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Beyond Words: Chronicling Spiritual Ecstasy and Experience in Sufi Poetry

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SIT Morocco: Multiculturalism and Human Rights Fall 2011

Beyond Words: Chronicling Spiritual Ecstasy and Experience in Sufi Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to understand the primary form of expression within Sufism—poetry. I focused on two of the most famous Sufi poems in Morocco, the al-Burda and al-Hamziya, and investigated how these poems are used in ceremonies today, and to what extent and why they hold significance. Key components to this project were my visits to the Boudchichi zaouia in the Rabat medina to see how these poems invoke spirituality, community, faith and remembrance. I also considered the Western interest in Sufi poetry to explore how these poems shape Western perceptions of Islam today.

Introduction: The Intangible Nature of Sufism

According to H. A. R. Gibb, the great historian of Islamic civilization, Sufism means “authentic religious experience.” And yet, Sufi scholars emphasize the ephemeral quality of their religion, as their reality cannot be found in definitions, descriptions or books. In order to tap into the indescribable Sufi experience, one must accept that there is something intrinsic in the Sufi attitude that scorns domestication and definition.

Sufism is identified with Islam’s spirit in the Hadith of Gabriel. In the Qur’an it states that the Prophet Mohammad was sitting with a few friends when a man appeared and asked them several questions. Once the man left, the Prophet identified him as the angel Gabriel, who had come to instruct them on their religion (*din*). The discourse between Gabriel and the Prophet outlined the religion of Islam in three basic levels: submission (*islam*), faith (*iman*), and “doing the beautiful” (*ihsan*). The first two dimensions—submission and faith—are words that all believers of Islam are familiar with, for they include the “Five Pillars of Islam” and the “three principles” that become engrained in most Islamic upbringings. The third level—“doing the beautiful”—possesses a meaning that is not as crystalline as its two counterparts, and it is this component of Islam that the Sufis specialize in.

“Doing the beautiful” is described as “worshipping God as if you see Him, for even if you do not see Him, He sees you,” (Chittick 7). This aspect is not fortified in rules or principles that people must adhere to, making it intangible and open to interpretation. *Ihsan* is left untouched by the most vocal of Islamic scholars, including the jurists (*fuqaha*) and the theologians. Just as the specifics of the Sufi experience cannot be acutely articulated, *ihsan* is similarly elusive.

Ihsan encompasses the notion in Islam that teaches people how to transform themselves “so that they may come into harmony with the ground of all being,” (Chittick 5). While the ideas of *islam* and *iman* emphasize the activities that must be performed and how to understand the self and others, *ihsan* points the way to achieving nearness with God. A form of expression that has remained for centuries as a pillar of Sufism is the aesthetic response to the challenge of *ihsan*: art. And what better art form exists to convey the inexpressible than poetry?

The Origin of Art within Islam

A unifying principle binds Islamic art: a reflection on the world of Islam itself. A key ingredient in both is worship, for art mirrors the Qur’an in its contemplation and remembrance of Allah. This remembrance, or *dhikr*, is the ultimate goal of all Islamic worship, and art provides an outlet for this need to experience remembrance. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr states in his book *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, “This art could not perform such a spiritual function if it were not related in the most intimate manner to both the form and content of the Islamic revelation,” (Nasr 4).

Where does the role of art base itself in the world of Islam? When considering the three paths of Islam, it is evident that art does not fall under the category of *al-Shariah*, the Divine Law which outlines the interactions between Allah, mankind and society. Though this Law sets the context for Islamic art, it does not define how man ought to create things. *Al-Shariah* imbues the artist with the virtues and ideals of his faith through the words in the Qur’an and the prophetic *Hadith* and *Sunnah*, the sayings of Muhammad

which are engrained in Muslim society. However, this Law is concrete in its instructions, and does not guide spiritual expression necessarily.

The core of Islamic art cannot be found in the theology (*kalam*) of its religion either, for the majority of Islamic artistic masterpieces were created before the foundations of religious sciences were even solidified (Nasr 5). This asserts the notion that art was used as a form of religious authority before theory was codified and the juridical sciences behind Islam became the prime source for defending and defining the Divine Law.

