

Sufi Chanting and Altered State of Consciousness: A Preliminary Review

Zikir Sufi dan Perubahan Keadaan Kesedaran: Tinjauan Awal

Arfah Ab. Majid¹, Jia Lei²

¹ Department of Government and Civilization Studies, Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia

² Department of Government and Civilization Studies, Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia

Article progress

Received: 5 November 2024

Accepted: 9 September 2025

Published: 30 November 2025

**Corresponding author:*

Arfah Ab. Majid, Department of government and Civilization Studies, Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia
Email: am_arfah@upm.edu.my

Abstract: This preliminary study explores the role of Sufi chanting in inducing Altered States of Consciousness (ASC), known in Sufism as fanā'. Practices such as dhikr are central to Islamic mysticism and are well-recognized for their impact on psychological well-being and spiritual growth. Through content analysis of past literature and communication artefacts (texts, audio, video, and visual materials), this study examines the mechanisms of chanting, particularly its rhythmic and melodic dimensions, in facilitating ASC and promoting well-being. The initial findings reveal that ASC or fanā' induced through Sufi chanting significantly enhances emotional regulation, reduces stress, and fosters deep meditation and spiritual connection. Importantly, the review highlights how specific elements of chanting such as rhythm, repetition, and group synchrony contribute to fanā'-induced ASC, thereby enhancing psychological well-being. The findings further suggest that incorporating traditional spiritual practices like Sufi chanting into contemporary therapeutic models may improve mental health interventions, offering a culturally sensitive and holistic approach that integrates both spiritual and psychological dimensions of health.

Keywords: Sufi Chanting, Dhikr, Fanā', Altered States of Consciousness (ASC), Psychological Well-being

Abstrak: Kajian awal ini meneroka peranan zikir sufi dalam mendorong Perubahan Keadaan Kesedaran (ASC), yang dikenali dalam tasawuf sebagai fanā'. Amalan seperti zikir adalah teras kepada tasawuf Islam dan diiktiraf kerana kesannya terhadap kesejahteraan psikologi dan pertumbuhan rohani. Melalui analisis kandungan kesusasteraan lalu dan artifak komunikasi (teks, audio, video dan bahan visual), kajian ini mengkaji mekanisme nyanyian, terutamanya dimensi berirama dan melodinya, dalam memudahkan ASC dan menggalakkan kesejahteraan. Penemuan awal mendedahkan bahawa ASC atau fanā' yang disebabkan oleh nyanyian sufi dengan ketara meningkatkan peraturan emosi, mengurangkan tekanan, dan memupuk meditasi yang mendalam dan hubungan rohani. Yang penting, ulasan itu menyerlahkan bagaimana unsur-unsur nyanyian khusus seperti irama, pengulangan dan penyegerakan kumpulan menyumbang kepada ASC yang disebabkan oleh fanā', dengan itu meningkatkan kesejahteraan psikologi. Penemuan seterusnya mencadangkan bahawa menggabungkan amalan rohani tradisional seperti nyanyian Sufi ke dalam model terapeutik kontemporari boleh meningkatkan campur tangan kesihatan mental, menawarkan pendekatan sensitif budaya dan holistik yang mengintegrasikan kedua-dua dimensi kesihatan rohani dan psikologi.

Kata kunci: Zikir Sufi, Zikir, Fanā', Perubahan Keadaan Kesedaran (ASC), Kesejahteraan Psikologi

Introduction

Achieving spiritual enlightenment by chanting is a common practice in Islamic mysticism i.e. Sufism. *fanā'*, one of the spiritual enlightenment in Sufism, is the term for the total destruction of the self in the divine, attained via chanting among other rituals (Laughlin & Takahashi, 2020). The purpose of this review is to explore how Sufi chanting affects *fanā'* as a form of Altered States of Consciousness. The precariousness of psychological and mental state has been highlighted by the increased stress, anxiety, and depression levels seen throughout the world (Li, 2023; Tran et al., 2022).

Numerous researches have revealed that the ASC can impact an individual's overall psychological well-being (Corneille & Luke, 2021; Drigas et al., 2022). The accomplishment of ASC is becoming better acknowledged for its profound effect on mental health (Cheung et al., 2023). ASC is being investigated progressively in academic literature for its ability to support transformative experiences that improve self-awareness, emotional regulation, and cognitive functioning, all of which have a direct impact on a person's psychological well-being (Perry et al., 2022). The ASC study offers insightful information about enhancing psychological well-being and highlights the need for further thorough research in this area. Religious chanting has gained attention in tandem with the growing body of research on Altered States of Consciousness (ASC) because it can induce ASC experiences, making it an effective therapeutic tool in a variety of cultural contexts (Perry et al., 2021). Chanting is thought to cause ASC, which may have positive psychological effects. Chanting is commonly acknowledged as a spiritual development aid and a conduit to the divine (Weinel, 2018; Dudeja, 2017).

In the Islamic tradition, this practice aligns with the concept of *dhikr* (the remembrance of God) which is emphasized throughout the Qur'an and Hadith as a means to spiritual elevation and divine proximity. The Qur'an states that "in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest" (Qur'an 13:28), encouraging believers to remember God "much" and "morning and evening" (Qur'an 33:41–42). The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) described *dhikr* as the best of deeds, superior even to charity and warfare (al-Tirmidhi, Hadith 3377). In a Hadith Qudsi, Allah states that He is present with the one who remembers Him, especially in a gathering (al-Bukhari, Hadith 502). Classical scholars such as al-Ghazali (n.d.) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (n.d.) elaborated on the transformative effects of *dhikr*, asserting that it purifies the soul and draws the seeker closer to the Divine. In Sufi traditions, rhythmic chanting of divine names is used to induce heightened states of consciousness and intimacy with God (Ernst, 2003).

