International Journal of Community Music Volume 2 Number 1 © 2009 Intellect Ltd
Article. English language. doi: 10.1386/ijcm.2.1.9/1

Singing community/remembering in common: Sufi liturgy and North African identity in southern France[1]

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Abstract

In Morocco, the forms of Islam practiced are very influenced by Sufism, and there are many 'paths' or tariqat, *including the* tariqa butshishiyya, *a Sufi path in the Qadiri lineage whose living leader is Shaykh Hamza in northeastern Morocco (http://www.tariqa.org/). In the last decade, branches of this school of Sufism have grown up in France, England, Spain and the United States, and the texts of the prayers, songs and poems have been transliterated for those not literate in Arabic. This study focuses on one group of female Sufi practitioners in the south of France, and the role of sung liturgy and sonic performance in creating a sense of religious and cultural community for North African Muslims who reside in a country where the ideology of secularism is as sacred as religion.*

Key words

North Africa
Sufism
community
liturgy
secularism
religion

Introduction

In Morocco, the forms of Islam practiced are very influenced by Sufism, and there are many 'paths' or *tariqat*, including the *tariqa butshishiyya*, a Sufi path in the *Qadiri* lineage whose living leader is Shaykh Hamza in northeastern Morocco (http://www.tariqa.org/). In the last decade, branches of this school of Sufism have grown up in France, England, Spain and the United States. Likewise, the texts of the prayers, songs and poems have been transliterated for those not literate in Arabic. This study focuses on one group of female Sufi practitioners in the south of France, and the role of sung ritual and sonic performance in creating a sense of religious and cultural community for North African Muslims who reside in a country where the ideology of secularism is as sacred as religion. What are the ethics of practicing the Sufi liturgy in France? How does it create an ethos of community?

1994

In 1994 I had a Fulbright fellowship to study expressive culture in Morocco. I lived in Rabat, and although I began my year by building upon my previous research in the marketplace (Kapchan 1996), I quickly changed my project to something new – music and trance. Morocco had always seemed to me a country where trance was ubiquitous. By that time I had already lived in Morocco for several years (1982–85 and every summer since) and had seen people go into (seemingly) music-induced trances at public concerts and in private homes. Soon after arriving, I began to do

1. This research was funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. My thanks to Sidi Mounir al-Qadiri al-Boutshishi (through whom I have the idhn, or permission of the shaykh Sidi Hamzi al-Qadiri al –Boutshishi) and to Faouzi Skali for their roles in facilitating this research. Remerciements auusi à Lalla Malika, Lalla Nadia et tous les faqirat.

fieldwork with the Moroccan *Gnawa*, ritual musicians who heal the possessed through music. The *Gnawa* have a vital culture in Morocco that includes all-night spirit propitiation ceremonies for the possessed (Hell 2002; Kapchan 2007; Paques 1991). They have also influenced Moroccan popular music genres as well as African-American jazz music and world beat. This article is not about the *Gnawa*, however. Rather, it is about the experiences that I had with the Sufis while conducting research with the *Gnawa* – experiences that, according to them, protected me from the dangerous flirtation with the *jnun*, or spirits, that I had naively undertaken.

All trance is not possession-trance. Indeed, there are Sufis in Morocco – the 'Aissawa, for example, or the Hamadsha – that also go into trance, what they call *al-hal*, an ecstatic 'state' of communion with the divine. My interests in these states led me at that time to pick up a copy of *La Voie Soufi*, 'The Sufi Path,' by Moroccan scholar, Faouzi Skali (1993). Finding the text both beautiful and compelling, I decided I would try to meet with Skali. I obtained his telephone number from the Fulbright officer in Rabat and eventually went to visit him at his home in Fes. I told him about my personal interests in the esoteric, and my professional ones as well. It turned out that he was also an anthropologist, having studied at the Sorbonne in Paris, and having written many books about Sufism (Skali 1989; 1993; 1998; 2002). He asked if I would like to begin practicing the Sufi ritual *dhikr*, a ceremony of 'remembrance.' I thought this would be an occasion to deepen my personal search as well as my knowledge about Moroccan culture, and so soon after meeting Faouzi, I went to Casablanca to meet with the *faqirat*, literally the 'poor women,' a designation for female Sufi devotees.