One must look to the inner dimension of Islam, *al-Haqiqah*, or the Truth, to find the origin of art within Islam. The inner dimension is connected to the spiritual level of Islam, the heart of Sufism. When considering this aspect of Islam, the term for spirituality in Islamic languages becomes important, for it is always aligned with either the word *ruh* (spirit) or *na'na* (meaning). Therefore, spirituality in Islam is synonymous with inner knowledge and understanding. Art takes on an even greater role once this interiority is recognized within Islam, for whatever is created must reflect on both the principles of the religion and the intimacy with Allah that is sought out (Nasr 6).

The Inner Dimension of Islam

Islamic spirituality stems from the Quar'an and the message of the Prophet which still pervades Muslim daily life. Not only did Muhammad leave his *Hadith* and *Sunnah* for his followers as a source of navigation through daily life, but his words remain as a guide to those who still seek the familiarity with Allah which the Prophet demonstrated.

Within interpretations of the Qur'an there are four senses of the verses: expression, allusion, the subtle senses (*Lata'if*) and spiritual realities (*haqa'iq*). Ibn Abbas, a paternal cousin of the Prophet and an expert in the interpretation (*tafsir*) of the Qur'an, created a similar classification for the four ways: an aspect known by the Arabs after their language; a sense that is no excuse to ignore; meaning revealed to scholars; and a sense preserved by God (Corbin 21). The latter component—a sense preserved by God—implies that there are textures embedded in the Qur'an which are unspoken of and left untouched, preserved for those only closest to God.

Many hadiths attest to the idea that there are hidden meanings embedded in the Qur'an. A well-known hadith states, "The Koran has an outward appearance and a deep hidden meaning exoteric (*tafsir*) and a sense esoteric (*ta'wil*). In turn, the esoteric meaning conceals an esoteric meaning (this depth has a depth to the image of the celestial Spheres nested within each other) so on, up to seven esoteric meanings (seven depths of hidden depth)," (Corbin 21). The *tafsir* is a meaning reserved for the esoteric interpretations (*batin*) of the Qur'an, separate from the apparent meaning (*zahir*). But how to access such obscure meanings of an already cryptic text?

Without art these mysterious depths of the Qur'an could not be explored, for it takes a form of expression that goes beyond rational thought to tap into such spiritual realities. The traditional approach to Islamic art is to "gain a vision of that archetypal world," either by those seeking intimacy with Allah themselves or by those who have been instructed to create something by such a vision, as is the case of the great Sufi poet al-Busiri (Nasr 8).

The Use of Poetry

The Prophet described *iman* as such: “Faith is to acknowledge with the heart, to voice with the tongue, and to act with the limbs,” (Chittick 6). This outlines the hierarchy of bodily domains that human beings consist of: the heart, signifying innermost awareness; the tongue which articulates and expresses; and one’s limbs, the source of action. The art of poetry incorporates all three of these, for one cannot compose a poem without the cognizance of the heart, the use of speech or the physical use of limbs to write out the words. Poetry channels the three spheres of the body so that awareness, thought and activity fuse to create one product.

One of the critical virtues that Sufis seek in their quest is truth. They often quote the Prophet as saying, “O God, show us things as they are.” Seeking truth is implicated with the truth of the soul, according to Abdessamad Ghazi, a minister at Rabita Mohammadia des Ouléma, a religious ministry in Rabat. “It’s the closest thing to real spiritual experience,” Ghazi said in an interview. “It’s not plain prose for a reason. These poems function as both experience and education. They have different levels which transmit ideas that couldn’t be attained in any other way.” The form of poetry used in zaouias, or Sufi orders, today, called *sama* in Arabic, is not solely a chant—it is Sufi poetry with specific rhythms to attain *dhikr*, or invocation with Allah.

I spoke with Yassine Salouine, a student at Dar al Hadith, a school devoted to higher Islamic studies and the religious sciences. When asked what he thought the purpose of poetry within Sufism is, he said, “People read the Quar’an, attend ceremonies and make gestures, and read poems to invoke Allah. They do these things because they want to be close to Allah and verses of certain poems bring them closer.” Two of the

most famous poems in Morocco that bring about this communion with God are the *al-Burda* and *al-Hamziya*.