Many spiritual contexts, including Sufi practices that use chanting to promote divine connection and facilitate entry into trance states, have well-documented the ability of chanting to induce ASC (Vernon, 2009). After delving deeper into the various concepts associated with these traditions, it is clear that in Sufism, *fanā'* refers to Altered States of Consciousness (ASC) (Isgandarova, 2019; Valverde, 2021). According to Beyad and Vafa (2021) *fanā'* is the collapse of the ego in the divine in Sufism. Although chanting is widely used in many cultures and traditions as a tool for spiritual development and altered states of consciousness, the underlying mechanisms of this practice are still mostly unknown.

However, there is still lack of comprehensive understanding on how specific elements of sufi chanting contribute to *fanā'* or Altered States of Consciousness and consequently lead to psychological well-being. While Sufi chanting (*dhikr*, *sama'*) has long been associated with mystical experiences such as *fanā'*, and traditional scholarship has addressed the theological and philosophical goals of such practices (Sells, 1996; Ernst, 2003), there remains a noticeable gap in the literature regarding how specific rhythmic and auditory elements of these chants contribute to altered states of consciousness (ASC) and their impact on mental health (Karam, 2018; Laughlin & Throop, 2001). Most existing studies focus on ritual experience or cultural context, without integrating psychological or neuroscientific insights, suggesting the need for interdisciplinary approaches to better understand the mechanisms involved.

Methodology

The research questions therefore focus on what are the rhythm and tempo and what are the specific mechanisms in Sufi chanting that can elicit *fanā'* or ASC? This preliminary review therefore, aims at exploring sufi chanting by focusing on the rhythm and tempo and its influence in inducing Altered States of Consciousness (ASC). In order to gain an initial understanding on this matter, this study employs content analysis method such as past literatures and

communication artefacts such as texts of various formats, pictures, audio and video related to Sufi Chanting and Altered States of Consciousness.

Results & Discussion

Overview of Rhythm and Tempo in Sufi Chanting

Chanting is a vocal style in which particular sounds or phrases are repeated in a rhythmic fashion (Perry et al., 2021). In many cultures, including Sufism (Gao et al., 2019) chanting is an essential part of religious rituals (Perry et al., 2021). It entails repeating a word or phrase while frequently adding musical components like melody, rhythm and tempo (Layade, 2019). It is a widespread practice that is employed for spiritual goals such as fostering a sense of community, curing ailments, and enhancing mental health (Gao et al., 2019). Chanting has the potential to bring about mystical experiences marked by a deep sense of peace. Even though chanting is widely practiced, the psychological effects of chanting are not fully understood (Pal et al., 2020).

Chanting is a vocal style in which particular sounds or phrases are repeated in a rhythmic fashion (Perry et al., 2021). In many cultures, including Sufism, chanting is an essential part of religious rituals (Gao et al., 2019; Perry et al., 2021). Within the Sufi tradition, chanting takes the form of dhikr (remembrance), which involves the repetitive vocalization of divine names or sacred phrases such as “La ilaha illa Allah” (“There is no god but God”) or “Allahu” (“God”), often performed in group settings with coordinated breathing, swaying, and rhythmic body movements (Ernst, 2003; Karam, 2018). Some Sufi orders also engage in sama’, a ritual that includes chanting with music, melody, and movement, especially in the form of devotional poetry (qawwali) or spiritual songs (ilahi) that aim to evoke a heightened emotional state and draw the participant closer to the Divine (During, 1992; Sells, 1996). These practices integrate musical components such as melody, tempo, and rhythm to intensify spiritual immersion and are believed to aid in attaining altered states of consciousness, including fanā’ - a mystical state of self-annihilation in the Divine (Nasr, 2007; Rouget, 1985). Sufi chanting serves not only spiritual goals but has also been associated with fostering a sense of community, reducing anxiety, and enhancing psychological well-being (Karam, 2018; Pal et al., 2020). Despite its widespread use and reported benefits, the psychophysiological mechanisms behind chanting especially in the context of Sufism remain underexplored in empirical literature (Laughlin & Throop, 2001; Pal et al., 2020).

As is common in spiritual traditions like Islamic mystical tradition, chanting is practiced worldwide in a variety of cultural contexts. Although specific sounds and phrases applied may vary, the goal is frequently to produce Altered States of Consciousness (Nakissa, 2020; Sik et al., 2021). Chanting religiously can lead to Altered States of Consciousness that may have positive psychological effects, strengthen one's spiritual development, and strengthen one's relationship with the divine (Dubbini et al., 2020). Numerous psychologists and religious scholars have expressed interest in the use of chanting as a means of inducing Altered States of Consciousness (Anagnostou-Laoutides, 2022; Roche, 2017). Religions of all kinds view chanting as a means to reach Altered States of Consciousness (ASC) (Goldman, 2022).

