

These reviews may be found on the *RA Reviews* website at:

<https://researchafrica.duke.edu/>

Shafiq Morton, *The Circle of the Saints - Stories of the Kramats at the Cape*
Publisher, AWQAF SA. 368 Pages, ISBN # 9781037091223.

Reviewed by: Adli Yacubi. Independent South Africa–based writer and cultural critic.

Walking the Circle: On Shafiq Morton's The Circle of the Saints Awliyā', exile, and the moral geography of South Africa.

1. Framing the Work: Inheritance, Not Inventory

Some books arrive as ‘information,’ others arrive as ‘inheritance.’ *The Circle of the Saints* by Shafiq Morton belongs firmly to the latter category. It is neither a catalogue of kramats nor a conventional survey of Muslim presence in the Cape. Rather, it is a disciplined act of remembrance that restores South Africa’s Muslim past to its ethical, spiritual, and historical depth. Entering a field long shaped by colonial archives, nationalist silences, and fragmentary memory, Morton’s work is marked by restraint, adab, and methodological care.

At a moment when “heritage” is often reduced to performance or nostalgia, *The Circle of the Saints* insists on something more demanding: that the awliyā’ be understood as historical actors whose authority emerged through exile, incarceration, pedagogy, and moral endurance. The book’s significance lies not only in whom it documents, but in how it teaches us to read South Africa’s sacred past — patiently, relationally, and without possession.

2. Method and Archive: Reading Against the Grain

One of the most striking features of Morton’s work is its method. This is neither romantic folklore dressed as history nor an uncritical celebration of sainthood. Morton reads VOC records against the grain, treats oral tradition with seriousness rather than sentimentality, and allows silences to remain where certainty would be dishonest. In doing so, he avoids both colonial reduction and hagiographic excess.

The saints who emerge in this archive — jurists, scholars, teachers, exiles — are neither flattened into administrative footnotes nor mythologized beyond reach. Instead, they appear as figures shaped by power, jealousy, surveillance, displacement, and fidelity. Morton’s archive is therefore not merely documentary; it is ethical. It asks how authority is formed under conditions of constraint, and how remembrance itself becomes a practice of responsibility.

This methodological posture gives the book its quiet strength. It does not shout its claims. It listens, weighs, and places.

3. Sacred Geography: Kramats, Burial, and Moral Space

A central contribution of *The Circle of the Saints* lies in its treatment of kramats and burial sites not as objects of superstition, but as markers of moral geography.¹ These sites record where courage stood, where prayer refused erasure, and where remembrance resisted the bulldozer. They are not merely places of visitation; they are inscriptions of ethical presence in contested land.

Morton shows how burial, exile, and spatial marginalisation were integral to the formation of sainthood at the Cape. The awliyā' were often buried on the edges of the city — on hills, in quarries, beyond formal boundaries — yet it is precisely these margins that became enduring centres of meaning. In this sense, land itself becomes an archive: a record of suffering, fidelity, and moral orientation. Such an approach intervenes quietly but decisively in contemporary debates about heritage and belonging. It reminds us that sacred space is not conferred by recognition, but by endurance.

4. Saints in Exile: Shaykh Yusuf, Tuan Guru, and Ethical Authority

Exile is not incidental in Morton's narrative; it is constitutive.² Figures such as Shaykh Yusuf of Makassar and Imam Abdullah ibn Qadi Abd al-Salam (Tuan Guru) exemplify a form of authority forged not through institutional power, but through ethical steadiness under rupture.

Shaykh Yusuf's banishment to the Cape was intended as containment. Instead, it produced transmission. His presence seeded a lineage of remembrance that outlived the empire that sought to silence him. Likewise, Imam Abdullah ibn Qadi Abd al-Salam's imprisonment on Robben Island did not extinguish knowledge; it reorganised it. Writing, teaching, and disciplined worship became acts of quiet defiance.

Morton's treatment of these figures resists heroic simplification. Their authority emerges not from charisma alone, but from restraint, scholarship, and sustained care for community. This is Sufism not as aesthetic performance, but as ethical endurance.

5. Situating the Work: Shifting South African Muslim Historiography

Read within the broader field of South African Muslim historiography, *The Circle of the Saints* marks a decisive shift.³ Rather than treating Islam at the Cape as peripheral, derivative, or culturally insular, Morton situates it within a transoceanic world shaped by Hadrami, Southeast Asian, African, and local lineages.

This positioning aligns the book with wider African and Indian Ocean scholarship that understands Islamic transmission as mobile, relational, and ethically grounded. It resonates with work that treats Sufism not as private devotion, but as a social infrastructure through which knowledge, authority, and survival were sustained under colonial pressure.

¹ Mustapha Keraan and Muhammed Haron, "The Barakat of Shaykh Yusuf," *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 45, no. 1 (2008): 84–98.

² Shafiq Morton, *The Circle of the Saints: The Stories of the Kramats of the Cape* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2023), chap. 2–4.

³ Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

In this account, the Cape is not an outpost. It is a crucible.