I recall all this here to note that my entrée into the world of Sufi music and practice was not initially as a scholar, but as someone who was *à la recherche*, seeking knowledge certainly, but also seeking an interior and spiritual experience. Although many years passed between 1994–95, when I was thirty-six and practicing regularly with the *faqirat* in Morocco, and my recent practice in France in 2008, in the eyes of the *faqirat* I have continued to be and still am part of the community, and not (at least primarily not) an anthropologist. This status has brought me much insight, but also created some ethical conundrums. I never asked Faouzi why he sent me to Casablanca instead of directing me to a group in Rabat. Thinking back, it was probably because the women in the Casablanca group were professional women – bankers and teachers, my age or older. Most of them had come to Sufism after exploring other 'paths' – Buddhist meditation, yoga. Indeed, one of them still made her living as a professional yoga teacher in Casablanca. They were well-educated, well-traveled intellectuals, a kind of Casablanci elite, who had chosen to become Sufis as adults.

The first time I attended a ceremony, I arrived early to meet the *muqaddima*, the woman 'overseer' who hosted the *dhikr* and who would eventually become my guide. K lived in a spacious two-bedroom apartment. In her late thirties, K had been widowed as a young woman and childless, now lived as a single woman. Although her elderly mother lived with her much of the time, she would sometimes have extended stays with her other children, leaving K alone.

Dhikr means remembrance. The *dhikr* ceremony consists of chanting the names of God in unison in order to remember the connection with the divine that daily life and education makes us forget. It is not that the Sufi learns about God, but that s/he remembers what s/he already knows but has forgotten. Chanting the names of God is a way to connect with an inner memory. 'The head forgets,' said one *faqira* to me, 'but the heart remembers' (conversation with the author, November 2008). Chanting the names of God is thought to polish the rust off the heart, so that it may remember what it has forgotten – that is, *tawhid*, or unity.

K instructed me in the proper dress. I wore a *djellaba* and a scarf over my head. She told me not to touch the Qur'an if I was menstruating. And she handed me one of the photocopied pamphlets in which the *dhikr* ceremony was transcribed.

The women began arriving and I was introduced to each. They all greeted me by kissing me on both cheeks. When everyone due to come was there, we began . . .

Bismi'allah ar-rahman ar-rahim . . .

We began with the *fatiha*, the opening prayer. Then we recited one of the better-known Qur'anic verses: *surat al-yassine*. The women recited masterfully, drawing out some word endings and then speeding quickly over whole sentences, their tone rising and falling together. They did not seem to follow any of the elaborate enunciation rules (*tajwid*) that I had read about, but they did pronounce the Arabic beautifully (Nelson 1985; Rasmussen 2001). I tried to follow the Arabic text, but they were going too fast, and so I listened.

When they had finished reciting the Qur'an they turned to chanting the names of God. This was easier for me. I joined in immediately: *lla ilaha ila llah*, there is no God but God, 500 times. *al-latif*, oh subtle one; *huwa hu*, He is He, *hasbunallahu wa-ni'm al-wakeel*, God is sufficient for me and [is] my comfort and guarantor. While the sound of the words was beautiful, it was the power with which they were intoned that struck me first. The sound came from deep within them. For some, their breathing was part of the sound itself – deep rhythmic inhalations followed by full open-throated tones. The women chanted loudly and melodically. After ninety minutes my chest was buzzing.

The ceremony did not stop there. Once again we recited the *Yassine sura* and then some other prayers, and then the women got out the songbooks. Some of the songs that are sung after the *dhikr* ceremony are said to come from eighteenth and nineteenth century *qasa'id* sung praise poems originally from al-Andalus. Others are more recent. My research on the history of these songs is just beginning, yet their import for the *faqirat* was clear – even on that very first night. They took up the songs with great enthusiasm. At one point, a woman possessed of a beautiful and trained voice sang the verses, and others came in for the chorus. Indeed, there is a chorus after every verse in the songbook and the verses are numerous. While chanting the names of God in the Sufi *dhikr* is something everyone does, the songs give those with trained voices a chance to solo, and others a chance to listen. The songs praise the Prophet Muhammad, but also his companions, as well as the living *shaykh* and leader of the *Boutshishiyya* order, *shaykh al-Hamza*. Of course these latter lyrics are more recent.

After three hours, we ended with a prayer, kissing each other's hands and saying, *allah y-qbal*, may God accept [your prayers].

My fieldwork with the *Gnawa* continued in Rabat, but once a week for the better part of a year I went to Casablanca to chant with the Sufis. They often told me that I was lucky to be among them, that the chanting would protect me from the caprices of the *jnun*, the genies that populated the ceremonies of the *Gnawa*, who were the subjects of my 'official' research.

