, n.d.), p. 22.

³⁶ Green, 'The uses of books', p. 255.

³⁷ K. El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (New York, 2015), pp. 97–128. For Wali Allah's practice of *mutāla'a*, see M. Q. Zaman, 'Islamic education in eighteenth and early nineteenth century India', *Knowledge, Authority and Change in Islamic Societies: Studies in Honor of Dale F. Eickelman*, (eds) A. J. Fromherz and S. Nadav (Boston, 2021), pp. 36–60.

³⁸ For a fascinating example of an eighteenth-century scholar who was promoting the idea of independent study based on texts alone, see Muhammad 'Ali al-Faruqī al-Thānawī, *Kashshāf istilāhāt al-funūn wa al-'ulūm al-Islāmīyya*, 3 vols (Beirut, n.d.), vol. 1, p. 1. For a translation of the relevant passage, see I. Lala, 'An analysis of Muhammad Ibn 'Ali al-Tahānawī's approach in *Kashshāf Istilāhāt al-Funūn*—the entry of *Huwiyya*', *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 17 (2017), pp. 14–34, p. 19.

³⁹ Shah Abd al-Rahim relates that his own guide, Khwajah Khurd, told him to avoid reading 'non-essential' books and stories in order to further his spiritual development. Shah Abd al-Rahim, *Anfās-i rahīmīyya* (Delhi, n.d.), p. 22.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37. For a discussion of this practice, see C. W. Ernst, *Refractions of Islam in India: Situating Sufism and Yoga* (New Delhi, 2016), pp. 424–426.

separation of two bodies. This transmutation was feasible, he writes in one letter, because of a certain ‘enchantment’ (*naʿrang*) that writing makes possible.⁴¹ In his view, this ‘enchantment’ could occur because the spiritual bonds that existed between two individuals had their origins in a pre-material state. Face-to-face meetings were not, in themselves, valuable except as a way to renew and strengthen these pre-material spiritual affinities.

To understand this form of epistolographic ‘enchantment’ requires that we place it within a broader framework of Naqshbandi reading practices in this period. Biographical dictionaries or *tazkiras*—in particular—were recommended for novices in these circles. These texts, containing records of the statements and actions of the *shaykhs* of the *tariqa*, provided models for the student’s own spiritual wayfaring. Beyond serving as models of ‘exemplary behaviour’, the act of reading *tazkiras* was understood as a tool for generating spiritual companionship with the spirit of the deceased masters of the *tariqa*.⁴² Readers viewed these texts, in other words, as a technology that would allow them to ‘see’ an individual whose material body was no longer accessible. Nur Allah Budhanwi (d. 1782), a disciple of Shah Wali Allah, describes his experience of this kind of independent study:

One day, I was studying (*mutālaʿa*) *Anfās al-ʿārifīn*, a work of [Shah Wali Allah] in which he mentions the states of [his father Abd al-Rahim] and [his uncle] Abu al-Riza Muhammad. When I reached the [description of the] state of Hafiz Abd Allah, sleep came over me and the aforementioned book lay on my chest. In a vision (*wāqīʿa*), it appeared to me as if the spirit of every great individual that is mentioned in the book were present underneath their names, as if there was a great light underneath each word of the treatise. The words were like eyeglasses (*misl-i ʿaynak*) in relation to those spirits and lights. And I remained in this [state of] witnessing of the manuscript for two to three hours. After that I woke up.⁴³

Once again, it is clear that Nur Allah was reading this book alone: a reader would hardly fall asleep for several hours in the course of reciting a text in front of his *shaykh*. His description of the text’s connection to the world of spirits, however, is even more striking. Rather than describe the written text as second-order and inferior to significations of speech, he portrays it as an instrument of perception, specifically eye-glasses, which allowed an individual, with suitable spiritual preparedness, to witness the luminous spirits of the pious dead.⁴⁴ Classically, such states of spiritual communion were achieved through proximity to the body of a *shaykh*, often during pilgrimages to the graves of the dead. Eighteenth-century Naqshbandis, however, were evidently attaining such states through books instead. The aim of reading these texts, then, was to cultivate a particularly heightened spiritual state whereby the book ‘rendered itself...epistemologically obsolete’.⁴⁵ In other words, Nur Allah was reading the book not simply for the information it contained but rather as a way to attain a vision (*wāqīʿa*) that allowed him to perceive

⁴¹ Phulati, *al-Qawl al-jalī*, p. 189.

⁴² For an interesting discussion on how *tazkiras* were used in the eighteenth century, see Green, ‘The uses of books’, p. 251.

⁴³ Phulati, *al-Qawl al-jalī*, p. 71.

⁴⁴ The novelty of the simile and, therefore, perhaps of this mode of reading, is suggested by the fact that eye-glasses had only become widely available in Delhi in the century prior to this account. A. Jan Qaisar, *The Indian Response to European Technology and Culture (A.D. 1498–1707)* (Delhi, 1982), pp. 74–76.

⁴⁵ Green, ‘The uses of books’, p. 252.

the spirits of the dead, individuals who retained a certain spiritual identity but whose material bodies had long since decayed.

Spiritual companionship in letters

This mode of reading has important implications for conceptions of eighteenth-century epistolography that allows us to make sense of the language that Shah Wali Allah uses to describe epistles that he has received and his ability to perceive the sender. Just as Nur Allah described the spiritual witnessing made possible by reading the *tazkira*, so too does Shah Wali Allah describe letters that he has received in sensory terms: as bearers of luminescence or odour, and as a means of expressing the modes of spiritual companionship that such writings make possible.⁴⁶ We see this, for example, in a response to a letter that Shah Wali Allah had received from Mawlawi Abd al-Qadir, a rationalist scholar of Jaunpur, which Shah Wali Allah began with the following verse:

Greetings to the enfolded [letter] that made visible its creator:
It brought radiance from the light of the one who folded it.
When winds blow from Jaunpur, contented,
The world, and whatever's in it, become fragrant.

ahlan bi'l-malfūfa adhat mu'āmilahā
tuhdī ilayya sanan min nūr thānihā
min jawnfūr idhā habba riyāh ridan
*minhā ta'atturat al-dunyā wa mā fihā*⁴⁷

Here Wali Allah's description of his experience of seeing the folded paper as a luminous body, or experiencing the words as a fragrance-bearing breeze, is not suggesting that he has seen light with the external sense of sight, nor smelled an odour with the external olfactory sense. Rather, the image suggests the sensations experienced by the internal senses.

This concept of internal perception, which allowed awareness far beyond what was immediately present to the external senses, had deep roots in Naqshbandi circles. Najm al-Din Razi Daya (d. 1257), whose *Mirshād al-'ibād min al-mabdā' ilā al-ma'ād* was an immensely popular text with early Naqshbandis, describes these internal senses as parallel to the external, physical senses: 'The heart has an eye with which it beholds visions of the unseen; an ear with which it listens to the speech of the inhabitants of the unseen and the speech of God; nostrils with which it smells the perfumes of the unseen; and a palate with which it perceives the taste of love, the sweetness of faith, and the savor of gnosis.'⁴⁸ These internal senses were thus capable of experiencing things not immediately available through sight or touch.

⁴⁶ The description of letters as bearing the scent of the sender are used with such frequency that they become commonplace. Shah Wali Allah frequently describes Muhammad Ashiq's letters as 'musk scented (*nāma-i muskhīn shamāma*)', while describing his own written greetings as 'redolent of love (*salām-i mahabbat mashām*)'. It is possible that some letters were scented with actual perfumes, a practice referred to in a number of Persianate texts from South Asia. M. Alam and S. Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World: Studies on Culture and Politics* (New York, 2011), p. 228.

