Virtual allegiance: online baya’a practices within a worldwide Sufi Order

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Much has been reported (Campbell 2013; Katz 2012) about the way means of communication, including language, based on the face-to-face encounters and physical proximity that characterise traditional religious ceremonies and rituals are, in the present age, being complemented and transformed by what some are calling cyber-rituals (Jacobs 2007). These cyber rituals and ceremonies, at first glance, might seem to be ritually impoverished by such distancing vis-à-vis their physical equivalents. At the same time, the transformation of profane cyberspace into virtual sacred space (Durkheim 1912; O’Leary 1995), increases the opportunities for participation in such rituals and ceremonies even when respective participants are physically separated from one another (Jacobs 2007; Jakobsh 2006). This paper will share some online data pertaining to an instance of such virtual, and asynchronous, ritual performance in the context of religious oaths of allegiance (Bleeker 1965), or baya’a, which are traditionally undertaken face-to-face, within an established and worldwide Sufi Order or tariqah. Through an analysis of two online ‘sacred portals’ and associated online forums, the sociolinguistic dimensions of such practices are analysed with a view to evaluating the potential of the internet to support ritual practices within a sacred cyberspace. These dimensions include the use of English, the use of Roman script, multilingual discourses and translation and the co-sanctification (Fishman 2006) of sacred script.

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