2008

In the intervening years, I spent many hours chanting in Morocco and even in the United States, where the *Boutshishiyya tariqa* has begun to take root. However in 2008 I went to live in France, where, outside of North Africa, the *Boutshishiyya* Sufi presence is largest. On sabbatical, this was a time for me to heal myself from the stresses of New York City, and the pressures of a career. My introduction to the *faqirat* in the region had something of destiny about it. I was in the Sunday market of my village when I noticed two vendors selling Moroccan goods. I approached and, realizing that they were Moroccan, struck up a conversation in Moroccan Arabic with the woman of the couple. As is customary, I asked her where she was from in Morocco. When she told me that it was near Oujda, I mentioned that my daughter's father was also from there – adding that, of course, it was also the region where the *zawiya* of sheikh Sidi Hamza was located.

> 'You know about the shaykh?' she asked?
> 'I have been to the *zawiya* twice,' I told her. 'I used to practice *dhikr* with the *faqirat* in Morocco years ago.'
> 'But we are also in the order (*tariqa*)!' she exclaimed, referring to herself and her husband who stood nearby. 'You must come to a meeting here in France as well.'
> 'I was intending to,' I told her, 'though I thought the closest one was in Avignon.'
> 'No, we meet every week just 20 minutes from here,' she said.
> We exchanged phone numbers.

It was thus that I began to practice once again, this time, however, conscious of documenting the experience and of understanding it, not just with my heart (as I had in 1994), but with my head.

It turned out that the population of the group in France was much younger than the one I had known in Morocco. They were primarily second generation North African-French, though there were a few French converts in their twenties as well. Unlike the *faqirat* in Casablanca, most of these young women were not literate in Arabic and the pamphlets from which they chanted were written in Latin letters, a transliteration of the Arabic. Although they recited the Arabic prayers fluently, most of them did not understand what they were saying. When I expressed dismay at this, one of the more advanced of the young women told me, *Il faut comprendre avec le coeur,* 'you have to understand with the heart' (conversation with the author, November 2008). Clearly the metaphor of both listening and understanding with the heart was central.

One of the central questions that emerged for me as I continued to practice and reflect with this group, concerned the ways in which community is recognized, created and negotiated among the young *faqirat* in France. More specifically, how is it created in and through musical acts?

Being Muslim and North African in France

North Africans represent the largest minority in France, and Islam the second religion after Catholicism (although according to recent statistics, 31 per cent of the French population is atheist, see Samuel 2008). Given France's history of religious wars, as well as the historical alliance of the church and the monarchy, the division between church and state (*laïcité*, or secularism) has been vehemently defended since the revolution, despite President Sarkozy's recent call for a 'positive secularism' (*laïcité positive*) (see Gallo 2008). It is not that religion is absent in France, but that it must remain in its place – that is, the place the state gives it, the private domain. No 'ostentatious' symbols of religiosity should enter public life – symbols such as yarmulkes and head-scarves are banned from public institutions, at least in principle (Asad 2003; Balibar 2004; Bowen 2007). Indeed, the question of whether Muslim girls should be allowed to wear the veil in school dominated the news in the late 1980s and 1990s, as girls in different parts of France were expelled from school and banned from attendance. Court cases ensued and the French court decided that 'ostentatious' symbols of religion were not permitted in public institutions (though it is up to the school administrators to judge what symbols are ostentatious). The vehement protection of secularism has given rise to equally impassioned discourses about the rights of religious minorities to comport themselves in accordance with their beliefs – not only by Muslims, but by international organizations like the Human Rights Watch.[2] Most Muslims do not want to abolish the line between church and state in France so much as to live in a democracy where religious expression is tolerated. Nonetheless, Islam is often represented as a threat to the French polity and its policies in the media and elsewhere. Because there is no division of 'church' and state in Muslim countries like Iran or even Morocco and Algeria, many French secularists imagine that Muslims do not, and cannot, participate in the ethos of the French secular nation (Asad 2006). Indeed, it is the inability of both the Muslim imagination and the French secular imagination to make space for the other that is a large source of the tensions in France.

The last few decades in France have seen a rise in xenophobia and overt racism, evident in the popularity of the far-right politician Jean-Marie Le Pen and the Front National party that he founded. While Le Pen's popularity has waned in recent years, the alleged prejudice in the police system against French citizens of North and sub-Saharan heritage caused riots in 2003, when car burnings and skirmishes with the police spread across France. In the region that I am working, this violence was documented three years earlier when a young French man murdered a young *beur* (French citizen of North African origin) and gang violence ensued.[3]

The segregation of the Muslim populations in France is evident in and exacerbated by the actual demographics of the nation. North Africans as well as sub-Saharan Africans often live in enclaves on the periphery of cities, in apartment complexes called HLM – *habitation à loyer modéré*, or

2. Human Rights Watch stated: 'The proposed law is an unwarranted infringement on the right to religious practice. For many Muslims, wearing a headscarf is not only about religious expression, it is about religious obligation in salaat.'