⁴⁷ Wali Allah to Abd al-Qadir Jawnpuri, Letter 117, *Makātīb*, vol. 1, pt. 2, pp. 185–186.

⁴⁸ N. al-Din Razi Daya, *The Path of God's Bondsmen from Origin to Return (Meršād al-'ebād Men al-Mabdā' Elā'l-Ma'ād)*, (trans.) Hamid Algar (Delmar, 1982), pp. 205–206. For a discussion, see S. Bashir, *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (New York, 2011), p. 44. For an extremely rich study of odours in an earlier Christian context, see Martin Roch, *L'Intelligence d'un Sens: Odeurs miraculeuses et odorat dans l'Occident du haut Moyen Âge (V^e-VIII^e siècles)* (Turnhout, 2009).

Investigations into the internal senses are found in Wali Allah's technical treatises, too. Working within a modified Avicennan psychological framework, he explains that there are certain existent things (*mawjūdāt*) that can *only* be perceived by these internal senses. In *al-Khayr al-kathīr* he argues that just as there are five external senses, so too are there three internal senses (the *sensus communis*, the perception, and the estimative faculty) that are properties (*khasā'is*) of an individual's *pneuma* (lit. 'the airy body' *al-badan al-hawā'ī*).⁴⁹ Indeed, it is only the internal 'perceptive' faculty that perceives a person as a person—'the pure individual' (*al-shakḥ al-sirf*)—as opposed to an assortment of colours and shapes. Similarly, the estimative faculty (*wahm*) apprehends the 'intention' (*ma'nā*) of a thing rather than its external form (*surat*).⁵⁰ As Wali Allah states, as well as perceiving the spiritual 'light' that an individual produces during pious acts like prayer, the *wahm* allows us to experience 'accidental, intuitive matters (*umūr 'aradiyya wijdāniyya*)' like anger and love.⁵¹ When, for example, a perceptive individual (*dhakiyy*) sits with someone who is grieving and afflicted (*mahmūm maḡhmūm*), the grief transfers to him (*ta'addāhu al-hamm wa'l-ghamm*) by means of the *wahm*.⁵² Although the grief is not his own, this perception can produce physical effects in the one perceiving it: he might turn pale and lose his appetite, for example.

Even during periods of physical proximity, then, companionship was predicated on these non-material, supra-formal perceptions. In the case of two spiritually concordant individuals with extremely sensitive faculties, such perceptions could occur even when their material bodies were not proximate or immediately evident to the external senses.⁵³ Thus, when Shah Wali Allah describes the letter as a fragrance-bearing breeze, he is suggesting that the words of the letter served to focus his internal senses in such a way that allowed for a supra-formal connection between himself and the letter writer.

Throughout his correspondence, Wali Allah draws on these ideas to explain the long-established Sufi notion that the spirits of two individuals might be connected over vast geographical differences. Writing to his long-time correspondent Muhammad Muin (d. 1747) of Thatta in Sindh, Wali Allah describes the emotion aroused by his letter: 'Your noble letter arrived and stirred up much tenderness (*sahīfa-i sharīfa rasīd muhayyij-i ishfāq-i farāwān gardīd*).' He assures Muhammad Muin that because of the strength of their spiritual bond, a face-to-face meeting was largely unnecessary: 'In a situation where spiritual congruence is strong, it is likely the case that bodily meeting has become obsolete (*jā-yi ki i'tilāf-i rūhānī mustahkam ast nazdīk ast ki suhbat-i jismānī bī kār uftad*).' To illustrate this statement, he composed a short verse:

⁴⁹ Shah Wali Allah describes the *pneuma* as an aspect of the soul that mediates between the immaterial soul and the gross materiality of an individual. See Shah Wali Allah al-Dihlawi, *al-Khayr al-kathīr*, Silsilat matbū'āt al-majlis al-'ilmī (Bijnor, 1352), p. 47. For discussions of Wali Allah's understanding of the *pneuma*, see M. U. Faruque, *Sculpting the Self: Islam, Selfhood, and Human Flourishing* (Ann Arbor, 2021), p. 183.

⁵⁰ Although the *ma'nā* is non-sensible, it 'inheres in sensible objects'. The classic example given by Ibn Sina is that of a sheep and a wolf: the sheep perceives the snarling wolf with its external senses but understands the danger the wolf poses by means of the *wahm*. M. Noble, *Philosophising the Occult, Avicennan Psychology and 'The Hidden Secret' of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī* (Berlin and Boston, 2021), p. 142.

⁵¹ Wali Allah, *al-Khayr al-kathīr*, p. 47.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Wali Allah argues that even after an individual's death, and the loss of the external senses, the *pneuma* continues to act as the substrate for the imaginal and estimative faculties. In this way, the identity of a person continues posthumously, albeit shorn of material attributes. It is this continued personhood that allows us to perceive dead individuals during visionary states. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

What need has friendship for face-to-face meeting?
The wind of Yemen is still absorbed in the perfume of Arabia.

musāhabat chi zarūr ast āshnā'ī rā
*hunūz bād-i yaman mahw-i nakhat-i 'arabīst*⁵⁴

The central conceit of this verse—the intense longing of the wind for the scent of Arabia—is ultimately derived from the hadith in which the Prophet Muhammad remarked that he felt the ‘breath of the All-Merciful’ (*nafas al-rahmān*) coming from Yemen.⁵⁵ This hadith was understood by the Naqshbandis to be a reference to the relationship between the Prophet Muhammad and the Yemeni shepherd, Uways al-Qarni. According to traditions that developed over the centuries, Uways was unable to travel to meet the Prophet because he had to remain in Yemen with his ailing mother, and the two men never physically met.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Uways developed an intense spiritual connection with the Prophet and became a Muslim.⁵⁷ This relationship became paradigmatic for Naqshbandi Sufis who received direct communications from the Prophet in the form of visions or dreams. In *Nafahāt al-uns*, a book Wali Allah read in his youth, the great Naqshbandi Abd al-Rahman Jami (d. 1492) cited Farid al-Din Attar’s (d. 1221) description of such individuals: ‘There is a group of friends of God whom *shaykhs* of the mystical path and the great ones in the [way of] reality call Uwaysīs. And, externally, they have no need for a guide (*pīr*), because the Lord of Messengership—may the peace and blessings of God be upon him—guides them with his particular care, without the mediation of another, just as he guided Uways.’⁵⁸ Although the Naqshbandis always emphasised the need for a living guide, they took, as one historian has argued, ‘special pride in the practice of nonphysical Uwaysī transmission’.⁵⁹ Shah Wali Allah’s father Abd al-Rahim was one such Uwaysi, having received, in the imaginal world, an authorisation (*ijāza*) directly from the Prophet as well as from Baha al-Din Naqshband (d. 1389).⁶⁰ Shah Wali Allah’s description of letters as a Yemeni breeze is, therefore, a way of suggesting that letters might bear the trace, perceptible only by the inner senses, of an individual from whom one was physically separated.

In the same letter to Muhammad Muin, Shah Wali Allah explains why such ‘spiritual friendship’ (*dūstī-yi rūhānī*) was, in fact, superior to face-to-face meetings.⁶¹ He writes that the materiality of the body disturbs the more refined inclinations of the human *pneuma* that, as mentioned above, was the seat of the *wahm* and other internal senses:

⁵⁴ Wali Allah to Muhammad Muin Tattawi, Letter 72, *Makātīb*, vol. 1, pp. 130–132.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of this hadith in Persian poetry, see A. Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade: The Imagery of Persian Poetry* (Chapel Hill, 1992), p. 106.

⁵⁶ A. S. Hussaini, ‘Uways al-Qarani and the Uwaysī Sūfīs’, *Muslim World* 57.2 (1 April 1967), pp. 103–113.

