

Ziraat at Sharda



The recent Khankah at the Sharda Centre in Aotearoa was for me a profound experience of ecological peacemaking in a Sufi Maori context. It began with the Ziraat weekend led by Jamia Haqq, also known as Eila, with Halima and Abraham Sussman as special guests and organised by Wendy Hodder, a local artist, dance leader, musician and one of the co-creators along with Shafia Maryam of the Maori inspired dances.

The weekend of the 6 to the 9th September, was followed by 4 days of co-creating for the Land and ended with 4 days of dance deepening and leadership training by Abraham and Halima. This Khankah was a great example of making peace in the world through the process of eating, dancing and praying together, as inspired by Murshid Sam's vision. It was also an experience of what Aboriginal people in Australia, call 'Connecting to Country' which included the processes of co-creating in community at a centre inspired by the vision of Halima MacEwan that has been growing since the 60s as have the Dances of Universal Peace.

The ecological and indigenous aspects of this Khankah, at our time of massive ecological challenges like the climate emergency that we are facing globally, further add to the significance of this event. By healing the Land and the relationship with the indigenous people of New Zealand, we are truly contributing to co-creating a better world.

On a personal level, as a child of Holocaust survivors living in Australia, Sharda has been part of a deep healing process for my ancestral trauma. It was here that in 2010 I attended the first Tihei Maori Ora weekend with Shafia Maryam and Wendy, who were then launching their Maori inspired dances.



Shafia presenting her fire dance with Wendy on the right

In 2010, as part of a Maori inspired gathering we began with a Mihi, where each of the people present introduce themselves, along with their ancestors, their place of abode, their river, their mountain, their totem and other significant factors that contribute to making us who we are today. While several of the locals presented their Mihi in Maori and were very familiar and articulate about their ancestors and other related matters, for me it was a very traumatic moment. It is one thing to know that I am a child of Holocaust survivors and quite another to try to give voice to my experience. I just broke down in tears and cried uncontrollably. However, the feelings of love and support from the dance community and the wonderful leaders, Shafia and Wendy, was the beginning of a deep process of ancestral healing for me, that continues to this day.

Not long after that weekend, I was inspired to write a poem entitled *A Prayer to the Elements at Sharda*, which was recently published in my book of poetry and photography entitled *Travelling Poetics*. Suddenly there was a greater significance to this whole healing process that has since then involved many healing modalities, including the dances and other Sufi healing practices, like Ziraat. In the Ziraat process led by Eila, we connected deeply with the Land and the community through focussing on the 5 alchemical elements, that have become a vital part of my own daily practice. By manifesting altars and rituals and songs and dances to each of the elements in small groups and then sharing this experience with the larger whole community, this process became really transformative.

After the tribute to the fire element by Shafia's group, pictured above, we moved through the bush to the Earth element altar, which was co-created by Abraham's group. This later was to become the Fern Temple or Empty Theatre after the co-creation process with the Land as shown in the photos below.



*The Koru -
spirals itself into existence
from spiral galaxies to spiral tree fern buds
unfolding umbrella like
on the creek's edge -
the water spiralling around the mossy rocks
watering the miniature forests of lichen
and the grass like moss as it gushes by.¹*

¹ From *Travelling Poetics* p. 25 available from Lulu Publications

<http://www.lulu.com/shop/ben-zion-arjuna-weiss/travelling-poetics/paperback/product-24019937.html>



In the place of the Earth altar Abraham led a Mapuche dance *Ayun Mapu*, which means Love Earth. The Mapuche are the indigenous people of Chile.

Next the whole group walked to the other side of the creek to celebrate the water element with Wendy's group. Here we had some impassioned talks about the state of the waters on the planet and a traditional folk song from Andrei's childhood about a river in the Czech Republic. At each element altar we also meditated on the element and practiced the element breath and toned the sound for that element.



Then we all trekked up to the top of the highest hill at Sharda to celebrate the air element. This was led by Halima's group and involved some beautiful free dance, toning and a meditation on the air element.



With the wind in the canopy of the trees, this was a very airy place where we could breathe freely and dance with the rhythm of the branches of the trees, which were all part of the air altar.

Finally we went down the hill to the ether altar that I was coordinating. This was located at a group of rocks that Halima MacEwan had called the place of the rock people. A Native American visitor to Sharda, once commented that in this place the veils between the worlds are thinner.



As soon as Eila had taken us to this place in our preparatory walk on the Land, I felt a connection with the place and I volunteered myself to coordinate the ether element group. On Wendy's invitation I had brought my violin to the retreat and I chose to play it here where we sang and danced the Blessing Dance based on the words of the blessing given by Hazrat Inayat Khan for the end of the Universal Worship. So our group set up the ether altar and invited people into the space with the ether breath, chant and finally with the dance.

After this the whole group returned to the meditation hall where Eila had prepared a ritual to integrate the elements, which involved a rebirthing process and other activities. The following day there was a Universal Worship on the theme of Nature, for which Sirrallah invited me to play my violin as people came into the hall. The worship complemented the Ziraat ritual of the previous day by showing how the various religious traditions related to the natural world. This revealed the unity of these major world religions, as Hazrat Inayat Khan saw them, with regard to the natural world, of which we are all a part.

For me, the weekend really was an opportunity to read the sacred manuscript of nature, which as Murshid said is the only book that will enlighten the reader.



Let me end this report with a story about connecting to the Earth that was inspired by reading this entry in the Ruhaniat Ziraat Reader (p.122) under the section – Blessing of Breath

Element breaths attunement, with body awareness (earth: bones -supporting life; water: fluid-muscles-flowing life; fire: heartbeat, blood pulse-pulsing life; air: skin, breath, changeable/freely moving life), completing each with:

We are part of the earth (or water, fire, and air), becoming conscious of itself...

This reminded me of a shamanic journey I went on back in the 80s as part of an Interhelp weekend workshop in the Channon in northern NSW. Interhelp was a group that grew out of Joanna Macy's visit to Australia in the mid 80s. We were lying on the floor and encouraged to go to a place where we connected to the Earth. I found myself flying back down south to the stone circle on the southern headland of Bondi Beach. There I found an Aboriginal elder standing on one leg and holding his spear to support him. He was looking in the distance out across the landscape. I was sitting at his feet, and when he acknowledged my presence, I asked him: 'What is the purpose of us humans on the Earth?'

His answer resonates with the above quote.

He said: 'We are here to be the consciousness of the Earth!' I felt it was a profound insight into the purpose of human existence. Clearly the Sufi way and the Indigenous ways are very resonant with each other. On his first visit to Australia, Pir Zia said that the Sufis always find their way to the indigenous of a land. I have to agree with him.

For us to be the consciousness of the Earth would seem to be vital to the survival of the planet at this critical time in the Earth's ecology.

In gratitude to Jamia Haqq (Eila), Wendy, Halima, Abraham and all those who were at the Sharda Centre for that weekend, and to Halima MacEwan for her vision and the Sharda Trust for supporting that vision. Ya Shakur!

Some reflections by Arjuna
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