3. http://www.ladepeche.fr/article/2000/12/05/108600-Le-meurtrier-de-Vauvert-parle-d-un-acte-irreflechi.html. Accessed 6 October 2008.

rent-controlled apartments. While these complexes are in the suburbs (*la banlieu*) of many major cities in France, they are also found on the periphery of smaller cities and villages. These are not immigrant communities any longer – most of the residents are French citizens, having been born in France to immigrant parents – but they are communities of difference. Their marginalization in French society takes many forms – from the physical spaces they inhabit on the edges of cities, towns and villages, to the reduced opportunities they face in the job market due to racism or a simple lack of *coup de pistons* – that is, influence.

French North-Africans are quite aware of the disadvantages of their ghettoization. Talking of the violence in schools where a majority of the children are 'Arab,' one *faqira* remarked, 'One has to be truly exceptional to get out of it. There is so much despair' (conversation with the author, September 2008). 'Yes,' echoed F, 'in my job there are several people who were hired without diplomas just because they knew people. For me, however, they required a *bac plus trois*. They wouldn't let me begin working until they saw my diplomas. The others (the French) don't have them' (conversation with the author, September 2008).

For North Africans practicing Islam in France, creating community is an exigency. "I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have the *faqirat*," one faqira remarked (conversation with the author, September 2008). Not only do they face the racism and tensions that have come in the wake of the Algerian War and both Algerian and Moroccan independence from colonial France, but they encounter different beliefs about community and what it performs – particularly those for whom religion is an important source of meaning and identification. A religious sign like wearing the veil, for example, may be a way of asserting an ethnic and cultural identity apart from the dominant French culture, but it is also a religious symbol – and for some an obligation – that stands in stark contrast to the secularist policies of the French state.

While it is problematic to generalize about 'the French,' or 'Muslims in France,' it is fair to say that the role of religion in public life (and by extension, the definition of religious community) is contested in the largely secular politics of French society. The marginalization of French citizens of North African heritage in France has been well documented (see Goodman 2005; Silverstein and Tetreault 2006), and it is important for the discussion of community and the role of community music to acknowledge that North Africans have many reasons to create identities that break the received molds that exist in French society. While different fundamentalisms may fulfill this function, there are other alternatives – the practice of Sufism being one of them. Indeed, the choice to practice Sufism, as opposed to more conventional or orthodox forms of Islam, is significant. It allows scholars to speak of a revival of 'sunni Sufism' (Ben Driss 2002) that is explicitly non-political, but which entails a search for an 'authentic Islamic experience' (Ben Driss 2002: 17). Indeed, according to sociologist Karim Ben Driss, 'the authenticity of this experience is the very spirit of this revival, [and] the reconstruction of identity is one of its consequences' (Ben Driss 2002:17, translation by author).

Musings on community

The role of music in building community may seem obvious. People sing together in harmony – that is, in pleasing agreement, each one with their

own voice, but also creating one collective voice. On closer examination, however, the notion of community is not self-evident. Is community immanent (the body of Christ, the Jewish people) or is it transcendent, as in some Buddhist traditions (Weber 1963)? Or in fact is the idea of community simply that – an idea held in common, an 'imagined community' as Benedict Anderson says in regard to nationalism (Anderson 1999)? Must community be tied to a place, or is it mobile and mutable, emergent in performance and just as ephemeral?

For French philosophers and intellectuals, to speak in one communal voice is an impossibility. Jean-Luc Nancy notes:

> There has already been between us – all together and each one of us alone – the sharing of something in common that is only our share, but in the sharing touches our very existence and makes us exist, in that it exposes our limits. It's that which makes us a 'we,' separating us and bringing us together, creating proximity out of the distance between us – 'us' in the major indecision of this collective or plural subject, condemned (and this is its strength) to never find its own voice. (Nancy 2001: 45, translation mine)

The fact of never finding one's 'proper voice' is, for Nancy, a condemnation and exaltation. Our commonality resides in the glimpses we afford one another of our singular mortality – which is the only thing we truly share *for Nancy*.