⁵⁷ Schimmel, *A Two-Colored Brocade*, p. 106.

⁵⁸ Nur al-Din Abd al-Rahman Jami, *Nafahāt al-uns min hazarāt al-quds*, (ed.) Mahmudi Abidi (Tehran, 1375), p. 16.

⁵⁹ D. Le Gall, *A Culture of Sufism: Naqshbandis in the Ottoman World, 1450–1700*. SUNY Series in Medieval Middle East History (Albany, 2005), p. 121. The disciples of Baha al-Din (d. 1388) likewise claimed that their master was an *uwaysi*. Hussaini, ‘Uways al-Qarani’, p. 112.

⁶⁰ According to Shah Abd al-Rahim, Shah Wali Allah’s father, it might be possible for such individuals to dispense with an external *pīr* altogether. He describes himself as an Uwaysi who had received initiation in the spiritual world and from the lineage of Adam Banuri in the material world. Abd al-Rahim, *Rahmat-i Rahīmīyya: Irshād-i rahīmīyya kā Urdū tarjuma dar sulūk*, (ed.) Ghulam Mustafa Khan (Ikhwan-i Mustafai, 1379), p. 13.

⁶¹ Wali Allah to Muhammad Muin, Letter 72, *Makātīb*, vol. 1, pp. 130–132.

[Face-to-face companionship] is not [completely useless] but it is likely that it interferes (*mukhill*) [with the congruence of spirits] because in corporeal companionship (*suhbat-i jismāni*) the shadowy external form of the body (*hay'at-i ghāsiqa-i badaniyya*) intrudes upon the *pneuma* (*nasama*), and [the *pneuma*'s propensity for] turning in the direction of spiritual congruence (*i'tilāf-i rūhāni*) is reduced...The view of this weak one is that the *pneuma* (*nasama-i hawā'iyya*), that supports [the existence of] the dark, external form [of the body] (*hay'at-i nafs-i insāniyya*), has an aversion (*i'rāz*) to the lower [carnal] human soul (*nafs-i insāniyya*), and an attachment to the material of the imaginal world (*mādda-i misāliyya*), and there [i.e. in the imaginal world] all the souls (*nufūs*) have one [single] life (*hayāt*) [and there, unlike in the material world,] it is not the case that each individual has a separate life.⁶²

As Shah Wali Allah explains, the *pneuma* is naturally drawn to the pre-material imaginal world, a level of reality that lay between the world of materiality and the world of pure spirits, 'distinguished by the fact that it has no material existence but contains forms in the images of material bodies'.⁶³ In Shah Wali Allah's view, although some manner of pre-material individuation exists at this level of reality, all souls share a single, indivisible 'life' because they are not yet corporealised into distinct material bodies. Reading the letter of a friend, without the intrusion of physical bodies that drag the *pneuma* back towards the physical world, allows for something of this pre-material unity to be attained.

Shah Wali Allah was not alone in considering letters as a means for developing spiritual connections between two individuals. On one occasion a young scholar from Jaunpur Abd al-Qadir wrote Shah Wali Allah a letter that reads something like modern fan mail. The younger man describes how he had heard people praising Shah Wali Allah's qualities and lamented that he was unable to travel to Delhi to meet him in person:

Indeed, it is not appropriate that friendship between persons and mutual acquaintance between individuals be restricted to perception with the eyes, or that it be confined to conversation with tongues. How could it be so? For whatever reached my hearing in regard to you in the way of noble and excellent qualities, and whatever came to my ears in the way of [your] laudable attributes, manifest and non-manifest, filled my innards and spread through my limbs, until I desired that, along with [what I had heard], there would be something in the way of correspondence with you that might draw us together, and would be counted as a kind of mutual connection before I attained the blessing of meeting [you], and I accomplished the good fortune of [physical] proximity.⁶⁴

In his response to Abd al-Qadir, Shah Wali Allah reasserted the idea that the exchange of letters is not only a kind of companionship but has *advantages* over a physical meeting because it occurs at the level of a spiritual union without the mediation of gross physicality: 'Indeed, the exchanging of letters is a kind of companionship and that which is

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, p. 37.

⁶⁴ Wali Allah to Abd al-Qadir al-Jawnfuri, Letter 21, *Rasā'il*, pp. 36–40, p. 38. In his own letters, Wali Allah too often claims that it is quite possible to feel strong affection for an individual based on their reputation alone. To illustrate this point, he cites the famous verse of the Abbasid poet Bashir b. Burd (d. 784) 'Sometimes, the ears love before the eyes (*wa'l-udhun ta'shiq qabl al-'ayn ahyānan*)'. See, for example, Wali Allah to Umar Peshawari, Letter 131, *Makātib*, vol. 2, pp. 393–394.

worthy of consideration [occurs] through the mutual relating of spirits, not with the drawing near of dust (*al-mukātaba naw‘ min al-istihāb wa al-‘ibra bi-munāsabat al-arwāh lā bi-muqārabat al-turāb*).⁶⁵

One might be tempted to understand Shah Wali Allah’s response as simply a heightened form of epistolary civility, a witty inversion of the emphasis usually placed on face-to-face companionship—or, perhaps, a polite way of encouraging Abd al-Rashid not to visit Delhi after all (certainly, the relationship between the two men does not seem to have developed after this initial exchange). However, Shah Wali Allah was very much committed to the idea of ‘spiritual friendship’, one for which a number of his letters give textual support, by citing a hadith recorded in both Bukhari and Muslim: ‘The spirits are like conscripted soldiers. Those with whom they are acquainted [among the other spirits] they unite with them and those they do not know they conflict with them.’⁶⁶ In his famous commentary on Muslim’s *Sahīh*—a commentary with which Shah Wali Allah was very familiar—Abu Zakariyya al-Nawawi (d. 1277) gives a brief explanation of this hadith. According to al-Nawawi, the hadith’s use of the verb *ta‘ārafā*—‘to become acquainted with one another’—was a reference to the sympathy or compatibility (*muwāfaqa*) between the attributes of the spirits of different individuals. He wrote that ‘[the spirits] were created as a [single] group and then became divided into their [different] bodies (*khuliqat mujtama‘atan thumma furīqat fī ajsādihā*)’. He reasoned that whenever an individual’s traits (*shiyam*) corresponded to those of another individual, they would have affection for one another. On the other hand, he would shun and feel enmity towards whomever had traits different from his own.⁶⁷ As al-Nawawi’s commentary suggests, this hadith was generally understood to mean that individuals were drawn to one another because their spirits (*arwāh*) had established a mutual affinity in the pre-material world that manifested as a mutual attraction in the material world after their individuation into separate bodies. Wali Allah draws on these ideas to argue that, in the right spiritual state, it might be possible for two individuals to attain something of this pre-material unity.

Figures within Wali Allah’s circle argued that, in cases of intense spiritual congruence between two individuals, written communications might, somewhat paradoxically, be rendered superfluous. Muhammad Ashiq, Wali Allah’s closest disciple, describes how another one of the disciples—literally, ‘servants’ (*khādīmān*)—performed a 40-day retreat (*chilla*) in his own village, a long way from Wali Allah’s ‘blessed court’ (*astāna-i fayz ashyāna*) in Delhi. During his retreat, he sent frequent letters to Shah Wali Allah with questions about his spiritual progress and received written responses before the disciple’s letters had even reached him. Moreover, ‘whatever [Shah Wali Allah] had ordered [that the disciple do] in order to obtain those states, he had infused that state into the words [of the letter itself] so that even as [the disciple] read [Shah Wali Allah’s] noble letter, that state became manifest [in him]’.⁶⁸ While this narrative highlights Wali Allah’s own powers, it also suggests the paradoxical nature of epistolography: while used as a tool for maintaining close bonds between master and student, it also remained subordinate to spiritual connections

⁶⁵ Wali Allah to Abd al-Qadir al-Jawnfuri, Letter 21, *Rasā‘il*, p. 38.