The History of the Two Epics

In order to understand the significance that the *al-Burda* and *al-Hamziya* hold in modern times, particularly in Morocco, one must delve into the history of the great master who crafted the poems: al-Busiri. Born on the 7th of March 1212 in either Busir or Dalas in Upper Egypt, he has become one of the most celebrated poets in all of Egyptian history. As a young man, al-Busiri studied Arabic and the religious sciences in Cairo, where he followed the teachings of the Sufi Abu l-Abbas Ahmad al-Mursi. He was also a follower of the Shadhiliyya Sufi order (Homerin 2011).

Al-Busiri was considered to be an accomplished poet by his contemporaries, particularly because of his two most famous poems, his *al-Burda* and *al-Hamziya*. The circumstances surrounding the composition of the *al-Burda* are what make this poem so significant today. The story itself is reminiscent of the miraculous content that al-Busiri writes about; perhaps the allegorical origin contributes to the timeless nature of al-Busiri's poems.

It is said that the great poet once suffered an incapacitating stroke, in the midst of which he prayed, cried out to God for help, and wrote a poem praising Muhammad. Al-Busiri then fell asleep and dreamed that the Prophet touched his face and wrapped him in his cloak. It is here that the poem's name arises, for *burda* means cloak in Arabic. When the poet awoke he found that the stroke had left no mark on him and that he was in good health. Once the news of this rarity spread, others sought out the ode that al-Busiri had

composed in his bed, and the *al-Burda* soon became known for its miraculous healing powers (Homerin 2011).

Al-Busiri's *al-Burda* has become one of the most renowned poems in not only the Sufi tradition, but the entire Muslim world. People found that through recitation the poem could revive the sick and cure loved ones, and the restorative power of Busiri's words protected the poem itself for years to come. The poem has been copied many times, translated into several languages and its verses have been inscribed on amulets and walls to ward off negativity. For all its commentaries, imitations and prevalence, the *al-Burda* is "arguably the most famous poem in the Arabic language," (Homerin 2011).

Al-Burda and Al-Hamziyah

Of all the famous poems composed by Sufi scholars, the *al-Burda* and *al-Hamziyah* are the two most favored in Morocco. Most Sufi orders include these poems into their daily or weekly chants alongside verses of the Qur'an—in fact, it is rare to find any Sufi gathering that doesn't recite portions of these poems. There are some believers who think that these poems are equal or maybe even better than reader the Qur'an, but these are "ignorant people," according to Professor Khalid Saqi, a director at Dar el Hadith. Sunni Sufis seek to purify the soul through experience without overlooking the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*. Though these poems are holy texts, they weren't conveyed in the revelatory fashion that the Qur'an was, and remain as a genre of their own. The poems invoke the question as to what spiritual value the Sufis give these poems and why.

For the Sufis, reading these poems is to worship Allah, for they consider these texts to be holy. Any poetry that praises the Prophet gives its readers closeness to Allah, but these poems in particular, given their historical context and supposed miraculous healing properties, have attained the rare status of sacred. Sufis tend to believe that praising the Prophet experientially gives them more than simply praising Allah, that there is something intrinsically other in the experiential component that heightens their spiritual proximity with Allah.

The History of Zaouias

Alfred Bel. Bel, a French orientalist who taught in Algeria and Morocco for many years, was responsible for reorganizing the traditional religious teaching at the Qarawiyyin Mosque in Fes. Bel argues that after Islam was first introduced to the people of North Africa, the urban elite primarily employed Islam's formal rituals and Islamic mysticism—*tawawwuf*, or Sufism. Beginning in the 13th century, rural religious lodges, or *zaouias*, were built to parallel those already functioning in towns. These lodges were some of the first to emphasize Sufism over other forms of Islam (Eickelman 24). Each religious lodge was led by a *shaykh*, a Sufi master who directed spiritual rituals. *Shaykhs* and their disciples were collectively known as *foqra*, or “those who have abandoned everything in quest of God,” as defined in Sufi texts. These *zaouias* still exist today in almost every Moroccan city and town, and the ceremonies have remained largely unchanged.