Musings on the impossibility of community, at least in French scholarship of the last forty years, grow out of disillusionment with systems of communism, socialism and other conceptions of non-capitalist political formation. For theorists like George Bataille, Maurice Blanchot or Jean-Luc Nancy, community as something immanent is an impossibility. Community is glimpsed at the limits of our being, in the encounter with finitude, but it is not a metaphysical reality. It is an opening *out* but never a complete embracing *of*. For Nancy, community is found at the edges of possibility, in the experience of what passes through but never permanently inhabits the subject. Encountering the limits of community turns one in upon oneself, revealing the impossibility of truly knowing the other, but it also opens outward, exposing the self to the other. Community, like love – and like music – traverses the individual but cannot be possessed by anyone. It is known only by how it 'strikes' (Nancy 2001). It is known in its resonance, in how it sounds and resounds. It is temporary.

Philosophies of the communal are many, and French theorists and philosophers cannot be said to represent the average French citizen. Cynicism about *religious* community, on the other hand, is readily accessible in the popular press and in the street.[4] While the majority of French people still think of themselves as Catholic, there is nonetheless an acknowledged '*crise*' or crisis in the French Catholic church due to lack of attendance and growing disenchantment with the notion of a personal God. As fundamentalisms are ever more in evidence worldwide, the ideology of secularism in France becomes more and more defensive and vituperative.

The Sufis I know would agree with Nancy that humans are linked by virtue of sharing a finitude, yet they would not be so cynical about the experience of community. Indeed, the Muslim conception of community is

4. I once attended a French marriage where the church ceremony was so raucous with talking that the priest actually reprimanded the congregation several times for their lack of attention and respect.

different from both the ideas of the French philosophers and the concepts of the French state. For Muslims, believers belong to the *umma al-mu'minin* that is the community of the faithful. While the word *umma* is often used in the context of political Islam to refer to the Muslim nation, in the context of Sufism it includes all those who practice the faith.

For Sufis in France, the concept of *companionship* (*subha*) is even more stressed than the concept of the *umma*, as unity with God can only be reached by keeping company with others on the path. As the shaykh, Sidi Hamza, notes:

> True Man is he who has a permanent bond with our Lord. The law makes a distinction between Sidi Mohammed, Sidi Idris, Abd al-Latif, etc., but the truth doesn't make a distinction and unites them in one, your head and mine, your face and mine, we are all part of one single Light, there is no distinction, there is only Reunion. We can't speak of many parts, as they are all united as One. That isn't found in books. We can attain this only with the companionship of brothers (*subha*), invocation (*dhikr*) and the practice of the Heart (*nab'a min qalb*). (Quoted in Ben Driss 2002: 182)

Companionship (or accompaniment) is essential in order to progress on the Sufi path. In the sense used above by Sidi Hamza it is a kind of work, a practice that leads the disciple to an experience of unity with the divine. It also has other effects. 'Intimate relations are woven in the heart of the brotherhood, whose quality recalls the life of the Prophet's Companions. Companionship (*subha*), friendship, brotherhood all constitute the basis of a profound Love, often described as 'inexplicable' (Ben Driss 2002: 248, translation by author).

Companionship generates love, but it is also a kind of technique for advancing on the path. As the *Boutshishiyya* website states: 'It is human nature to become what one takes as a model. If the model is good, the soul tends to be good. The whole secret of companionship resides in this.'[5] Community is necessary to provide models of good ethics (*akhlaq*), particularly at this moment in history when, according to Shaykh Sidi Hamza, materialism has created such an imbalance between body and spirit. Sufism attempts to rectify this imbalance by the practice of invocation and the concurrent creation of beauty (Ben Driss 2002: 140).

The Aristotelian ethos that equates doing with being, and practice with moral identity, is very present in the well-known Sufi theologies of Ibn al-'Arabi (twelfth–thirteenth century) and al-Ghazzali (eleventh–twelfth century) (see Chittick 1989; Corbin 1998). For contemporary Sufis as well, the practice of piety *constitutes* faith, it is not the result of faith (Hoffman 1995, 1999; see also Gilsenan 1973, emphasis added). One not only learns by doing, but one *becomes* by doing. Part of this active cultivation of the ethical self is done through music. While the place of music in orthodox Islam has always been debated, its place in Sufi ritual is codified. Indeed, there is a spiritual practice called *sama'* which cultivates communion with God through (attentive) 'listening'.[6]

For the *Boutshishiyya*, community is created in acts of worship. One does not belong to the community by virtue of blood, nor by virtue of residence, but by virtue of submission to God and to the practice of prayer,

5. 'La nature de l'âme humaine est de s 'imprégner de celui qu'elle prend pour modèle. Si le modèle est bon, l'âme tend à être bonne. Tout le secret du compagnonnage réside ici', http://www.saveurs-soufies.com. Accessed 6 October 2008.