⁶⁶ Muhiyy al-Din Abu Zakariyya b. Sharaf al-Nawawi, ‘Kitāb al-bir wa’l-sila wa-ādāb: Bāb arwāh junūd muja-nadda’, no. 2648, *al-Minhāj fī sharh Sahīh Muslim bin al-Hajjāj* (al-Riyād, 1421/2000), p. 1564. It is worth noting that a copy of this text was available to purchase along with the six major hadith collections in Delhi during Wali Allah’s lifetime, although he laments that he is unable to afford them. This suggests that while there was no mass market for books, they were sometimes available to purchase without entering into a relationship with a particular teacher. Wali Allah to Shah Nur Allah, Letter 17, *Makātīb*, vol. 1, pp. 71–73.

⁶⁷ Al-Nawawi, *Sharh Sahīh Muslim*, p. 1564.

⁶⁸ Phulati, *al-Qawl al-jali*, p. 74.

intense enough for a master to understand his student's concerns and to produce spiritual states in him as if he were immediately present.

Maintaining bonds

In most cases, the regular exchange of letters was considered imperative for maintaining bonds that had been strengthened during periods of face-to-face companionship. We frequently encounter complaints of letters going unanswered and the attendant fear that these spiritual bonds were therefore withering. In one such letter Abd al-Aziz, Shah Wali Allah's son, writes to an old disciple of his father, rejoicing that a letter had finally arrived 'more delicate than the breeze and sweeter than divine blessings (*arraq min al-nasim wa ahlā min al-na'im*)... giving news of the constancy of [your] love and the firmness of [our] bond (*mukhbira 'an wakid wadd wa muhakkam 'aqd*)'. Prior to the arrival of the letter, their correspondence had lapsed to the extent that Abd al-Aziz 'thought that the roar of [our] love had diminished (*al-muwadda qad intaqasa za'iruhā*)'. Had the situation not been resolved, he warned, 'it would have necessitated the forgetting of [our] love and resulted in the disintegration of [our] customary connection (*awjaba nisyān al-widād wa addat bi-fasl al-wasl al-mu'tād*)'.⁶⁹

As the rhyming prose of this Arabic letter suggests, epistolographic exchanges often displayed great eloquence and rhetorical skill.⁷⁰ Although these spiritual bonds were considered to be something beyond speech, the letters themselves—like face-to-face meetings—required strict adherence to the protocols of correct comportment (*ādāb*), a manifestation of the underlying harmony between the spirits of the two individuals.⁷¹ As Muzaffar Alam and Seema Alavi have demonstrated, Persianate epistolography as an art-form required a mastery of the forms of address and structure relevant to the relative ranks of the receiver and the sender.⁷² Indeed, schoolchildren learned the protocols of epistolary politesse as a core component of their education. In his late eighteenth-century letter-writing manual, *Munsha'āt-i dil-kushā* ('Letters that Ravish the Heart'), Sayyid Nisar Ali of Bareilly emphasised that his work would teach children the correct *ādāb* of letter writing: '[the book includes] a number of letters [of a kind] that the people of the time write to one other, with the courtesies and titles found in each, using language that should be suitable for the temperament of children who are in elementary education, and that should be easy [for them] to comprehend'.⁷³ Likewise, in his *Manāzīr al-Inshā'*, the fifteenth-century Deccani *wazīr* Mahmud Gawan (d. 1481) wrote that 'writing according to rank is the greatest quality of a scribe'.⁷⁴ This was perhaps even truer for the Naqshbandis: as one oft-cited epigram had it, 'Correct deportment is everything on the path of spiritual wayfaring (*al-tarīqa kulluhu ādāb*)'.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Shah Abd al-Aziz to Baba Usman Kashmiri, Letter 20, *Rasā'il*, pp. 34–36.

⁷⁰ There was some disagreement among scholars as to the value of rhyming prose but it was certainly not used simply for the purposes of memorisation, as some have argued. Mahmud Gawan writes, 'to this humble person the appearance of the flowers of rhymed prose on the sweet-smelling tree of eloquent speech causes fruit of agreeable nature'. He also argued, following al-Sakkaki's *Miftāh al-ʿulūm*, that the use of rhyme in the Quran was evidence of its superior quality. See Flatt, *The Courts of the Deccan Sultanates*, p. 189.

⁷¹ As Gully suggests, *adab* could mean both 'the combination of literary training and the acquisition of good manners and their output'. Gully, *The Culture of Letter-Writing*, p. 6.

⁷² M. Alam and S. Alavi, *A European Experience of the Mughal Orient* (New Delhi, 2007), p. 16. See also I. Ahmad Zilli, 'Development of *Inshā'* literature to the end of Akbar's reign', in *The Making of Indo-Persian Culture: Indian and French Studies*, (eds) M. Alam, F. N. Delvoeye and M. Gaborieau (New Delhi, 2000), pp. 310–311.

⁷³ Sayyid Nisar Ali Bukhari Barelwi, *Inshā-yi Dilkushā* ([Lucknow], 1873), p. 1.

⁷⁴ Cited in Flatt, *The Courts of the Deccan Sultanates*, p. 186.

⁷⁵ Arthur Buehler translates this as 'Behaving in a beautiful manner is everything on the path'. The phrase was cited by Ahmad Sirhindi in his own letters but is attributed to Abu Hafs Amr ibn Salama al-Haddad al-Nishapuri (d. 874). Buehler, *Revealed Grace*, p. 206, fn. 55.

There was a resultant concern to avoid sending letters without proper attention for epistolography protocol. Wali Allah once excused himself for not writing to Muhammad Ashiq during a period of bodily and spiritual affliction because he had not wished to produce a letter that was 'unartful' (*bī tasannu'*). Such letters were, he claimed, citing the Abbasid poet al-Mutannabi (d. 965), 'winds blowing with that which the ships do not desire'.⁷⁶ Even with an ethical imperative to maintain an exchange of letters with an absent friend, standards had to be maintained.

The Umani letters

To understand how Wali Allah's theoretical framework of 'spiritual friendship' and 'spiritual congruence' translated into practice, it is worth considering a series of letters that I term the Umani letters'. These letters illustrate clearly that Shah Wali Allah was willing to instigate a relationship with an individual for whom he had a pre-material spiritual affinity, and to receive an *ijāza* from him, without ever having a face-to-face meeting. Moreover, Shah Wali Allah wrote these letters to an individual known to him exclusively through a process of spiritual unveiling (*kashf*).⁷⁷ Shah Wali Allah did not know the individual's name: only his lineage (Yemeni), place of residence (Uman), physical characteristics, and intellectual outlook. Indeed, we have no evidence that the individual ever existed (at least, in the material world) and, as we shall see, Shah Wali Allah failed in his attempt to locate him.