An American in a Zaouia

Walking down Avenue Sidi Fatah in the old medina of Rabat, one could walk past a *zaouia*, or Sufi order, and not even realize it. Or rather, anyone with unlearned eyes could be unaware of the telltale signs of a *zaouia*. The door to the Boudchichi Sufi Order *zaouia* is ornately decorated with golden designs on wood, and a brass plaque next to the door indicates the Order's presence. Yet, the door blends in easily with the variety of mysterious portals in the medina. There's nothing about the intricate beauty of the entranceway that suggests the great power that lies beyond its threshold. When I entered the *zaouia* it was through the door to the left of the main entrance, where the women gather on Friday afternoons to pray. I was admitted with the explanation of my purpose by my Moroccan host sister, who had never entered the *zaouia* before but was welcomed in. After taking off my shoes I was beckoned into the prayer room, a high-ceilinged and naturally lit emerald and pearl palace of a sanctuary. I padded over the deep-red carpets of the large pillared room, aware of the stares I was attracting for not knowing what to do there.

Around seventy or eighty women sat in the prayer room, swaying, bobbing and rocking to rhythmic chants of single words or praises—portions of the Qur'an or *al-Burda* that they knew by heart. When I arrived the women were intoning the word Allah and from the sound of it they weren't only chanting the word, but repeating it as if to draw a great force into the room. The group consisted of mostly older women, though the room was peppered with girls as young as five. They sat on couches, cushions and on the floor, some leaning against pillars, and almost all of them had their eyes closed, though there were those who stared straight ahead as if entranced by something invisible. Their

voices filled the room in synchronized tones, voices completely in tune and reverberating all around me. The chanting gained energy and accelerated to no end. One woman sucked in her breath so deeply with each Allah it looked as if these chants were her source of air, inhaling with such force each time and willing herself to go on. She was sweating noticeably and sometimes her voice would fail her. She would start moaning and muttering Allah as if he was in room and very close to her, his spirit looming above, her eyelids fluttering and shaking her head as if overcome by a force.

I could only wonder what she must be experiencing; I could only conjure divine images but I couldn't see them. My comprehension of the words they were saying was limited, and yet the power of their words was so strong I began to sway on my own and tried to repeat what they were chanting. Usually when you repeat a word over and over it loses its meaning, but for them it was the opposite—with each recitation of the words they gained power, momentum and strength, and what I can only guess is some propelling toward understanding. I locked eyes with a girl of only five or six years old who was played with her scarf like I was and looking at me as if she knew that I didn't very well understand what was happening in that room. She looked around at all the women chanting and had some semblance of understanding but not fully, and I related to her in that moment; we were two children lost among something that was way larger than either of us. There was a girl a bit older sitting to the side, only eight or nine years old, but as the women transitioned into longer portions of chanting she could sing along to almost all of it, keeping in time and rhythm and knowing the words.

Someone handed me a prayer book so that I could follow along, and I made a great effort to keep up with their pace. They had memorized pages and pages of these

ancient words, voicing them as seamlessly as a song. I noticed that the mood in the room changed as they switched from single-word chants to longer strings of text; the women sat up a little straighter and some of them were looking at each other with grins on their faces. The energy in the room shifted from one of pure concentration to that of swelling exuberance and something like pride, perhaps a response to the sheer radiating power of the words that they were voicing.

The Power of Chanting

When Muslims chant something together, it means that the words are special. When people enter the *zaouia*, they are clad in beautiful costumes and perfumed scents are sometimes released within the prayer room to create a sacred space. Muslims invoke religiosity while reading through chanting, something that is encouraged in a famous *hadith*. Chanting is connected to *dhikr*, the remembrance of Allah. Spiritual awe is invoked through the combination of all these elements—chanting in unison, scented smoke, and the creation of a sanctified atmosphere. “This experience is engrained in the psyche of all Moroccans,” according to Professor Saqi. Chanting is connected to religiosity, a fervor which can only be attained through a concentrated attention to rhythm and the surrounding voices in the *zaouia*.

Poems such as the *al-Burda* and *al-Hamziya* trace the beginning of the birth of the Prophet, and reciting these verses create emotional pressure as the chanters grow increasingly energetic about the words. People can reach high-pitched critical mass when overcome with religious zeal. Shouting and the raising of voices is sometimes the natural response to the spiritual power that the poetic verses contain. According to Yassine

Salouine, a student I spoke with at Dar el Hadith, the question remains as to whether dramatic reactions to chanting are pretentious or authentic. It is not rare for a person to faint at a Sufi ceremony, and whether this behavior is intentional or not, it suggests that the words possess an inherently action-rendering property.