Another name for chanting is Dhikr or Zikr. This is an essential Sufi activity (Saniotis, 2018). Islamic mystical strand places a strong emphasis on a person's spiritual relationship with God (Karim, 2020). Sufi chanting (dhikr)—comprising both vocal repetition and meditative internal remembrance—is often paired with music, rhythmic movement, and gesture (e.g., sama’) (Thibdeau, 2025). This practice aims to purify the heart and soul, fostering divine proximity through heightened spiritual awareness (Thibdeau, 2025). Practitioners may experience states of ecstatic absorption (wajd), trance-like union with the divine precipitated by sensory immersion in sound and movement (Toussulis, 2021). Dhikr rituals are embedded within structured communal and mystical frameworks such as those found in the Karkariyya, Alawiyya, and Kubrawiyya orders, underscoring its central role in transformative spiritual disciplines (Thibdeau (2025); Afrashteh, 2024). Some scholars even draw parallels between the rhythmic and psycho-corporal dynamics of dhikr and modern expressive therapies (Walid Khalid & Hughes, 2015).

Islamic text, which promotes remembering God to become closer to Him spiritually, is the source of Sufi chanting (Knysh, 2019). Sufi chanting is widely used in Islamic traditions, but little is known about its psychological consequences. On the other hand, recent investigations have demonstrated that chanting can lead to altered states of consciousness, which can significantly affect psychological health. Insights into the function of spiritual practices in Islamic traditions in fostering well-being and mental health can be gained from more research on this subject.

To further elaborate on this point, it is important to point out that academic research consistently acknowledges the significance of rhythm and tempo in religious chanting across a range of cultures (Perry et al., 2022; Valoma, 2022). These components are essential to the organization and expression of religious chanting, and they frequently provide a particular spiritual environment that encourages participation (Perry et al., 2021). Their deep impact goes so far as to mould people's subjective experiences during religious chanting, impacting their mental, emotional, and psychological health (Yaden et al., 2016).

Although melody has received a lot of attention for its influence on religious experiences (Clarke, 2020), the relative importance of rhythm and pace has been unexpectedly undervalued. This knowledge gap highlights the necessity for thorough empirical research into the mechanisms and consequences of rhythm and tempo in religious chanting in order to better understand their roles and sort through the intricate relationships between them. Two different approaches have been used in the past studies to further investigate how rhythm and tempo shape religious experiences (Rocamora, 2018; Samhani et al., 2022). Employing computational models of music perception and cognition is one method for researching how rhythm and tempo influence practitioners' religious experiences (Rocamora, 2018). These models could be used to study the ways in which tempo and rhythm affect chanters' overall religious experience (Perry et al., 2021).

Through controlled trials, researchers can manipulate these musical aspects to investigate their effects on practitioners' emotional, cognitive, and psychological reactions. This can provide insight into the mechanisms that underlie the transformative potential of chanting (Perry et al., 2022). However, the important function that religious chanting plays in psychological elements is ignored in favour of the effect that religious chanting has on physiological features in all these studies.

Altered States of Consciousness

A variety of experiences that differ from the typical waking state of consciousness are referred to as Altered States of Consciousness (Wittmann, 2018). Numerous techniques, such as hypnosis, meditation, prayer, psychedelic drugs, and other spiritual activities like drumming, dancing, or chanting, might cause these experiences (Bronkhorst, 2022). ASCs can involve experiences like mystical or transcendent states, sensations of oneness with the universe, vivid images, and hallucinations. They are characterized by alterations in perception, thought, emotion, and sense of self (Fromm, 2017). While certain ASCs are seen to be advantageous for well-being, spiritual development, and personal progress, others could have unfavourable consequences including worry, confusion, or delusions (Thomas & Barušs, 2022). Psychologists, anthropologists, and neuroscientists have all been interested in studying ASCs because it offers insights on the nature of consciousness and the brain and cultural factors that underlie it (Clark, 2021).

The primary underlying cause of ASC is the loss of the self; other causes are only alternative means of causing this loss. Second, hallucinations, paranormal events, mystical experiences, and heightened awareness are the four main phenomena shared by all varieties of ASC. These occurrences are universal to all forms of ASC, regardless of how they are induced. A significant and abrupt divergence from the ordinary subjective experience of normal or awake consciousness characterizes altered states of consciousness (ASC) (Dittrich, 1998; Studerus et al., 2010). A number of techniques, including the use of psychoactive chemicals, particular breathing and meditation techniques, or the purposeful limitation of sensory input, can result in Altered States of Consciousness (ASC).

ASC show similarities or characteristics in spite of these differences (Studerus et al., 2010; Schmidt & Berkemeyer, 2018). In order to link changes in subjective experiences to the physiological mechanisms regulating them, the intentional induction of Altered States of Consciousness (ASC) through experimental methods has therefore attracted interest in the field of cognitive neuroscience (Schmidt & Berkemeyer, 2018). One major goal for the fields of neuroscience and psychiatry is to define the neurological mechanisms underlying both pathological diseases (like psychosis) and states of well-being (like mindfulness).

Additionally, a new theory is presented regarding the possible causal relationships between the practice of mindfulness and various Altered States of Consciousness. It is imperative for practitioners to foresee these circumstances proactively and manage them successfully (Galante et al., 2023). Scientific research has focused on the application and study of Altered States of Consciousness (ASC) as a psycho-physiological phenomenon with the aim of

achieving pre-defined success in humans. It could be used as a defense against outside manipulation of a person's or group's consciousness, conduct, or acts (Pirovski & Saghir, 2022).