The story of this unusual correspondence began in July 1750 (Sha'bān 1163). Every year, it was Muhammad Ashiq's established habit to travel from Phulat to Delhi to join Shah Wali Allah for a 40-day period of seclusion (*i'tikāf-i arba'in*). During this time, which lasted from the end of Sha'bān and continued throughout the month of Ramazān, Shah Wali Allah would receive spiritual unveilings that he would relate to Muhammad Ashiq who would write them down. It was during these periods of intensive spiritual 'unveiling' that Shah Wali Allah produced a number of his shorter treatises on *tasawwuf* and metaphysics. In 1750, however, because of some domestic obligation (*iltizām-i maqām-i ābā'-i in mustahām*),⁷⁸ Muhammad Ashiq wrote to Shah Wali Allah regretfully informing him that this year he would have to remain in Phulat.⁷⁹ Shah Wali Allah responded by telling Muhammad Ashiq it had occurred to him that, in recompense (*talāfi*) for their necessary and apparent separation (*mufāraqat-i sūriyya-i zarūriyya*), he would address his comments to Muhammad Ashiq's 'imaginal form (*sūrat-i misāliyya*)' and write down on paper whatever was feasible in the way of subtle points that would ordinarily have been discussed orally (*bi'l-mushāfaha*).⁸⁰ In this way, he continued, the conjuration (*naḡrang*) suggested by the phrase 'the exchange of letters is a kind of [oral] discourse (*al-mukātaba naw' min al-mukhātaba*)' would become apparent. Muhammad Ashiq tells us that after receiving this initial letter from Shah Wali Allah, he eagerly awaited his spiritual guide's 'discourses' (*mukhātabāt*).⁸¹

⁷⁶ Wali Allah to Muhammad Ashiq, Letter 36, *Makātīb*, vol. 2, pp. 273–274, p. 273.

⁷⁷ As Muhammad Ashiq writes, the letter 'was written to a dear one whose conditions were known by way of spiritual unveiling (*kashf*)'. Wali Allah to a beloved friend, Letter 109, *Makātīb*, vol. 1, pt. 2, pp. 178–179, p. 178.

⁷⁸ Although Muhammad Ashiq does not explicitly tell us that this is the exact wording of his own letter to Shah Wali Allah, we can surmise as much from the use of rhyming prose. Phulatī, *al-Qawl al-jalī*, p. 189.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* This letter is also included, without any context, in the *Makātīb*. Wali Allah to Muhammad Ashiq, Letter 84, *Makātīb*, vol. 2, pp. 327–328.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

It was in the first of these Ramazān discourses that Shah Wali Allah described a vision he had received of an unknown Umani scholar:

On one occasion, this image formed [before me] that in the realm of Uman, of which the port of Muscat is the coastal region, there is a righteous dear one [i.e. a member of a Sufi Way], characterised by the attributes of the people of God. He is aged in years and [although] in origin he is from the tribe of Himyar and is from Yemen, he finds himself in Uman. God looks towards him with mercy and his predilection is for the scholars of hadith. It is understood that this dear one is a Shāfiʿī [in jurisprudence] and Ashʿarī [in theology], and he is brilliant and well-known, even though he is dark-complexioned and chooses to live in obscurity and seclusion.⁸²

Shah Wali Allah took this vision very seriously indeed. He was convinced that he had a spiritual connection with the Umani scholar, despite not having met him in the material world. In fact, he resolved to contact this scholar in order to receive an *ijāza* from him as a precursor to a face-to-face meeting. Although they already had a spiritual bond, Shah Wali Allah was eager to generate connections in the material world, too. Therefore, he wrote the Umani scholar a letter (in Arabic, naturally):

From the one who stands in need of generous God's mercy, Wali Allah son of Abd al-Rahim—may God make their final resting places a permanent blessing—to the person he knows [only] by his attributes: namely, that he is Yemeni of origin, living in Uman, a scholar of hadith, a scholar of Shāfiʿī [jurisprudence], Ashaʿrī [in theology], with unbroken and elevated chains of transmission, one who has met shaykhs and studied with them, who is old in age, ruddy in complexion, and well-proportioned in height. Oh, my master, peace and God's mercy and blessings be upon you. This needy one is desirous of you: between us there is a spiritual congruence (*iʿtilāf rūhānī*). If God almighty wills a meeting, then it will occur. Please be so kind as to give me a report of your chains of transmission and the texts that you read to teachers (*maqrūʿāt*) and [the names of] your teachers, and all of the benefits [from your learning] and please be so kind as to grant an *ijāza*, so that my heart will be becalmed by that until the time of a [face-to-face] meeting. And ask God for the welfare and blessings of me, my children and my companions. Peace be upon you.⁸³

Having written this letter, the question then arose as to how Shah Wali Allah would ensure that it reached the nameless Umani scholar, known only by his attributes (*sifāt*). He decided to entrust it to one of his most learned students, Hafiz Jar Allah Panjabi, who happened to be travelling to the Haramayn for pilgrimage.⁸⁴ Jar Allah most likely set off for the pilgrimage the following year (1751) because, had he travelled in 1750, there would not have been enough time between the end of the rains in North India (late September)—when travel became feasible—and the beginning of the Hajj season

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁸³ Wali Allah to 'a dear friend', Letter 109, *Makātīb*, vol. 1, pt. 2, pp. 178–179.

⁸⁴ Jar Allah b. Abd al-Rahim of Lahore. This was not Jar Allah's first trip to the Haramayn. We have another letter that Shah Wali Allah sent to him in the 'Arab lands' written in 1748 describing the Jat attack on Delhi of that year. At some point he took on the *nisba* 'al-Madani' suggesting that he relocated permanently to the Hijaz, but it seems that he continued to make regular visits to Delhi, perhaps to visit Shah Wali Allah. We know that in 1173/1759, he received an *ijāza* for Wali Allah's *al-Musawwā* although it is, of course, possible that he received this remotely. See A. Khan, 'A unique ms. of *Fath al-Rahmān* by Shāh Walī Allāh', *Hamdard Islamicus* 5.1 (1982–1983), pp. 37–44, p. 44, en. 7.

that year (early November).⁸⁵ Shah Wali Allah wrote to Jar Allah with an unusual request: namely, to find this elderly scholar as he passed through Uman.⁸⁶

Shah Wali Allah wrote a letter to Jar Allah with instructions on how to locate the Umani scholar. He begins with a description of the initial vision: the wording is identical to that found in the passage cited above. Shah Wali Allah then continues:

Therefore, if you pass by Uman either as you are going [to the Haramayn] or at the time of returning, please make great effort to find this dear one. If you find him you will derive great benefit from him. Give him my greetings and tell him: 'This needy one [i.e. Wali Allah] has a particular spiritual love for you, in accordance with the hadith: "[The spirits are conscripted armies,] those which they recognise [from among the spirits], they are in harmony with them [and those they do not recognise, they are in disagreement with them]."'⁸⁷ And if the divine will is that [we] meet physically, the [truth of this hadith] will become manifest... According to how much time you have, please write to me with an *ijāza* for [the transmission of] hadith and a statement of your unbroken and elevated chains of transmission. *If I have the capacity to do so, I will visit you/Travelling headlong and walking joyfully.* If you do not have the opportunity to go to Uman, depute one of your friends or acquaintances to do so. Because underneath this is a subtle point. And God Almighty knows best the subtleties of affairs.⁸⁸

Jar Allah travelled on the pilgrimage and sought out the scholar when he disembarked from his ship at Muscat.

Unfortunately (though perhaps unsurprisingly), Jar Allah was unsuccessful in his attempts to find the nameless scholar. He wrote to Shah Wali Allah informing him of his failure. We know this because Shah Wali Allah sent another Arabic letter to Jar Allah while he was still in the Haramayn:

Your letter reached me and I read in it of the efforts that you made in the search for the man of the land of Uman and that it was not possible [for you] to meet him and that you did not hear news of him. May your good deed be attributed to Allah and may Allah reward you with a good reward. Indeed, your effort belongs to Allah and is in Allah. And perhaps here there is a secret about which you will be informed later. Do not struggle further in this search, for indeed the search has reached its point of maturation. But know that the sought-for man is elderly, tall, black in colour, and [wears] the clothes of a merchant. He is not among those who are known for their knowledge. Indeed, he is obscure and unknown. Do not continue to struggle in the search for him more than you have already.⁸⁹

Though this attempt failed, more importantly, it demonstrates that Wali Allah felt that his spiritual connection to this individual existed *prior* to any face-to-face meeting. As his citation of the hadith 'the spirits are conscripted armies' suggests, he understood their relationship to exist at a pre-material level of reality and he sought only to replicate and strengthen that connection in the material world.

