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Ritual, Music, Sociability and Censure: Making a Film on Sufi 'dhikr' in Egypt

Abstract

The author describes her experiences attending and filming the Sufi ritual of communal dhikr in order to create an educational videotape approximately a half-hour in length that would include commentary and translation of some of the lyrics and could convey Sufi dhikr as ritual, art (in the form of music and poetry), and social event. Dhikr is the "remembrance" of God through concentrated repetition of some of his "Beautiful Names," accompanied by stylized movements of the body such as bowing or swinging from side to side, often employing methods of breath control and done in some countries (Egypt included) to musical accompaniment.

Author Notes

Special Section: Bringing the World to the Classroom

No other aspect of the academic teaching of religion demands an audiovisual presentation more than ritual. Despite that fact, such materials on Islamic ritual are extraordinarily rare. Few films on Islam show more than a single prostration of the complex liturgical prayer, salat, that is performed five times daily (a pedagogical gap I had to fill with a video intended for converts instructing them how to pray), and until recently the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, was rarely shown on film. The one video I had seen on the Five Pillars (obligatory rituals) of Islam, issued by a company that distributes many educational videos on religion, was marred by inaccuracies and incompleteness.

Even more difficult to convey verbally is the Sufi ritual of communal dhikr, the "remembrance" of God through concentrated repetition of some of his "Beautiful Names," accompanied by stylized movements of the body such as bowing or swinging from side to side, often employing methods of breath control and done in some countries (Egypt included) to musical accompaniment. Sufi dhikr is not only a religious ritual designed to open the mind to God's influence and lead to increased spiritual awareness, it is very much a social event, indeed the focus of Sufi social life, often accompanied by elaborate hospitality. The ritual includes many actors simultaneously performing different roles, besides the people actually doing the recitation (the number of which may vary from a handful to several hundred). Of singular interest is the munshid, or singer, who inspires the

participants in dhikr with his lyrics of praise to the Prophet or other saintly figures and of the mysteries of mystical experience, drawn from a classical corpus of Sufi poetry mixed with contemporary improvisation. The interaction of the munshid's praise of the Prophet and the participants' recitation of the divine names is complex and fascinating. The munshid is said to "give life" to the dhikr, as a singer as well as his ability to impart spiritual intensity are critical to the ritual's success. Accompanying him is a group of musicians, typically playing percussion and violin or flute, and occasionally lute, though the latter is often reserved for secular music. There are also a number of other people involved in various ways: a man who stands between the rows of participants to keep their movements synchronized; the host, if the dhikr is held at a private mosque or party; the cooks and servers of food and drinks; and the large numbers of observers, who often outnumber the participants and may be talking or smoking on the sidelines.

For years I searched in vain for a film or video on Sufi dhikr for classroom use. I attempted to fill in the gap with verbal explanations, audiocassettes of Sufi music, and even my own imitations of the movements of Sufi dhikr for my class. In 1987 I went to Egypt to study the role of women in the Sufi orders and the function of saints' day celebrations (moulids in Egyptian Arabic), building on earlier work I had done on Muslim women's religious lives in Egypt. I met Shaykh 'Izz al-'Arab al-Hawari, a Sufi shaykh (master or spiritual teacher), who was

extraordinarily open with me and took me on as a quasi-disciple, opening up for me such a wealth of information that my project expanded into a broader study of Sufism in Egypt, resulting in the publication of a book (*Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt*, University of South Carolina Press, 1995). Sufism is an esoteric movement; Sufis are integral to Islamic religious life in both Sunni and Shi'i Islam, but they consider their spiritual experiences divine "secrets" that should be shared only with those whom God has spiritually prepared. Before I met Shaykh 'Izz, my attempts to plumb the depths of Sufism were met with derision by Sufis who felt that even a Muslim would never understand Sufi truths, let alone a foreigner like me. Sufi silence is based as much on prudence as privilege, for many elements in Egyptian society, such as modernists, fundamentalists, or government officials worried about Islam's image in the West, oppose Sufism either on principle (stating, for example, that it is an un-Islamic innovation that did not exist in the time of the Prophet), or for pragmatic reasons: they are embarrassed by the emotionalism of dhikr, verging at times on ecstasy or even apparent mental derangement.