6. Comparative and Regional Anchors

This historiographical positioning is further strengthened when *The Circle of the Saints* is read alongside Morton's wider body of work. His earlier studies — including *From the Spice Islands to Cape Town*, which traces Southeast Asian Muslim displacement under Dutch colonialism, and *The Crescent at the Cape: The True Story of Shaykh Abu-Bakr Effendi (1814–1880)* — reveal a consistent scholarly concern with migration, religious authority, and ethical reform under imperial constraint.

Read together, these works underscore Morton's long-standing commitment to recovering South Africa's Muslim past not as hagiography or marginal folklore, but as a rigorously documented history embedded within an Indian Ocean world shaped by exile, reform, and disciplined transmission.

This approach also resonates with Indian Ocean frameworks such as Engseng Ho's analysis of Hadrami genealogies and saintly lineages as mobile moral networks, sustained through exile, kinship, and remembrance rather than territorial power.

7. A Measured Critical Note

If one were to raise a gentle critical question, it would concern not an absence, but a threshold — the point at which the archive begins to open toward forms of sanctity it can only partially hold.

Throughout the book, Morton's refusal to speculate where evidence thins remains a scholarly virtue.⁴ His discipline guards against romantic excess and colonial projection alike, especially in a field long shaped by conjecture masquerading as reverence. Yet, this same methodological restraint means that certain affective and everyday dimensions of saintly life — domestic ritual, embodied devotion, gendered transmission, and popular remembrance — necessarily remain less visible across much of the text.

It is, therefore, significant that Morton concludes *The Circle of the Saints* with "Sisters of Paradise: Saartjie van de Kaap." This final chapter does not overturn the archive so much as lean toward its edges. By naming women whose sanctity survives largely through fragment, place, and whispered memory — including those "unknown in the Tana Baru" — Morton signals an awareness that *barakah* circulates beyond textual authority and formal genealogy. The gesture is deliberate, restrained, and ethically consistent with the book as a whole.

At the same time, the chapter's brevity and positioning underscore the very challenge it acknowledges: that women's religious lives, devotional labour, and modes of transmission have been systematically rendered peripheral by the colonial archive itself. What appears here is not a recovery so much as an opening — a recognition that the discipline required to write responsibly about saints must also know when to pause, gesture, and make space.

Read this way, the book's silences are not shortcomings but invitations. They call for complementary work — feminist historiography, oral history, and ethnographic

⁴ Morton, *The Circle of the Saints*, chap. 10, "Sisters of Paradise: Saartjie van de Kaap."

attentiveness — capable of tracing how sanctity is carried through bodies, households, ritual sound, and care. Morton does not attempt this work himself, and wisely so. Instead, he prepares the ground without claiming it.

The result is not a closed circle, but a widening one — where ethical restraint becomes the condition for future voices to enter without distortion.

8. Closing the Circle

In closing, *The Circle of the Saints* succeeds not only as a contribution to South African Muslim history, but as a work that quietly models *adab* as scholarly practice. Morton writes with restraint rather than possession, attentiveness rather than spectacle. He allows uncertainty where the archive thins, honours oral memory without instrumentalising it, and resists the temptation to resolve spiritual lives into neat analytical conclusions. In doing so, the book demonstrates that method itself can be ethical — that how one writes about saints matters as much as what is written.

This ethical posture strengthens the book's wider historiographical contribution. *The Circle of the Saints* urges scholars to attend carefully to how moral authority survives displacement, how memory anchors itself in land, and how archives — formal and informal — must be read with humility as well as courage. By tracing the lives of figures such as Shaykh Yusuf of Makassar, Shaykh Madura, and Imam Abdullah ibn Qadi Abdus Salaam (Tuan Guru) — saints forged in exile rather than triumph — Morton resists both romanticisation and erasure. What emerges instead is sanctity understood as endurance, transmission, discipline, and moral presence under conditions of surveillance and rupture.

Significantly, the book does not claim to exhaust this moral landscape. Its closing gestures — particularly in the chapter on the *Sisters of Paradise* — signal an awareness that sanctity also survives beyond textual authority, in fragment, sound, care, and unnamed remembrance. The circle Morton draws is, therefore, neither closed nor proprietary. It remains porous, instructive, and unfinished — much like the tradition it documents and the landscapes it inhabits.

For scholars of Islam in Africa, colonial history, and sacred geographies of resistance, this work does not simply fill a gap in the field. It recalibrates the field's centre of gravity, reminding us that inheritance, when handled with care, remains a living responsibility rather than a settled possession.

Research Africa

Copyright © 2025 by Research Africa, (research_africa-editor@duke.edu), all rights reserved. RA allows for copy and redistribution of the material in any medium or format, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the RA website. You may not distribute the modified material. RA reserves the right to withdraw permission for republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. For any other proposed uses, contact RA's Editor-in-Chief. The opinions represented in the reviews and published on the RA Reviews website are not necessarily those held by RA and its Review editorial team.