6. Chittick notes that invoking the names of God has practical effects: 'Each of these words designates a mode of gaining direct knowledge of God and of the unseen worlds without the intermediary of study, teacher, or rational faculty. God "opens up" the heart to the infusion of knowledge' (Chittick 1989: xii).

chanting and singing. Community is created in performance. Indeed, acts of the body instantiate community, but of these acts, it is listening that does the ethical work of liturgy.

Liturgy as a work of community

Historically, liturgy is not just a form of public worship with a prescribed form, but a public duty performed without recompense by richer citizens for poorer ones. Lévinas defines it as: 'the putting out of funds at a loss' (Lévinas 1982:192). It is an act of charity for the sake of community. Often consisting of intoned psalms, prayers, exaltations and hymns, the etymology of the word liturgy reminds us that a religious rite is a service enacted by a ritual specialist for the people, or a service done by the people for others. Liturgy is a kind of "prestation" in that it offers gifts, but also exacts obligation, involving participants in a long-term relation of reciprocity (Mauss 1925); for liturgy takes up a life within social actors that needs to be nourished by sustained communal performance. Insofar as it enacts an ethical relation between social actors, liturgy is performative. It does something in the world, weaving an aesthetic thread – and, who knows, perhaps a spiritual one? – between participants. 'Furthermore,' says Lévinas of liturgy, 'as an absolutely patient action, liturgy is not to be ranked as a cult besides work and ethics. It is ethics itself' (Lévinas 1982: 192).

In Islam the word for liturgy is *wadhifa*, which also has at its root the concept of 'work' or service. The Sufi *wadhifa* includes prayers, Qur'anic recitations, and praises. It also includes or is followed by the *dhikr*, the remembrance ceremony, which involves chanting several of the 99 names of God over and over, creating a trance-like state that may lead to ecstatic communion with the divine. The work of the *wadhifa* is to offer praise to God while 'polishing the heart' of the participants. Chanting, and then singing together while sitting in a circle on the floor creates a pathos in common, but it also purifies the heart so that the *faqira* may progress up the ladder of spiritual initiation. Commenting on the proper comportment at a ceremony, one of the *faqirat* noted that the circle must not be broken by legs extended straight into the centre, or by getting up and traversing the space. "It is the '*sirr* [the secret] that circulates during the *dhikr*," the *muqadimma*, or group leader, added (conversation with the author, October 2008). The circle is the sacred space of the secret, a station, or level of Sufi initiation and development.[7]

Liturgy is most certainly a prescribed form. And it may be considered in a negative light when it is viewed as merely rote repetition (Lévinas 1982; Pepper 1995). What are the effects of this prescription? Can repetition exist at all when speaking of live performance? Further, in what sense (or senses) does liturgy become an ethical act? What does Sufi liturgy perform in France?

Al-Wadhifa or 'The Work'

For the North African-identified Sunni Sufi in France, practicing the liturgy is a means of purification, a way of unveiling the secrets of the divine to the self and for the community. *Akhlaq*, good acts or ethics, is one of the stated goals of the Sufi in community, and the *dhikr*, or remembrance of God ceremony, polishes the heart so that right conduct and ethical behavior prevail.

7. http://www.saveurs-soufies.com/htm//tctraining0001011c.html. Accessed 15 September 2008.

The work that liturgy does may be understood by examining its context of performance:

I made the mistake of following the signs for Centre Ville. In fact, the HLMs (*habitations à loyer modéré*) are always outside the centre of town. So I retraced my steps and made a left at the rondpoint, away from the centre, and towards the periphery. Beaville is about not far from Montpellier with a population of 10,700 (2008). Like other villages of its size in the region, the homes are made of grey stone and date from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The HLMs, of course, are much more recent. Cinder-block apartments painted in white, the ones in Vauvert are four story walk-ups organized by name and alphabetized areas – Beauville apartments, buildings A, B, C, etc. There are several different neighborhoods.

I knew I was in the vicinity when I heard North-African hip-hop playing. I pulled into a strip of stores where some youths were hanging out and asked them where the Beauville apartments were.

'Straight up the hill, past the rondpoint,' was the answer.