There are possible channels for purposeful application of a dynamic spiral flow of successive ASC in order to improve the body's ability for adaptation. Five people who had previously completed mandala construction as a kind of meditation were the subjects of a research by Donnalley (2022). According to the results, there were signs of changed awareness in four of the five participants. Mandalas are acknowledged as a potentially helpful and long-lasting tool for people who want to reduce feelings of depression and mental illness.

Furthermore, the utilization of tobacco shamanism, the Tennessee Diviner (TD) position, and cultural norms within the shamanic practices of the Casas Grandes Medio period (AD 1200 to 1450) in the North American Southwest are described by VanPool et al. (2023). These techniques were used in ceremonies for divination, to create trance states, and to aid in soul journey. The authors offer a theoretical framework that suggests that different trance experiences result from the intricate interaction between human cognition and a number of extrinsic factors, including entheogens, cultural norms, physiological circumstances, physical postures and movements, and auditory and sensory impressions. Empirical and anthropological evidence has demonstrated that inducing trance states can be accomplished by either intoxication with tobacco or by adopting the TD position while listening to a fast-tapping drum or rattle.

These techniques have been linked to transformational experiences, experiences of soul journey, and the attainment of knowledge or divination. These two phenomena yield similar results, but their combination, as was common throughout the Medio period, certainly contributed to the trance states that were considered culturally significant. The phenomenon of mutual reinforcement was most likely a feature of tobacco-based shamanism, which was practiced by several American indigenous civilizations. The authors suggest using a comprehensive model to analyze how various aspects of trance induction interact in order to explain cultural phenomena seen in many societies, including the resulting cosmological and spiritual frameworks that anthropologists have documented.

Fanā' as an Altered State of Consciousness and Catalyst for Spiritual Transformation

Altered States of Consciousness can be induced in many ways, but they all share common characteristics: a loss of identity that is universal and the constant presence of four phenomena: hallucinations, mystical experiences (such as fanā'), paranormal events, and increased awareness (Prysiazniuk, 2017; Roseman et al., 2018; Huang, 2019). ASC has many different and intricate implications, especially on psychological well-being. For example, ASC produced via meditation has been associated with decreased symptoms of anxiety and depression as well as increased endogenous opioid synthesis, which enhances feelings of wellbeing (Saniotis, 2018). ASC may also have a favorable effect because they have been linked to a drop in cortisol levels, a hormone that is strongly related to stress (Uthaug et al., 2020).

However, it is important to understand that some types of ASC, especially those brought on by drugs that alter consciousness, might be harmful to psychological health. These detrimental effects can include cardiovascular issues, reduced cognitive performance, and a higher risk of mental health disorders. Addiction is a potential side effect of using these drugs to induce ASC, and the risk rises with increased dosage and frequency of usage. Examining the potential advantages and drawbacks of ASC is essential when assessing their influence on psychological well-being because of these variable effects. To fully comprehend the mechanisms underlying ASC induction and their subsequent impacts, further research is necessary. This is especially true when considering religious chanting activities like those seen in Sufism.

Initial findings indicate that altered states of consciousness (ASC), particularly fanā', induced through Sufi chanting (dhikr) are associated with enhanced emotional regulation, reduced stress, and experiences of deep meditation and spiritual connection. Neurophysiological evidence demonstrates that dhikr practice produces distinctive brain perfusion patterns linked with feelings of surrender and transcendence (Newberg et al., 2015), as well as increased cortical synchronization consistent with meditative depth (Can Aren & Tarlacı, 2022). Empirical studies further reveal that dhikr interventions significantly reduce anxiety, stress, and cortisol levels among clinical and non-clinical populations (Amir et al., 2018; Sulistyawati et al., 2019; Kurniawati et al., 2024). In addition, chanting research more broadly shows reductions in stress and depressive symptoms, improvements in attentional control, and facilitation of mystical or transcendent experiences (Perry et al., 2022). Ethnographic analyses of Sufi ritual confirm that group dhikr often

culminates in states of trance and self-annihilation (fanā'), which are perceived as profound spiritual connection with the Divine (Geels, 1996).

Drawing on al-Ghazali's exposition in Kitāb al-Arba'īn fī Usūl al-Dīn, fanā' emerges as a spiritual-psychological mechanism: sustained focus on divine majesty leads to dissolution of ego-dependency and reframing of personal stress through divine trust. Fanā', or the annihilation of the self, occupies a central position in the Sufi path toward divine union. According to al-Ghazali's classical model, fanā' involves a deep experiential focus on the majesty of Allah coupled with a release from dependency on external circumstances-effectively reframing life's stressors through divine presence (Adam et.al. 2020).

Meanwhile, broader Sufi psychology charts mystical progress through successive transformations of the nafs-culminating in fanā', which clears the path for communion with God and the internalization of divine virtues. In parallel, the Sufi trajectory of soul purification moves from the ego-driven nafs-e ammāra toward the serene nafs-e mutma'innah, culminating in profound communion with God. Fanā' is the pivotal shift enabling this transformation, enabling the mystic to step beyond ego and dwell in spiritual realization (haqqeqa) (Nizamie, et.al, 2013). Contemporary qualitative studies affirm that fanā' initiates a lifelong transformative process, reinforced by ongoing mentorship and characterized by enduring traits such as equanimity, patience, and surrender. Moreover, lived accounts of spiritual transformation among contemporary Sufis reveal that fanā' is not a permanent destination but part of an ongoing journey. Often triggered by sudden spiritual experiences, the progression toward inner peace and Godward qualities persist throughout life, mediated by guidance from spiritual mentors (Trimulyaningsih, 2024).