Abdessamad Ghazi of the Rabita Mohammadia des Ouléma Ministry in Rabat spoke of finding a trance, or *al-hadera*, when reciting these poems. The Arabic word contains *hadar*, meaning the act of being present. People at Sufi ceremonies experience a sense of being in God's presence, and this connection of the heart is a manifestation of the chanting and listening that the ceremony encourages. Ghazi describes this sensation as "some other level of emotion," something that goes beyond words.

A character that distinguishes Sufis from their fellow Muslims is the spiritual quest that they take upon themselves, the *ihsen* which implies seeking true spiritual experience. "It's like they can hear God behind a door and are knocking at that door rather than just listening. They want to touch the meaning, not just see it," said Ghazi. Sufis take what other Muslims see as a ritual and transform it into a spiritual quest which they never cease to pursue. The first priority of chanting is *dhikr*, the meaning of remembering Allah. What follows is *sama*, the physical manifestation from the concept of this meaning. As Ghazi said, "God is showing you how to discover yourself."

Western Interest in Sufi Poetry

The extent to which people living in the non-Muslim world understand Islam's multiple dimensions is limited, as it is difficult to comprehend any religion from the outside. Western people are generally repelled by the sternness and restraints associated

with Islam, or only know the stereotypes surrounding the religion that have been perpetuated since the Middle Ages. Yet, Westerners in particular have become increasingly interested in Sufi theories and literature to the extent which those such as the seminal Sufi poet Jalalu'l-Din Molana 'Rumi' have reached *The New York Times*' *Bestsellers* list. Sufism—whose traditional expressions are through beauty, love, poetry and music—represents a side of Islam which is not violent, oppressive or any of the other negative connotations that people of the West harbor against Islam. A hallmark of the Sufi tradition is the appreciation of beauty and love, and poetry serves as both an aesthetic and practical mode of expression for Sufi teachings. Perhaps the words of some of Islam's most articulate and devoted believers may serve as an entryway to the core principles of its teachings and provide sincere understanding for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Ali Alizadeh, a Melbourne-based writer of poetry, narrative and criticism, has translated the works of Rumi, Attar of Nishapur and Hafez, three of the most influential Sufi poets. Alizadeh defends these authors' seminal poetry and questions the accuracy of Western perceptions of Islam. In his article entitled *Confused about Sufi Poetry?* he writes, "Could a culture capable of articulating such a 'noble' and 'universal' desire—a yearning for the Sublime, the divine, etc.—be so threatening and terrorizing?" This question delves into the heart of the modern issue surrounding skewed perceptions of Islam: how can people of the West maintain prejudices against Islam while indulging in the literary delights that are the hallmarks of Islam?

Abdessamad Ghazi attributes this Western fascination with Sufi poetry to the state of the world affairs. "We are entered in war, peril. When people feel alienated in their

world, they want to search for some sense,” Ghazi said in an interview. He emphasizes the universal nature of this problem—it’s not just the problem of the Arab world’s situation, but the world as a whole. “Sufism is intriguing for them because of the peace and tranquility of heart, mind and soul that it provides,” Ghazi said.

Alizadeh also emphasizes a post-modernist element that the ancient Sufi poets employed: the disruption of words and their meaning. Not only did these masters utilize lyricism, images and symbolism to elevate the language to a divine state, they also allowed their words to take on different meanings than what the words would normally signify. In the most celebrated of Sufi poetry, the words do not always “mean” what they “represent.”

The Question of Translation

As Professor Khalid Saqi rifles through old “buried treasures” in his office at Dar el Hadith—old hand-written scriptures inscribed on aged paper, passed down from his father, a Sufi chanter—I realize that there is so much that I cannot understand about this tradition due to the language barrier. It requires a full comprehension of the Arabic language to decode these pen-and-ink relics depicted in italicized script on frayed, dusty leaflets, a knowledge that is inherent in being raised in a Muslim country and gaining a comprehension over a lifetime.