I found the building easily and parked in front of it. N was watching for me out the window of the third floor apartment and called out to me. '*Montez*,' come on up, she smiled.

The door was open when I arrived and a little girl of about four greeted me. N came out from the kitchen and welcomed me, kissing me on both cheeks twice. She was a pretty girl, not more than 24, and was, of course, wearing a long black gondora (robe) and a scarf around her head. She escorted me into the living-room. The shutters were closed against the sun and the room was cool and welcoming. It was, in fact, like entering any Moroccan apartment in any city in Morocco: there were rugs with oriental-motifs on the floor, banquettes lining two walls, a large round table in the space between them, and a hutch on the opposite wall whose doors could be locked, protecting the sweets and linen inside from children's greedy hands. Family pictures were framed and displayed on the shelf.

'I'll go get you some cold water,' N said.

I set my bag down next to other bags left on the banquettes, and took out my scarf, wrapping it quickly around my head. N returned with the water, and I drank it all down, somewhat surprised at my thirst.

'Have everything?' N asked.

I began to follow her down the hall to where some women were already intoning the Qur'an.

'Oh wait, *at-tsibiyya*,' I said and ran back for my prayer beads.

There were eight women in the room, and a toddler. Only one looked up, but then quickly looked down again. They were reciting the *Youssef Surat*, a long Qur'anic verse that opens the liturgy. I sat down on a low mattress on the floor, and the young woman next to me placed a *cahier de wadhifa*, a liturgy book transcribed in the Latin alphabet, in front of me, pointing to the correct place in the text. I began to recite with them.

This room was also typical. There were thick quilted mats on the floor along two walls, of a kind made only in Morocco and Algeria, as well as a very thin flower-print mattress at right angles with these. A rug underlay everything. The women sat with legs folded under them, each holding their prayer beads in readiness for when the repetition of the names of God would begin. The only piece of furniture in the room was a *mario* – a tall

armoire where clothes and blankets are kept. Next to the wooden armoire, blankets were folded and piled almost as high as the ceiling. A cool breeze blew through lacey curtains. The room was sparse and clean.

The *dhikr* proceeded as it usually does, with the Qur'anic recitation, and then a vigorous and loud chanting of the names of God: *ya latif*, oh Subtle one, *huwa hu*, He [is] He, *ya al-qawi ya al-'aziz*, oh Powerful One, oh Dear One. The women began by slowly chanting the names of God, but the tempo and the dynamics increased progressively. As this happened, the mood of the group changed, and some women attained what is called *al-hal*, a spiritual state of union indexed by interruptions in the regularity of the chanting. I was profoundly aware that the longer we chanted, the more each one of us swirled into a unique tempo and tonality that nonetheless manifested an awareness of and response to all the others. Although we usually began on the same note, the chanting would often modulate up by half-steps. But there was no rule about this. Some women would follow the chromatic curve, but others modulated down, especially when the range was too high for comfort. Often women would be chanting a whole tone beneath others, or a fourth above. The result was not unlike East European choral singing – with seconds and open fifths creating harmonic tension. When the chanting was in full swing, there were fluctuations in rhythm as well, as some women 'stepped out' of the regular repetitions and began drawing long tones, as if moaning or keening, over the more vigorous and metrical rhythms of others. It was clear that there was a subtle listening going on, and an even subtler response. Indeed this was liturgy turned inside out, as repetition turned into improvisation, sometimes straying far from the ostinato of the phrase with which we began and which, in some fashion, was ever-present even when in the background.

If the repetition of the names of God in a regular ostinato rhythm provided the basis for collectively attaining a state of divine inspiration, more singular 'states' (*ahwal*) emerged in the spaces between the words. That is, the *dhikr* exemplified a singing (and feeling) together, but the fluctuations of *al-hal* provided the counterpoint. Some women performed loud cry breaks, others chanted in long tones over the rhythmic faster chanting of the group, the voices of others receding into a whisper, or making a melismatic crescendo into a wail. The manifestations of being in *al-hal* are un-predictable, and women are not supposed to observe each other when in this state. They do and must listen however. Indeed, there are times when the ritual has the qualities of western jazz improvisation, when the women are engaging in an aesthetic of being slightly 'out of tune' and 'off the beat', creating a layering of sound and a self-conscious musical conversation (what Keil 1995, calls 'participatory discrepancies'; see also Monson 1996).[8]

This should not be surprising, as all musical communication is based upon this subtle listening and variegated response (Keil 1995). However, the improvisational and unpredictable qualities of *al-hal* do attest to the fact that the Sufi liturgy is not 'mindless repetition' or a kind of embodied 'mechanical reproduction' of the voice. Indeed, the performance of each ceremony requires that each ceremony be unique. This uniqueness extends to the movement of the body as well as to listening and sound:

'Oh, do you know what S does?' a *faqira* told the others one day when we were all drinking tea and eating sweets after the ceremony, and discussing

8. 'The theory of participatory discrepancies is a liberating theory of relativity for audio-tactile processes and textures which asserts that "Music, to be personally involving and socially valuable, must be 'out of time' and 'out of tune'" (Keil 1995:4).