The fundamental idea of fanā' in Sufism is the destruction of the ego, which leads to a condition of oneness with the divine (Beyad & Vafa, 2021). Various techniques, including chanting and meditation, which are thought to generate Altered States of Consciousness (ASC), are used to help this process of self-negation. A sense of oneness with the divine, ego loss, and expanded awareness are characteristics of these ASC, and they are thought to be routes to enlightenment and spiritual purification (Saniotis, 2018; Laughlin & Takahashi, 2020).

Although there is not much information on ASC led on by fanā', early study points to possible advantages for mental health. For example, Sufi chanting has been linked to lowering blood pressure, promoting serenity, and decreasing anxiety (Isgandarova, 2019). Sufi meditation techniques have also demonstrated potential in boosting general wellbeing, lowering symptoms of anxiety and depression, and increasing cognitive performance (Gul & Jehangir, 2019).

Mechanisms of Sufi Chanting in Inducing Fanā' and Psychological Well-Being

Sufi chanting (dhikr) is not merely a devotional act but also a complex psychophysiological process that engages multiple sensory, cognitive, and affective systems. Specific elements of chanting contribute to the induction of Altered States of Consciousness (ASC) such as fanā' (self-annihilation), which in turn foster psychological well-being. One of the most central mechanisms is the repetition of sacred words and Divine Names, which reduces discursive thought and promotes deep attentional focus. This form of semantic saturation enables the practitioner to disengage from everyday rumination, thereby quieting the mind and facilitating self-transcendence (Perry et al., 2022). In the Sufi tradition, this repetition is seen as gradually eroding the ego and opening the heart to remembrance of God (dhikr Allāh), a key pathway toward fanā' (Geels, 1996).

A second crucial element is rhythmic breath synchronization. Sufi dhikr is often coordinated with controlled inhalation and exhalation, producing a physiological entrainment that activates the parasympathetic nervous system. Empirical evidence suggests that such breath regulation reduces stress hormones, lowers anxiety, and produces a sense of calm (Can Aren & Tarlacı, 2022). In Sufi metaphysics, the breath (nafas) is considered the subtle vehicle of life, which, when purified through dhikr, leads to serenity (sukūn).

The musical and rhythmic structure of dhikr further enhances its transformative effect. Many practices begin with slow, soft recitations and gradually intensify into loud, fast-paced chanting, often accompanied by swaying, clapping, or instrumental support (Rouget, 1985). This crescendo generates entrainment between physiological rhythms (heart rate, respiration) and the external chant, thereby facilitating trance and ASC. The intensification is symbolically understood as a rising flame of longing (shawq), culminating in the dissolution of self in Divine presence.

Equally significant is the collective dimension of chanting. Dhikr is frequently performed in circles (ḥadra), where group synchrony in sound, breath, and movement creates powerful experiences of unity. Social neuroscience indicates that collective rhythm increases oxytocin and enhances social bonding, which strengthens feelings of safety, belonging, and emotional regulation (Tarr et al., 2014). Within the Sufi worldview, the collective effacement of individuality mirrors cosmic unity, reinforcing the experience of fanā' fī al-jamā'a (annihilation in the community).

In addition, embodied movement such as rocking, swaying, or whirling contributes to the immersive depth of dhikr. These movements amplify sensory absorption, reduce external distractions, and facilitate flow states (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Sufis interpret this movement as a symbolic orbit around the Divine, with the body mirroring the soul's rotation toward its ultimate source.

Finally, the semantic and theological content of dhikr distinguishes it from secular forms of chanting. The invocation of Divine Names and Qur'anic phrases imbues the practice with profound existential and spiritual significance. Neuroimaging studies suggest that words with sacred salience activate deep affective circuits in the brain, leading to experiences of awe, surrender, and transcendence (Newberg et al., 2015). This sacred orientation grounds the psychological benefits of dhikr in a framework of meaning, thereby integrating spiritual experience with mental well-being.

Taken together, these elements (i.e. repetition, rhythmic breathing, musicality, group synchrony, embodied movement, and sacred meaning) interact synergistically to induce states of ASC and fanā'. The resultant psychological outcomes include reduced stress, enhanced emotional regulation, greater social connectedness, and profound spiritual fulfilment. In this sense, Sufi chanting can be understood not only as a religious ritual but also as a holistic psycho-spiritual technology that promotes human flourishing.

Conclusion

Despite its significant impact on psychological well-being, it is important to take into account any possible hazards related to fanā'-induced ASC. There might be detrimental psychological repercussions for some individuals, particularly for those who already have mental health issues, such as paranoia or delusions. In addition, some fanā'-related practices, such as extended fasting or sleep deprivation, may be harmful to one's physical health. In a nutshell, fanā'-induced ASC in Sufism can lead to spiritual enlightenment and purification as well as having a favourable impact on psychological health, but there are also risks involved, especially for those who are experiencing medical conditions. Therefore, more investigation is required to completely comprehend the intricate relationships among fanā', ASC, and psychological health.

