

Sufism Today By Melinda Wightman

Introduction

Sufism, or in Arabic, *tassawwuf*, is an umbrella term which refers to Islamic mystic traditions. It is a highly diverse set of traditions, with adherents from many different walks of life and with different levels of involvement. The same linguistic root also generates from the word for wool in Arabic; hence, a sufi is one who wears a wool garment. There is an antinomial aspect of sufism that relates to sufi mystics who lived life on the margins of society and often went against cultural norms. Many of them were ascetics who wore austere clothing, such as the aforementioned rough wool garments. However, adherents to an inner path that harmonizes with codes for daily life were among the prophet's companions and the earliest Muslims, before Orthodox Islam was established. This makes it impossible to understand Sufism as a purely antinomial phenomenon. It has always been and continues to be an integral part of Islam as it is practiced, both in its inner journeys, and in its outward prescriptions for living life in accordance to God's will.

Its mainstream aspect is confirmed by the fact that it is considered to be a path to spiritual enlightenment by many in the Muslim world (though *not all*), and that it has been responsible for much of the conversion in the Muslim world. It has become intertwined with local traditions and folk practices of Islam, which often reflect pre-Islamic traditions of the area. Its inclusive nature, and its focus on the Qur'an as the primary source for religious interpretation, creates a more flexible and open stance toward other religious frameworks which may be seen as having emerged from the same source, the one God, or *Allah*.

There is a lot of press given to Sufism these days, whether focusing in on whirling dervishes, or citing their founder Rumi as an exemplar of ecumenical tolerance and spiritual transcendence. And it is largely due to Rumi, in fact, that sufism provides such potent imagery and ideas and has captured the popular imagination. Sufism consists of much more than the order founded by Rumi and the whirling dervishes, of course, and its practices are as diverse as the regions in which it thrives. From West and North Africa, to Turkey, to Iran and Afghanistan, sufism has many interfaces with average people and mystics alike. These include the maintenance and visitation to shrines and tombs of deceased saints, *waqfs*, buildings intended for sufi practice, and the passing on of the traditions (called by many different names: *khanakat*), as well as the many daily manifestations which occur in sayings, references, concepts in literature and popular culture, and deeply held values of average people.

Epistemology

In addition to the Islamic sciences of legal interpretation, or *fiqh*, and histories and accounts of the prophet and the early companions, or *Hadi>th*, the Sufis added a third pillar to their epistemological structure, the science of the interior world, or *'ilm al-batan*. This is, perhaps, what is so remarkable about sufism, and possibly what makes it so appealing across cultures. Individualist cultures, in particular, may find this to be an attractive concept as it focuses on the unique experience, inner experience, of an individual. However, it is important not to overemphasize the importance of this romantic notion; Sufism is integrated with mainstream Islam in most

places, particularly in connection to Islamic endowments, or *waqfs*, and over time Sufi movements have tended to place continually more emphasis on the greater good of the umma, and on practices in accordance with Islamic Law, or *shar'iyah*, rather than on individual, possibly anti-establishment, practices. Lodges continue to take members and promote their particular practices for achieving closeness to God.

Major Sufi Orders and Their Founders

Chishtiyya, The Chishti Order

Abu Ishaq Shami> "The Syrian" brought Sufism to Chisht in the early 10th century (near Herat, or modern day Afghanistan), which is how the order originally received its name. Through Abu Ish{aq, the lineage, or *silsila*, of this order can be traced back to the Prophet Muhammad, and includes such notables as 'Ali bin Abi Talib, and Ibrahim Adham al-Balkhi. Sheikh Mu'i>n ad-Din of Ajmir established the order in India in the 12th century where it spread and cultivated a significant following until today.

Qadiriyya, The Qadiri Order

'Abd al-Qadir of Gilan, member of the H{anbali School of Islamic Law, started the order in Baghdad during the 12th century, though later followers did not necessarily adhere to that school. The order proliferated in Northern Africa, established a presence in Asia Minor, and a Qadiri lodge existed in Mecca as late as the 18th century. Many distinct orders derived from Qadiriyya exist now within its geographical domain across nearly every Islamic country.