⁸⁵ A journey of 45 days from the port of Surat to Jeddah was considered exceptionally fast. Phulātī, *al-Qawl al-jalī*, p. 40.

⁸⁶ Ships bringing pilgrims from the Mughal port of Surat to Jeddah would often stop at Muscat on the way.

⁸⁷ See the discussion of this hadith above.

⁸⁸ Wali Allah to Jar Allah, Letter 94, *Makātīb*, vol. 2, pp. 343–344.

⁸⁹ Wali Allah to Jar Allah, Letter 162, *Makātīb*, vol. 2, pp. 428–429.

***Ijāzas*: textual authorisations?**

As we saw earlier, Wali Allah was willing to exchange *ijāzas* with this enigmatic Umani scholar without feeling the need for a face-to-face meeting. In order to fully appreciate the significance of this, and therefore understand his framework of remote knowledge transmission, we must partially delink the granting of *ijāzas* from practices of oral knowledge transmission. Indeed, the misrecognition of remote transmission of knowledge in Islamicate South Asia derives, in part, from a number of misconceptions about the function of the *ijāza* as a technology.⁹⁰ Among historians of South Asia, the *ijāza* is often understood to be a document that was granted to a student on the basis of a satisfactory oral recitation of a book and a demonstration of their mastery of the text's meaning.⁹¹ According to this view, the teacher's presentation of the *ijāza* authorised the student to transmit that particular text to their own students.⁹² Scholars have argued that students would collect *ijāzas* for all of the individual texts that they had recited before a teacher or teachers.

While the genre of the *ijāza* cannot be discussed here in detail, it is worth noting that it was rather more fluid than such accounts suggest. Nor do these accounts reflect how *ijāzas* often functioned in eighteenth-century Naqshbandi circles.⁹³ *Ijāzas* produced by Wali Allah for his closest students clearly show that oral transmission of knowledge was not the only, or indeed the primary, purpose of companionship. Indeed, most *ijāzas* in Wali Allah's circle were not attestations of the correct recitation of a particular text. Rather, they were testimonies to the intellectual, spiritual, and ethical attainments of the recipient, as well as written records of the spiritual and affective bonds that existed between the granter and the recipient.⁹⁴

In cases where the prospective granter of an *ijāza* assessed the prospective recipient as capable but intellectually and spiritually undeveloped, the prospective recipient would undergo a rigorous period of companionship aimed at strengthening their capacities. This would usually involve a period of intellectual formation, including close study of certain texts in the context of face-to-face meetings as well as independent study and a demanding process of spiritual and ethical training (including the memorisation of prayer formulae, with their accompanying practices and the performance of menial tasks to inculcate humility). While an oral recitation of a text (or sections from certain texts) concluded the process, this was often performed in a ritualistic and ceremonial manner. Under no circumstances did it require the recipient to recite all of the *ijāza*-granter's own writings, let alone all of the texts that he was himself authorised to teach and transmit.⁹⁵ This was the case even in the context of hadith transmission where a prospective

⁹⁰ For a reflection on the confusion over the *ijāza* in modern scholarship, see Davidson, *Carrying on the Tradition*, pp. 109–111.

⁹¹ Robinson, 'Technology and religious change', pp. 235–236; Green, 'The uses of books', p. 244.

⁹² Robinson, 'Technology and religious change' pp. 235–236. By contrast, Davidson has argued that *ijāzas* for the purpose of transmission (as opposed to authorisations to teach) were, in fact, popularised at precisely the moment when 'time, distance or other factors made oral/aural transmission of the text unfeasible'. Davidson, *Carrying on the Tradition*, p. 109.

⁹³ For a detailed discussion, see D. Morgan, 'Spokesman of the Unseen World: Shāh Walī Allāh (1703–62), Islamic Reform and Applied Cosmology in Late-Mughal Delhi', (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Chicago, 2021), pp. 284–290.

⁹⁴ It should be emphasised that Wali Allah did not generally issue distinct *ijāzas* for the so-called 'esoteric' and 'exoteric' disciplines. In many cases, a disciple was granted a single authorisation for all fields. See, for example, the *ijāza* he granted his uncle Badr al-Haqq 'to teach Qur'ānic commentary and Prophetic hadith and jurisprudence and wayfaring [i.e. Sufism] and syntax'. As the text of the *ijāza* makes clear, it was issued following a period of companionship but without oral recitation of entire texts in any of these fields. Wali Allah to Badr al-Haqq, 22 Rabi' al-Awwal 1142 [15 October 1729], *al-Taḥfīmāt al-ilāhiyya* (Hyderabad, 1967), vol. 2, pp. 284–287.

⁹⁵ I use the masculine pronoun 'he' in this discussion because it reflects the source material. In eighteenth-century Delhi and its surrounding areas, female students did study the various Islamic disciplines, including law

ijāza recipient usually only recited the opening sections of the various hadith collections.⁹⁶ In other words, while this process of formation did include relatively short textual recitations, these were viewed as representative of the student's intellectual and spiritual attainments more broadly.

In these contexts, *ijāzas* tended to authorise the holder to transmit an entire corpus of texts or even whole fields of knowledge and practice mentioned in the document. Indeed, upon receipt of the *ijāza*, a student was sometimes permitted to transmit *all* texts and spiritual practices that the teacher was authorised to teach and transmit, or that he had himself written earlier or, indeed, that he *would* write in the future.⁹⁷ This kind of *ijāza*, sometimes described as a 'general *ijāza*' (*ijāza-i ʿāma*), obviated the need for further periods of face-to-face companionship (although, of course, this was desirable).⁹⁸

If a prospective *ijāza* granter felt that a prospective recipient was already intellectually and spiritually advanced, he might grant one without the need for an extended training process. While there might be a ceremonial recitation of sections (usually the openings) of particular texts, teachers sometimes issued *ijāzas* without requiring a face-to-face meeting at all. This generally occurred when a scholar was issuing an *ijāza* to another already established scholar or an individual from an illustrious scholarly lineage whose reputation preceded them. As we saw in the case of the Umani letters, established scholars, including Wali Allah, would sometimes write to other scholars and request an *ijāza* prior to a face-to-face meeting. In another letter, Shah Wali Allah wrote to Muhammad Wazih of Rae Bareilly, scion of the illustrious family of Sayyid Alam Allah, to tell him that 'everything for which I was granted permission by my own *shaykhs* is permitted [to you to use and transmit]'.⁹⁹ It does not seem that the two men ever had a face-to-face meeting, but Wali Allah had no compunction in authorising him to transmit these texts and spiritual practices.

What is most significant for the purposes of this article is that *ijāzas* were also attestations of the spiritual bond that had formed between the recipient and the granter. This bond figured in the text of the *ijāzas* as a form of *corporeal* identity between student and teacher. In one *ijāza* dated to 1733, for example, Wali Allah writes of his student that, after a long period of intellectual and spiritual training, 'his hand is my hand, and his tongue is my tongue'.¹⁰⁰ As with the sensory imagery discussed above, this suggests the spiritual congruence between the two individuals formed through periods of companionship. Once this connection had been established and the student had moved to a distant locale, these bonds might then be sustained through letters. Because the *ijāza* was a testament to the student's attainments—rather than evidence of an oral recitation of a particular text—the *ijāza* granter would, depending on the nature of the relationship, have little compunction in sending new books and other forms of written communication

and *tasawwuf*. However, texts produced by this particular group of scholars do not describe female education in great detail and all the extant *ijāzas* that I have encountered were produced by male teachers for male students.