9. See Mahmood 2005.

the differences between women and men's ritual comportment, 'He screams "ha!" very loudly and then he jumps up high in the air. He turns his body completely around in the air. That's his special *hal* [during the *dhikr*].'

Al-hal manifests differently for everyone. One *faqira* steps out of the ostinato, rolling back into a slower tempo and chanting 'allah' once for every two or three the group produces. Another pierces the regularity of the chanting by screaming *ha allah!* ('there is God!'), her seated body jumping up as if momentarily electrified. Another begins to clap her hands quickly, literally adding poly-rhythmic counterpoint to the chanting.

Liturgy is a work – perhaps *the* work – that labors for a sentiment of Sufi community. And yet the Sufi liturgy is also an anti-liturgy insofar as it relies upon improvisation – *al hal*. It balances form and creativity much like any genre of art. While the repetition of the names of God in unison may be said to reproduce 'the same'; *al-hal* diverges from the same, creating simultaneous sameness and difference, community and singular subjectivity. Indeed, the twelfth–thirteenth century Sufi philosopher Ibn al-'Arabi talks about such paradox as the foundation of all experience: 'To find God is to fall into bewilderment (*hayra*),' says Chittick in his exegesis of Ibn al-'Arabi,

> 'not the bewilderment of being lost and unable to find one's way, but the bewilderment of finding and knowing God and of not-finding and not-knowing Him at the same time. Every existent thing other than God dwells in a never-never land of affirmation and negation, finding and losing, knowing and not-knowing. The difference between the Finders and the rest of us is that they are fully aware of their own ambiguous situation'. (Chittick 1989:4)

The state of *hayra*, the self-conscious embracing of paradox, is not intellectualized in the community in southern France, but is experienced with the heart, and thus known (in the sense of gnosis).

Conclusion

What, then, does Sufi liturgy perform in the context of southern France? First of all, it is an initiation into listening, for despite the fact that most of the women are second generation North African French, almost none of them are literate in Arabic, having grown up in the French school system. Their initiation into the *tariqa*, the Sufi order, is also an initiation into the recitation of the Qur'an as well as the ritual prayers of Islam, including the chanting of the names of God. These texts are transcribed in the Latin alphabet and printed up in chapbooks (*un cahier de wadhifa*) that all the *fuqara* (male and female devotees) are given. The songbooks are likewise transliterated. And while some of the women understand colloquial Arabic, few understand all of what they are reciting in the liturgy (Qur'anic Arabic diverging from the colloquial significantly). Listening to those more practiced, and trying to approximate the sounds, is thus the first stage of communal practice. Responding in subtle (and often unconscious) ways to the rhythms and modalities of the chanting comes later. Listening, thus, is a work in common, a path of initiation.

Secondly, being a Sufi (as opposed to a more orthodox Muslim, even a secular North African) is a choice in France.[9] While the majority of the

young women were raised as 'cultural Muslims' (fasting Ramadan, and aware of the ritual calendar, though not necessarily praying), they have decided to engage in a practice that is explicitly ecstatic and esoteric. This decision creates an identity that is anchored in a genealogy of North African tradition, but which is explicitly non-political (in the sense of espousing no political discourse) and non-fundamentalist, while being 'authentically Moroccan and Muslim.'

Thirdly, actively engaging in the Sufi liturgy allows the individual to emerge in community – that is, the place of the soloist and of improvisation is acknowledged and appreciated at the same time that community (*subha*) is created. The Sufi liturgy is referred to as 'the path of beauty' (*at-tariqa aj-jamaliyya*). It is fair to say that the practice of Sufi aesthetics in the context of southern France creates an identity that is both single and collective, compelling and performative, creating community in a context of tense identity politics in France.

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Kapchan, Deborah A., "Singing community/remembering in common: Sufi liturgy and North African identity in southern France", *International journal of community music* 2/1 (Bristol, Great Britain: 2009), 9-23. {doi: 10.1386/ijcm.2.1.9/1}

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