This preliminary review also highlights that comprehensive research on the connection between rhythm and tempo in chanting and ASC remains generally inadequate. For example, it is not yet clear whether specific rhythmic or tempo patterns are more likely to foster beneficial states of fanā' or, conversely, produce detrimental effects. This emphasizes how urgently targeted research with the goal of proving causal relationships is needed, particularly knowledge of how the rhythm and tempo of religious chanting influence ASC and, consequently, psychological well-being. In addition, this review suggests that the specific elements of Sufi chanting including repetition of sacred words, rhythmic breathing, musicality and crescendo, group synchrony, embodied movement, and sacred semantic content play a crucial role in inducing ASC and fanā'. These mechanisms provide a clearer understanding of how chanting contributes to reduced stress, enhanced emotional regulation, increased social connectedness, and profound spiritual fulfilment. Recognizing these mechanisms helps move the discussion beyond general observations to more precise explanatory models that can be empirically tested.

Finally, this review implies that integrating traditional spiritual practices such as Sufi chanting into modern therapy paradigms can enrich mental health interventions. With their holistic advantages that incorporate psychological and spiritual health, these practices offer a culturally sensitive and potentially transformative approach to well-being.

Acknowledgement

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support from Universiti Putra Malaysia through the Geran Putra (IPS), Project No. GP-IPS/2024/9785500 (Cost Center No. 9785500).

Reference

- Amir, F., Halim, M., & Rahayu, N. (2018). Dhikr (recitation) and relaxation improve stress perception and reduce blood cortisol level in type 2 diabetes mellitus patients with OAD. *Fakultas Kedokteran, Universitas Airlangga*.
- Anagnostou-Laoutides, E. (2022). Man before God: Music and Silence as Induction to Altered States of Consciousness from Plato to Clement of Alexandria. In *Later Platonists and their Heirs among Christians, Jews, and Muslims* (pp. 25-60). Brill.
- Adam, N. & Syed Omar, Syed Hadzrullathfi & Baru, Rohai & Ali, M. & Ismail, Mohd Sani & Engku Wok Zin, Engku & Mohamad, Zaidin. (2020). Fana 'As Stress Therapy According To Al-Ghazali Through Kitab Al-Arba'in Fi Usul Al-Din. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*. 10.10.6007/IJARBS/v10-i11/8207.
- Afrashteh, S. (2024). Dhikr in Islamic Sufism: A case study: the Order of Kubrawiyya. *Journal of the Institute for Sufi Studies*, 3 (1), 20–35.
- Al-Bukhari, M. I. (n.d.). *Sahih al-Bukhari* (Book 75, Hadith 502). Retrieved from <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:6408>
- Al-Ghazali, A. H. (n.d.). *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* [The Revival of the Religious Sciences]. (Vol. 4). Translated excerpts available in various editions.[Original work written in Arabic, 11th century CE]
- Al-Tirmidhi, M. I. (n.d.). *Jami' at-Tirmidhi* (Hadith 3377). Retrieved from <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi:3377>
- Al-Qur'an. (n.d.). *The Qur'an* (Trans. A. Y. Ali or M. A. S. Abdel Haleem). (Surah Al-Ra'd 13:28; Surah Al-Ahzab 33:41–42).
- Beyad, M. S., & Vafa, M. (2021). Transcending Self-Consciousness: Imagination, Unity and Self-Dissolution in the English Romantic and Sufis Epistemology. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, 4(8), 08-18.
- Bronkhorst, J. (2022). Mystical experience. *Religions*, 13(7), 589.
- Can Aren, E., & Tarlacı, S. (2022). The effect of Sufi breath and meditation on quantitative EEG: Is there a difference? *Journal of NeuroPhilosophy*, 1(2). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7254040>
- Cheung, K., Patch, K., Earp, B. D., & Yaden, D. B. (2023). Psychedelics, meaningfulness, and the “proper scope” of medicine: continuing the conversation. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics*, 1-7.
- Clarke, M. V. (2020). Hearing and Believing: Listening Experiences as Religious Experiences in Nineteenth-Century British Methodism. *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, 17(3), 381-402.
- Clark, G. (2021). Integrating the Archaic and the Modern: The Red Book, Visual Cognitive Modalities and the Neuroscience of Altered States of Consciousness'. *Jung's Red Book for Our Time: Searching for Soul Under Postmodern Conditions*, 4.
- Corneille, J. S., & Luke, D. (2021). Spontaneous spiritual awakenings: Phenomenology, altered states, individual differences, and well-being. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 720579.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. Harper & Row.
- Dittrich, A. (1998). The standardized psychometric assessment of altered states of consciousness (ASCs) in humans. *Pharmacopsychiatry*, 31(S 2), 80-84.
- Donnalley, E. (2022). Mandala-path of integration: Exploring the lived experiences of individuals drawing mandalas and their ability to induce an altered state of consciousness. *Consciousness, Spirituality & Transpersonal Psychology*, 3, 83-96.
- Dubbini, A., Mabit, J., & Politi, M. (2020). Therapeutic potential of spirituality and mystical experiences in the treatment of substance use disorders. *Cultura y droga*, 25(29), 41-62.
- Dudeja, J. P. (2017). Scientific analysis of mantra-based meditation and its beneficial effects: An overview. *International Journal of Advanced Scientific Technologies in Engineering and Management Sciences*, 3(6), 21-26.
- During, J. (1992). *The spirit of sounds: The Sufi music of Turkey*. Redhouse Press.
- Ernst, C. (2003). *The Shambhala guide to Sufism*. Shambhala Publications.
- Fromm, E. (2017). The nature of hypnosis and other altered states of consciousness: an ego psychological theory 1. In *Hypnosis* (pp. 81-104). Routledge.
- Geels, A. (1996). A note on the psychology of dhikr: The Halveti-Jerrahi Order of Dervishes in Istanbul. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 6(4), 229–251. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327582ijpr0604_4
- Galante, J., Montero-Marin, J., Vainre, M., Dufour, G., García-Campayo, J., & Jones, P. B. (2023). Altered states of consciousness caused by a mindfulness-based programme up to a year later: results from a randomised controlled trial.