⁹⁶ One might read, for example, one entire hadith collection in *sard* form, that is, at high speed, and then just portions of the other major collections. For more on hadith transmission in this period, see S. Reichmuth, 'Murtadā az-Zabīdī (d. 1791) in biographical and autobiographical accounts. Glimpses of Islamic scholarship in the 18th century', *Die Welt des Islams* 39.1 (March 1999), pp. 64–102, p. 71.

⁹⁷ Sabine Schmidtke, discussing eighteenth-century Shīa contexts, has described this genre of *ijāza* as 'text-independent' *ijāzas*. Sabine Schmidtke, 'The *ijāza* from 'Abd Allāh b. Šāliḥ al-Samāhijī to Nāṣir al-Jārūdī al-Qatīfī: a source for the Twelver Shi'ī scholarly tradition of Baḥrayn', in *Culture and Memory in Medieval Islam*, (eds) Farhad Daftary and Josef W. Meri (London and New York, 2003), pp. 64–85.

⁹⁸ For related practices, see Reichmuth, 'Murtadā az-Zabīdī', p. 72.

⁹⁹ Wali Allah to Muhammad Wazih, Letter 46, *Makātīb*, vol. 2, pp. 282–283.

¹⁰⁰ Wali Allah, 'Ijāza'.

to a student on the assumption that they possessed the right intellectual, spiritual, and ethical preparedness to study it alone.

The remote transmission of texts in these networks was quite distinct, then, from the anonymity of print culture. Texts continued to be circulated within close-knit networks of trust based on intellectual and spiritual attainment. However, recognition of these modalities of circulation allows us to move away from a model of textual transmission that relies on the stark binary between oral and written culture.

Remote book collaborations

As we have seen, important figures in eighteenth-century Naqshbandi networks regarded the exchange of letters as a form of spiritual companionship. With this framework in mind, the following section shows how this intellectual theory underwrote the remote exchange of texts. Members of Wali Allah's circle often conducted their scholarly activities remotely with trusted disciples and students, sometimes over significant distances. Indeed, the remote exchanges of books, both completed and draft manuscripts, were central to a number of Shah Wali Allah's scholarly projects. Whenever he had finished a book, Shah Wali Allah would usually send a clean copy (*mubayyaz*) to his chief disciple Muhammad Ashiq by post. As mentioned above, Wali Allah sent him a finished copy of *Hawāmi*¹⁰¹, his extensive and extremely dense commentary on *Hizb al-bahr*. In another letter, which we can date to around 1749, Shah Wali Allah wrote to Muhammad Ashiq to lament that he was struggling to write *Musaffā*, his commentary on Imam Malik's famous early hadith collection *Muwatta'*, and to reassure him that he would send it to him once it was finished.¹⁰¹ Although Shah Wali Allah's long-term amanuensis Muhammad Amin Kashmiri¹⁰² was responsible for turning drafts into clean copies before they were sent, Shah Wali Allah would sometimes send drafts directly to Muhammad Ashiq who would then produce a finished version that was ready for circulation and send it back to Delhi.¹⁰³

Because Wali Allah lived in Delhi and Muhammad Ashiq lived in Phulat, Wali Allah sought to manage Muhammad Ashiq's writing activities remotely. At some point, most likely in the 1740s, Wali Allah instructed Muhammad Ashiq to work on producing a 'Collected Works' (*kulliyāt*) that was to include *al-Intibāh fi salāsil awliyā' Allāh, Anfās al-ʿarīfin*, and *Lamahāt*. He also instructed Muhammad Ashiq on what to include in his well-known collection of short treatises and poems, *al-Tafhīmāt al-ilāhiyya*. As well as instructions for the production of the texts, Shah Wali Allah sent Muhammad Ashiq the materials necessary to prepare the manuscripts, noting that, along with his letter, the messenger should have brought 'paper, red dye (*shangarf*), and a ruler [for drawing straight lines] (*mistar*)'.¹⁰⁴

Shah Wali Allah also remotely guided Muhammad Ashiq on what should be included in *al-Qawl al-jalī*, the biography of Shah Wali Allah that he was then in the process of writing.

¹⁰¹ Wali Allah to Muhammad Ashiq, Letter 66, *Makātīb*, vol. 2, pp. 309–310.

¹⁰² Muhammad Amin Kashmiri had been a trader before becoming one of Wali Allah's disciples some time before 1743. His role in Wali Allah's establishment suggests that, despite his mercantile background, he was highly literate. Phulati, *al-Qawl al-jalī*, p. 464.

¹⁰³ See, for example, Wali Allah to Muhammad Ashiq, Letter 114, *Makātīb*, vol. 1, pt. 2, p. 182. In this letter Wali Allah responds to a letter in which Muhammad Ashiq writes that he has finished the clean copy (*tabyīz*) of *Intibāh*. See also Wali Allah to Muhammad Ashiq, Letter 13, *Makātīb*, vol. 1, p. 67. In this letter, Wali Allah acknowledges receipt of sections of *Ḥujjat Allāh al-bāliḡha* that Muhammad Ashiq had copied. Muhammad Ashiq seems to have served as the primary amanuensis until Muhammad Amin joined the Wali Allahi circle in the early 1740s and took over this role. Although Muhammad Ashiq continued to do some of this work, we can date any work drafted by Muhammad Amin to the post 1742/1743 period.

¹⁰⁴ Wali Allah to Muhammad Ashiq, Letter 42, *Makātīb*, vol. 2, pp. 277–278.

He told Muhammad Ashiq to include in the biography a letter that the recently deceased Muhammad Muin of Thatta had written to one Sayyid Sa‘d Allah, adding that Muhammad Ashiq should provide his own interpretation (*tarjuma*) of it. He gave further instructions about including letters that he (Wali Allah) had written, as well as a treatise by his uncle Shah Abu al-Riza and (a now-lost) treatise of his father, *Mā‘asir-i rahimiyya*. In the same letter, Shah Wali Allah also instructed Muhammad Ashiq to finish his incomplete commentary on *al-Khayr al-kathīr* and told him that, if he did not finish it, he should include the major points in his own book, *Dirāyāt*.¹⁰⁵ Even when face-to-face meetings were not possible, Shah Wali Allah was thus able to remotely guide the literary production of his leading disciple.

As mentioned earlier, it was not uncommon in these circles to send books of all genres by post. This included collections of hadith. We know, for example, that Muhammad Muin of Thatta sent Shah Wali Allah instalments of Abu Bakr b. Abi Shayba’s (d. 849) voluminous hadith collection, *Musannaf*, over the course of several years.¹⁰⁶ Wali Allah had only met Muhammad Muin once in 1730 as he made his way, via Sindh, to the Hijaz and the two men developed a close relationship, exchanging *ijāzas* before Wali Allah’s departure.¹⁰⁷ Despite meeting only once, and despite their increasingly divergent views on a number of crucial issues, they continued a regular exchange of extremely affectionate letters for some 17 years until the older man’s death in 1747.¹⁰⁸ This remote hadith transmission was not a one off: we also have a letter in which Wali Allah mentions that he has sent a book of *musalsalāt* hadith to Muhammad Ashiq.¹⁰⁹ Although hadith transmission is often viewed as paradigmatic for the practice of oral transmission, we see here how the model of spiritual friendship developed in this network meant that the remote transmission of hadith also took place.