Sufism's opponents criticize its introspective, often apolitical attitude as an obstacle to modernization and productivity.

Fieldwork on Sufism therefore presents many challenges, beyond the merely physical challenges of foregoing sleep for long periods and enduring less than comfortable conditions. These include the challenges of finding trust and

acceptance, finding Sufis self-conscious and articulate enough to explain their teachings and experiences in a way that is understandable to the researcher, and resisting the censure of Sufism's vocal opponents. Use of a tape recorder was acceptable only with self-assured leaders, never with ordinary people, and I had to rely on my memory of many conversations, which I recorded on my computer as soon as I returned home. Certain aspects of popular religious life are virtually impossible to photograph, let alone videotape: the police confiscate cameras taken into the saints' shrines at the moulids, which form the core of Sufi social life and are an important arena for the performance of dhikr. My own position as a semi-anonymous participant-observer precluded the taking of many photos, except of pilgrims who requested photographs of themselves posing before the sepulchre of a great saint. Shaykh 'Izz did not mind attracting attention to himself and was less likely to attract censure, so he sometimes took photographs of people in dhikr for me.

But what I really wanted was to take home to my students a videotape of dhikr, to give them a visual impression of the ritual. I dared not attempt to do tape in a public setting, but Shaykh 'Izz had a mosque and encouraged me to videotape a dhikr he planned in his mosque. I did not own a video-camera, and Cairo does not rent out video-cameras, as shops do in the U.S. I contracted an Egyptian videographer accustomed to videotaping weddings. It was a disaster. He used a

bright light and intruded between the rows of participants in dhikr, prompting outcries and a quarrel that led the participants to leave. My "innocent" attempt to provide instructional material for my students had led to the breakup of the ceremony altogether, and aroused much resentment against both me and Shaykh 'Izz. Shaykh 'Izz encouraged me to try again, but with a camera that did not require a bright light. I succeeded in borrowing one from the British elementary school in Cairo, and my husband videotaped a dhikr from the scaffolding of the mosque, which was still under construction, later moving to the floor for a closer image, but still careful not to intrude upon the ceremony or be too conspicuous.

Although that tape had the potential to provide a visual image of delis, it was made in the PAL format and suffered visual deterioration in the transfer to the NTSC format. I also wished to obtain videotapes of dhikr performed in other social settings and with other musical talents, because the setting and artists tremendously influence the spiritual mood and even determine who may or may not participate in the dhikr. After returning to the United States, I began to develop a more ambitious goal: to create an educational videotape approximately a half-hour in length that would include commentary and translation of some of the lyrics and could convey Sufi dhikr as ritual, art (in the form of music and poetry), and social event. I decided to contact other individuals who might have videotapes of their own.

I collected videotapes from three other scholars. Some of the best footage, from a number of different dhikrs with several different mouldids and done in the American format, was contributed by Michael Frishkopf, an ethnomusicology doctoral student from UCLA researching Sufi music in Egypt. It is nonetheless indicative of government sensitivities about Western exposure to popular and ecstatic expressions of piety that he was banned from going to mouldids or saints' shrines. His videotapes were all done at private celebrations, though often in alleys and public squares, with the explicit approval of those in charge. Marcia Hermansen, professor of religious studies at San Diego State University, contributed a very short segment she videotaped of a weekly dhikr in an alley outside a saint's shrine in Cairo, fascinating for its close-ups of women in dhikr (who are rarely seen in dhikrs held in mosques or other more "proper" settings), before she was forced to turn off the video-camera.

Nicolaas H. Biegan, a former Dutch ambassador to Egypt (and current ambassador to the United Nations) as well as an Arabist and aficionado of Sufism, contributed valuable footage from a number of mouldids.

Dr. Biegan does not believe his diplomatic status had anything to do with his ability to videotape the mouldids and says no objections were ever raised, but my own experience of having my camera confiscated by the police at a mouldid as well as the experiences of Frishkopf and Hermansen lead me to suspect that his ability

to film the moulids unimpeded may have stemmed from his diplomatic privilege. His videotape was also in the PAL format and required conversion.