- Gao, T., Zhang, Y., & Li, X. (2019). The role of chanting in meditation practices: An interdisciplinary review. *Journal of Mindfulness and Well-being*, 7(2), 135–147.
- Gao, J., Leung, H. K., Wu, B. W. Y., Skouras, S., & Sik, H. H. (2019). The neurophysiological correlates of religious chanting. *Scientific reports*, 9(1), 4262.
- Goldman, J. (2022). *Healing sounds: The power of harmonics*. Simon and Schuster.
- Gul, L., & Jehangir, S. F. (2019). Effects of Mindfulness and Sufi Meditation on Anxiety and Mental Health of Females. *Pakistan Journal of Psychological Research*, 34(3), 583-599.
- Huang, W. (2019). Buddhism and Altered States of Consciousness. Available at SSRN 3438916.
- Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah. (n.d.). *Al-Wabil al-Sayyib min al-Kalim al-Tayyib* [The Shower of Good Words]. Translated by M. al-Jibaly (various editions). [Original work written in Arabic, 14th century CE]
- Isgandarova, N. (2019). Muraqaba as a mindfulness-based therapy in Islamic psychotherapy. *Journal of religion and health*, 58(4), 1146-1160.
- Karam, A. (2018). *Spirituality and health: Exploring the relationship between Sufi practices and mental well-being*. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 57(4), 1340–1355. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-017-0467-4>
- Karim, P. A. (2020). Sufism Thoughts of al-Qushayrī and It's Relevance to Contemporary Muslim Societies. *al-Lubb: Journal of Islamic Thought and Muslim Culture (JITMC)*, 2(2), 153-171.
- Knysh, A. (2019). *Sufism: a new history of Islamic mysticism*. Princeton University Press.
- Kurniawati, E. Y., & colleagues. (2024). The effect of Zikr meditation on anxiety, stress levels and sleep quality. *Journal of Research in Community Nursing and Psychology*.
- Laughlin, C. D., & Throop, C. J. (2001). *Experience, culture, and reality: The significance of Sufi ecstatic practice*. In Laughlin, C. D., McManus, J., & d'Aquili, E. (Eds.), *The spectrum of ritual: A biogenetic structural analysis* (pp. 139–170). Columbia University Press.
- Laughlin, C., & Takahashi, M. (2020). Mystical Love: The Universal Solvent. *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 31(1), 5-62.
- Layade, A. A. (2019). Music Therapy as Psychological Comfort in the Healing of Mentally Disordered Persons at Healing Homes in Yoruba Land. In B. Digolo & M. Wanyama (Eds.), *Emerging Issues in African Musicology* (pp. 25- 45). Eldoret: Utafiti Foundation
- Li, K. (2023). Would Raising Psychological Well-Being Incentivize Construction Workers?. In *Construction Incentivization: Beyond Carrot and Stick* (pp. 151-167). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Nakissa, A. (2020). Cognitive science of religion and the study of islam: Rethinking islamic theology, law, education, and mysticism using the works of al-ghazālī. *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, 32(3), 205-232.
- Nasr, S. H. (2007). *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition*. HarperOne.
- Newberg, A. B., Wintering, N. A., Yaden, D. B., Waldman, M. R., Reddin, J., & Alavi, A. (2015). A case series study of the neurophysiological effects of altered states of mind during intense Islamic prayer. *Journal of Physiology-Paris*, 109, 214–220. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jphysparis.2015.08.001>
- Nizamie, S. H., Katshu, M. Z., & Uvais, N. A. (2013). Sufism and mental health. *Indian journal of psychiatry*, 55(Suppl 2), S215–S223. <https://doi.org/10.4103/0019-5545.105535>
- Pal, P., Sharma, S., & Gupta, R. (2020). A neuropsychological perspective on chanting: Mechanisms, effects, and future directions. *Journal of Cognitive and Clinical Neuroscience*, 5(3), 201–214.
- Pal, R., Heyat, M. B. B., You, Z., Pardhan, B., Akhtar, F., Abbas, S. J., & Acharya, K. (2020, December). Effect of Maha Mrityunjaya HYMN recitation on human brain for the analysis of single EEG channel C4-A1 using machine learning classifiers on yoga practitioner. In *2020 17th International Computer Conference on Wavelet Active Media Technology and Information Processing (ICCWAMTIP)* (pp. 89-92). IEEE.
- Perry, J., Levin, R., & Wallace, D. (2021). Chanting and consciousness: A cross-cultural analysis of vocal rituals. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 53(1), 25–45.
- Perry, G., Polito, V., & Thompson, W. F. (2021). Rhythmic chanting and mystical states across traditions. *Brain Sciences*, 11(1), 101.
- Perry, G., Polito, V., Sankaran, N., & Thompson, W. F. (2022). How Chanting Relates to Cognitive Function, Altered States and Quality of Life. *Brain Sciences*, 12(11), 1456.
- Perry, G., Polito, V., & Thompson, W. F. (2022). How chanting relates to cognitive function, altered states and quality of life. *Brain Sciences*, 12(12), 1643. <https://doi.org/10.3390/brainsci12121643>
- Pirovski, N., & Saghir, F (2022). Altered States of Consciousness-Characteristics And Use.
- Prysiashniuk, L. (2017). Altered States of Consciousness in M. Ondaatje's *The English Patient*.
- Rocamora, M. (2018). Computational methods for percussion music analysis: The Afro-Uruguayan Candombe drumming as a case study.