The question I raise can be attributed back to Ibn Abbas’ classification system of the four ways of the Quar’an, for he asserted that the first way is an aspect known by the Arabs after their language. This notion suggests that there is a component of reading holy

texts that is inherent in knowing the Arabic language, almost as if this understanding is a second language that coincides with Arabic comprehension.

When discussing the issue of translation one must consider the *tafsir*, or esoteric interpretation, of the Quar'an. The great masters of *tafsir* access the mysterious dimensions of Quaranic verse through their vast understanding of *hadith*, or oral tradition. Foremost, an interpreter of the Quar'an must have an acute grasp on the Arabic language, with all its subtleties and variations in meaning (Godin 187).

Within Sufi poetry, authors such as al-Busiri use literary devices to amplify the language to match the holy content that the poems contain. Analogies and symbolism are so meticulously chosen that, when translated into another language, their intended meaning can often lose its vibrancy or sense. According to Nourine Quouar, one of the students that I spoke with at Dar el Hadith, "It's impossible to capture the imagination of a Sufi poet. You can't translate the real intention of the Sufi."

Return to the Zaouia

As I enter the Boudchichi zaouia for my final time, the woman sitting at the entranceway recognizes me and nods. I feel accepted into something that I still am so bewildered by. I walk into the familiar carpeted room where women line the perimeter and sit in rows on the floor, rocking back and forth with hands cupped to their mouths as they chant in Arabic. They all wear scarves and appear to be in more formal attire than usual, for this is a Friday, the holiest of days for Muslims. I notice some older women who can't keep up with the chanting but are still moving their bodies to the same rhythm and keeping in harmony with the group. They are reciting small verses, beginning with

new gusto with each repetition as if gaining strength and illumination each time. The energy in the room is just as infectious as my previous visits to the *zaouia*; the tempo excites the spirit and makes me want to tap my foot or hand and join in on the chanting, but I can't due to the large language gap. I see the appeal to this kind of religious ceremony—the sense of community, support and spiritual zeal is thrilling.

The voices pulsing around me seem to be smiling, though the faces aren't. In fact, everyone is very serious, yet their words inflect a joyous praise infused with strength and euphoria. There is no delay in their beat; they keep meticulous rhythms, mouths directed by an invisible conductor. The melody shifts to something that is reminiscent of a singsong school tune but is filled with spiritual richness. I feel that even if these voices were taken out of their prayer-room context the purpose would still come across, for the words are so ardently repeated, they could only contain the enthusiasm of religious experience. As the entrancing chant goes on I note that there is not much interaction between people physically—not many of the women are making eye contact with or touching each other—but their voices are what are colliding, making arches of empathy and spiritual fervor in the naturally-lit space above our heads. Everyone is concentrating on their own chanting, following an order of words that they're all familiar with, transitioning into rhythms seamlessly. It's the same routine as the previous week, with the same chanting patterns, yet there will be people here for weeks, months, and years to come. The phenomenon invokes the question: what keeps bringing people back week after week? Is it a need, an obligation, an indescribable magnetism? There is no visible leader, no commanding figure here, yet all the people present are beckoned to this *zaouia* for a reason.

The women begin to slow down the pace of the chant, emphasizing their words and putting renewed zeal into each verse, signifying that the session is drawing to a close. The verses sound like joyous declarations, yet there is a hint of pleading in some of the tones of the women surrounding me. I try to imagine what this experience would be like if I understood their words. There's never a dwindling in volume, as if some women fill in the gaps when others drop out of the chant. One woman lets out an "Ohh" that sounds like a horn but the pulsing chant around her continues. Even those who aren't voicing the words intone the melody through murmuring, and I try doing the same, internalizing the rhythm. Suddenly, as if cued, a grand exhale is let out around me, as if the women are purging themselves of something through their breath. They bring their hands to their faces as a silence falls. Then the women begin rapidly whispering prayers and the word Allah.

After the ceremony ends I shuffle out with the women. A few of them come up to me, curious as to why an American girl is visiting their center. I ask what significance this order holds for them, and the unifying response I receive concerns *dhikr*, the act of remembering Allah. One woman's face lights up when I inquire as to how the chants affect her. "It functions in both a spiritual and educational way," the woman says. "I grew up learning these poems; they've become so natural for me. They encourage tolerance, love and empathy towards each other. They're so powerful...you can't speak the words without feeling them."

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