We also have evidence that somewhat obscure Sufis, perhaps aspiring to become better known through a connection to important figures, would send their books to these celebrated individuals for them to read and perhaps publicise within their own networks. We have, for example, a letter in which Wali Allah responds to the missive of a now-obscure figure from Muzaffarnagar called Shah-i Awliya Muzaffarnagari. The original letter had arrived with a book (*kitābi*) that Wali Allah describes as ‘containing secrets and full of subtle points’.¹¹⁰ Although Wali Allah expresses a desire to meet his correspondent (*shawq-i mulāqāt ba-ham rasīd*) at some point in the future, his review of the book was politely withering.

Books of poetry were sent by post as well, on one occasion serving as the medium for the transport of the letter itself: in a letter written by Shah Abd al-Aziz, Shah Wali Allah’s

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Wali Allah writes, ‘Your letter accompanied by 53 sections (*juz*) of the *Musannaf* of Abū Bakr bin Abi Shayba arrived just as earlier, on two occasions, 53 parts arrived.’ Wali Allah to Muhammad Muin Tattawi, Letter 74, *Makātīb*, vol. 1, p. 135–136. Wali Allah thought that the work was of relatively little value. He placed it in the third rank of hadith collections, along with other texts whose compilers had not attempted to sift sound hadith from weak, nor to arrange the text in a way that would make it useful. Shah Wali Allah, *The Conclusive Argument from God: Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi’s Ḥujjāt Allāh al-Bāligha*, (trans.) Marcia Hermansen (New Delhi, 2013), p. 393.

¹⁰⁷ Basheer M. Nafi has suggested that the relationship between Muhammad Muin and Shah Wali Allah was most likely a latter-day fiction. B. M. Nafi, ‘A teacher of Ibn ‘Abd Al-Wahhāb: Muḥammad Ḥayāt Al-Sindī and the revival of *Aṣḥāb al-Ḥadīth*’s methodology’, *Islamic Law and Society* 13.2 (2006), pp. 208–241, p. 212. The evidence from Shah Wali Allah’s letters and biography clearly shows that they did indeed meet. However, Nafi is rightly sceptical of the idea that Muhammad Muin travelled to Delhi. This is, more likely, a confused reconstruction of their relationship based on the fact that Shah Wali Allah gave him an *ijāza* when he travelled to Thatta.

¹⁰⁸ Morgan ‘Spokesman of the Unseen World’, pp. 307–318.

¹⁰⁹ Wali Allah, *Makātīb*, vol. 1, pp. 152–153.

¹¹⁰ Wali Allah to Shah-i Awliya Muzaffarnagari, Letter 147, *Makātīb*, vol. 1, p. 221–222.

son, to his father-in-law Nur Allah Budhanwi, probably written in the early 1760s, he mentions that Nur Allah had sent him a copy of the *dīwān* of the contemporary Persian poet Muhammad Ali Hazin (d. 1776):

I read your graceful letter, which you had addressed to Khwajah Muhammad Amīn and inserted into the covering (*ghilāf*) of the *Dīwān-i Hazīn* [that you sent us]. I studied the various topics [discussed] in [the letter]... As for the *Dīwān al-Hazīn*, I read some of it from the morning until now and I have sent it back with the one carrying this letter.¹¹¹

In the same letter, Abd al-Aziz told Nur Allah that he was unable to send him the various books, written by the then-deceased Shah Wali Allah, that he had requested because the family was being forced to flee from Delhi in the face of an impending attack (presumably by the Marathas). He informed Nur Allah that the family had packed the contents of their library into sacks so they could bring them safely out of the city. The requested books included Shah Wali Allah's *Maktūb al-Madani*, written for Afandi Ismail al-Rumi, which settled the difference between *wahdat al-wujūd* and *wahdat al-shuhūd*, and his book on the Sunni caliphate, *Izālat al-khafāʾ*: 'As for [your] request for the written books, the decision is that I sealed them in bags that it is not possible to extract them at the moment. I will send them, God willing, after settling in a place.'¹¹² There is no sense in the letter that sending these books would be anything out of the ordinary.

The contents of this letter also reveal that it was not only finished books that were being circulated within these networks of trusted individuals. Although scholars have argued that the fear of textual corruption required strict protocols of oral transmission, we see that the bonds of trust among members of eighteenth-century Naqhsbandī circles meant that they were very willing to send unfinished drafts that still contained editorial amendments and other corrections. One of Shah Wali Allah's books that Nur Allah had requested—almost certainly *al-Musaffāʾ*²—was still in draft form at the time (it was completed posthumously in 1765) and Abd al-Aziz told him that he would only send the manuscript if Nur Allah agreed to 'not go beyond the limits [appropriate for] a draft', because 'in much of what is in it and in its notations—both omissions and lines written over it [for corrections]—the text is not suitable that anything be transcribed from it'.¹¹³ This last comment suggests that a clear distinction was made between formally 'published' texts (*mubayyaz*) and drafts (*taswīd/musawwada*). Both were circulated remotely among trusted networks of students and disciples, but only the published manuscripts were used as the basis of citation and/or the production of further copies. We know that Abd al-Aziz did eventually send the manuscript of *Musaffāʾ*² to Nur Allah, because in another letter he reported that the manuscript of the text had arrived safely back in Delhi.¹¹⁴

As lithographic printing took off in Bengal in the early nineteenth century, it seems that members of this circle began to engage in long-distance projects aimed at printing Wali Allah's work. In the 1820s, in the final decade of his life, Abd al-Aziz, Wali Allah's son, agreed to commission and send a copy of *Hujjat Allāh al-bāligha* to two contacts in Calcutta who had requested it so that they might produce the first lithographed edition. As Nur al-Hasan Rashid Kandhlawi has shown, the scholars Munshi Amin al-Din and

¹¹¹ Abd al-Azīz to Nur Allah Budhanwi, Letter 70, *Rasāʾil*, pp. 92–93.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Abd al-Azīz to Nur Allah Budhanwi, Letter 64, *Rasāʾil*, pp. 86–87: 'The book *al-Musaffāʾ*, a commentary on *al-Muwattāʾ* in Persian, which is one of the books of my father, may God have mercy upon him, and the manuscript of the *Sharh al-Chaghmini*, [both] reached me safely. So, rest your mind on this matter.'

his brother Munshi Naim al-Din, perhaps disciples of Abd al-Aziz's father, wrote in late 1821 asking for a copy of the text for publication. Abd al-Aziz willingly agreed to the request and asked only that they send Rs 13 for copying costs.¹¹⁵ Although this early nineteenth-century lithographic project did not come to fruition, it is notable that Abd al-Aziz, who (as noted above) was already sending uncollated manuscript copies of *Hujjat* to contacts in distant cities in the late eighteenth century, seemed to register no particular concern about the implications of this new technology or the threat it posed to face-to-face transmission.

Conclusion

By focusing closely on the practices of a small group of scholars, albeit a highly important and influential one, we are able to see that older models of textual transmission that rely on a simple binary between oral and written cultures do not capture the complex particularities of knowledge circulation among Muslim intellectuals of pre-colonial eighteenth-century India. This article has shown that a prominent circle of eighteenth-century Naqshbandis was perfectly willing to engage in modes of textual transmission that seem to diverge from classical protocols of face-to-face oral transmission. The psychological and spiritual theoretical framework in which members of this circle operated explains their willingness to engage in these practices. Because spirits could commune across physical time and space, the need for face-to-face transmission became obsolete in certain cases.

We cannot, however, conflate the remote transmission of texts within these networks with the anonymity of print culture. The idea of person-to-person transmission remained important, and texts were circulated within close-knit networks of trust based on intellectual and spiritual attainment. In order to understand what changed in the transition to print cultures of the nineteenth century, it is crucial to recognise both the continuities and ruptures that this transition produced within the various and contextually specific manuscript cultures that flourished in Islamicate early modernity.

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¹¹⁵ Kandhlawi, 'Hujjat Allāh al-bāligha', p. 63.

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