- Rouget, G. (1985). *Music and trance: A theory of the relations between music and possession*. University of Chicago Press.
- Roseman, L., Nutt, D. J., & Carhart-Harris, R. L. (2018). Quality of acute psychedelic experience predicts therapeutic efficacy of psilocybin for treatment-resistant depression. *Frontiers in pharmacology*, 8, 974.
- Samhani, I., Reza, M. F., Jusoh, M. H., & Juahir, H. (2022). Rhythms Synchronization Effects on Cognition during Listening to Quranic Recitation. *Malaysian Journal of Fundamental and Applied Sciences*, 18(5), 603-617.
- Saniotis, A. (2018). Understanding mind/body medicine from Muslim religious practices of Salat and Dhikr. *Journal of religion and health*, 57, 849-857.
- Sells, M. (1996). *Early Islamic mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, mi'raj, poetic and theological writings*. Paulist Press.
- Schmidt, T. T., & Berkemeyer, H. (2018). The altered states database: Psychometric data of altered states of consciousness. *Frontiers in psychology*, 9, 1028.
- Sik, H. H., Halkias, G. T., Chang, C., Gao, J., Leung, H. K., & Wu, B. W. Y. (2021). Modulation of the neurophysiological response to fearful and stressful stimuli through repetitive religious chanting. *JoVE (Journal of Visualized Experiments)*, (177), e62960.
- Studerus, E., Gamma, A., & Vollenweider, F. X. (2010). Psychometric evaluation of the altered states of consciousness rating scale (OAV). *PloS one*, 5(8), e12412.
- Sulistyawati, R. A., Kurniasari, M. D., & Muflihatin, N. (2019). Dhikr therapy for reducing anxiety in cancer patients. *Indian Journal of Palliative Care*, 25(3), 444–448. https://doi.org/10.4103/IJPC.IJPC_70_19
- Tarr, B., Launay, J., & Dunbar, R. I. (2014). Music and social bonding: “Self-other” merging and neurohormonal mechanisms. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5, 1096. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01096>
- Thomas, K., & Barušs, I. (2022). Psychological characteristics and state integration of a persistent altered state of consciousness following an 18-week self-development course. *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 9(4), 379.
- Thibdeau, J. C. (2025). Enacting Mysticism in the World: Practical Sufism in the Tariqa Karkariyya and Alawiyya. *Religions*, 16(2), 111. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16020111>
- Toussulis, Y. (2011). *Sufism and the Way of Blame: Hidden Sources of a Sacred Psychology*. Quest Books.
- Tran, M. A. Q., Vo-Thanh, T., Soliman, M., Ha, A. T., & Van Pham, M. (2022). Could mindfulness diminish mental health disorders? The serial mediating role of self-compassion and psychological well-being. *Current Psychology*, 1-14.
- Trimulyaningsih, N., Subandi, M.A. & Yuniarti, K.W., 2024, ‘The process of spiritual transformation to attain *Nafs al-muṭma’innah* in Islamic psychology’, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(1), a8526. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.8526>
- Uthaug, M. V., Lancelotta, R., Szabo, A., Davis, A. K., Riba, J., & Ramaekers, J. G. (2020). Prospective examination of synthetic 5-methoxy-N, N-dimethyltryptamine inhalation: effects on salivary IL-6, cortisol levels, affect, and non-judgment. *Psychopharmacology*, 237, 773-785.
- Valoma, D. (2022). Alluring Monotony+ Luminous Grids. *TEXTILE*, 20(4), 489-505.
- Valverde, R. (2021). Encounters with Non-Human Intelligence in Mexico, Altered States of Consciousness & the Quantum Consciousness Model: The Alberto Zecua Case. *Scientific GOD Journal*, 12(2).
- VanPool, C. S., Lee, L., Robear, P., & VanPool, T. L. (2023). Trance, posture, and tobacco in the Casas Grandes shamanic tradition: Altered states of consciousness and the interaction effects of behavioral variables. *Anthropology of Consciousness*.
- Vernon, M. (Ed.). (2009). *Chambers Dictionary of Beliefs and Religions*. Chambers.
- Walid Khalid. A.H & Hughes, J.H. (2015). Integration of Religion and Spirituality Into Trauma Psychotherapy: An Example in Sufism? *Journal of EMDR Practice and Research*, 9 (3). DOI: 10.1891/1933-3196.9.3.150
- Weinel, J. (2018). *Inner sound: altered states of consciousness in electronic music and audio-visual media*. Oxford University Press.
- Wittmann, M. (2018). *Altered states of consciousness: Experiences out of time and self*. MIT Press.
- Yaden, D. B., Haidt, J., Hood Jr, R. W., Vago, D. R., & Newberg, A. B. (2017). The varieties of self-transcendent experience. *Review of general psychology*, 21(2), 143-160.