Suhrawardiyya, The Suhrawardi Order

'Abu al-Naji>b Suhrawardi was the founder, and his nephew Shihab ad-Di>n 'Umar Suhrawardi propagated the order in the late 12th and early 13th centuries. Their activities occurred in Baghdad under the 'Abbasids, and many disciples founded orders upon returning to their homelands. The decentralized nature of the order allowed many of these sub-orders to take shape on their own terms. It is the most orthodox of the major orders, with emphasis on prayer, chanting, and fasting during Ramadan.

Naqshbandiyya, The Naqshabandi Order

Khoja Baha ad-Di>n Naqshband was born in the 14th century in Bukhara. He studied under both Persian-speaking and Turkish-speaking spiritual masters, and the order became widespread in both Turkish and Persian-speaking territories; this order is second only to the Qadiriyya in its geographical spread. Fidelity to Islamic law is emphasized, and there is a large degree of alignment with orthodox Islam.

¹Members of the Salafiyya movement, from the 19th century until today, condemn sufism. They consider it to be derived from superstition and connected to folk practices of Islam that they strongly disapprove of, such as ritual tomb visits and shrines to walls (literally "friends of God"); i.e., deceased spiritual masters or mystics. Ibn Tamiyya, an important theologian of the 13th and 14th centuries, was the first to vehemently oppose tomb worship and is the source of inspiration for this aspect of the modern salafiyya movement.

Poetry & the Literature of Sufism

The languages of Sufism include Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu. The oldest languages are, of course, Arabic, the original language of Islam, and Persian, which was used by many great Sufi poets starting in the 10th century. Sufi poetry of later Islamic Empires was composed in Turkish and Urdu as well. Here are some examples that were shared during our Sufi Poetry Night on March 4, 2009.

Persian

My Soul is Like an Eagle Soaring High

Written and translated by Alam Payind

At daybreak, I heard someone groaning
Saying: we have seen from these narrow-minded
akhunds and *mullahs*, nothing but evil
In this commotion, religion has become an instrument,
And I ran away when I saw the cloak of a *mullah*

For years these *mullahs* and *akhunds* have found their ways to torture my body
But they did not capture my soul and it is still like an eagle soaring high
By closing the doors of the Sufi lodges² what have they (*mullahs* and *akhunds*) achieved?
There will come new cupbearers bearing sweet wine³
They have confiscated from Sufis their string instruments and *nay*⁴,
not knowing that the water will flow again where it used to flow before.
Day and night I long for seeing my beloved freedom,
expecting that she will return to me without her veil.
For how long should I suffer separation?
Oh Payind, come and sing your new song.

² *khanakat*

³ Wine means intoxication through closeness to God.

⁴ Flute

Sources

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Useful links

metmuseum.org/special, click "Past Exhibitions," click "February 2008"

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Arabic

Sharaf al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Sa'īd Al-Būsīrī

(1213–1296)

Muhammad, leader of the two worlds
and of Man and the jinn,
Leader also of the Arabs and
non Arabs and their kin.

Our Prophet, Commander of right,
prohibits evil's way,
Yet no one's speech more gentle could be
than his nay or yea.

Beloved by Allah is he upon
whose pleading we depend
From terrors of the Day of Judgment,
which on us descend.

He summoned people unto Allah,
they to him did adhere,
And clung fast to the rope that none
could ever rent or tear.

In morals and features
he, all prophets did exceed,
None could approach his knowledge,
or his bounty e'er precede.

And thus from Allah's Apostle
they acquired and did gain,
A handful of the vast sea
or a sip of generous rain.

So other prophets in their rightful place
before him stand,
Regarding knowledge and the wisdom
that they understand.

He perfect is in traits concealed,
and features bright and clear,
And Man's Creator chose him
as His most beloved and dear.

Too far above all men is he
to have a partner who
Has equal qualities, because
the essence of virtue
That in him lies is indivisible,
and wholly true.