The next step was interpreting the tapes, not an easy task even for a trained Arabist. Understanding the words, let alone interpreting their meaning from a Sufi perspective, was a daunting task. It is often difficult enough to understand English lyrics when there is a great deal of competing noise and the words are sometimes distorted by the need to adapt them to musical rhythms and rhymes. The munshids often sing over public address systems that are inadequate for conveying words clearly, especially in an extremely noisy context, with competition not only from the musical instruments and the participants in dhikr, but also from the conversations and shouts of bystanders. Sufism has a specialized vocabulary that is not understood by many non-Sufis. I searched through email networks for anyone in the United States familiar with both the Egyptian dialect of Arabic and this genre of Sufi music, but came up with no one. I decided that I needed to bring Shaykh 'Izz to the United States.

The challenge of doing so was enormous. First there was the financial challenge. Finding funding for making an educational video based on videotapes of homemade and variable quality proved unexpectedly difficult. I was advised that the National Endowment for the Humanities would not consider funding the making of a film with less than professional-quality picture. My university's

Research Board would not fund it because it was not considered research but of merely pedagogical value. Finally I obtained a small grant from the Office of International Programs and Studies on our campus. Then there were the legal hurdles. Shaykh 'Izz's application for a tourist visa was denied. I learned that the university could sponsor a request for him to be allowed to have a work visa for the duration of this project, but normally English language proficiency is required for a work visa, and the American embassy in Cairo denied the request. It was only through Michael Frishkopf's persistence in breaking through the lower echelons of bureaucracy in the embassy and my faxing an urgent plea and explanation to an official there that Shaykh 'Izz finally obtained his visa. Space does not permit discussion of the enormous challenges that ensued after his arrival in the United States--Shaykh 'Izz had never been outside the Arab world and did not speak English; this normally gregarious man found himself confronted with agonizing isolation, despite my efforts to find Arabic-speaking companions. For me, the challenges of meeting his needs as well as those of my children and forcing him into an unfamiliar American work schedule were frustrating and draining. Despite all that, the task of translating and interpreting more than twenty hours of videotape was accomplished.

The financial cost of his stay here far exceeded my expectations and not only exhausted my grant but drained my personal finances as well. It is only the

happy circumstance of my appointment as a University Scholar, an honor that provided a research account from which I could draw funds, that enabled me actually to create the educational videotape I wanted. I had committed to showing the final product at an AAR (the American Academy of Religion) panel that was to discuss the pedagogical value of professor-made videos versus the production quality of professionally made videos. My new research account only cleared in October and the conference was in November. Writing and recording the narration and selecting video clips with the expert editing assistance of Timothy Jenvey of our university's Educational Technologies Assistance Group, were all performed under many time constraints. A preliminary half-hour version of the video, "Celebrating the Prophet in the Remembrance of God: Sufi Dhikr in Egypt," was shown at the panel, eliciting both interest and suggestions for improvement.

The video was also shown at the Middle East Studies Association and to my colleagues in religious studies at the University of Illinois. Based on their feedback, Mr. Jenvey and I redid the video, lengthening it to 39 minutes, reducing the amount of narration, and allowing more segments without voice over narration. Our university does not have the technology to provide subtitles, a drawback that is not as serious as some might think, because students often have difficulty reading subtitles, especially against a white background. The voice over translations are usually given just before the lines of the songs, leaving the Arabists and

ethnomusicologists in the audience the opportunity to hear the lines as they are performed.

A couple of observers at the AAR expressed a desire for a more personalized presentation of dhikr rather than the wide view usually taken by the camera. They especially wished for interviews with participants. Even if the opportunity for videotaped interviews presented itself, experience suggests that most people would either refuse to speak before a video-camera or would be unable to articulate their experiences in a manner understandable to Western audiences. One expert in ritual studies said he would have preferred to observe the ritual unencumbered by my narration, but my experience suggests that this would be extremely unwise. Many tourists and other foreign observers regularly see dhikr without having the slightest understanding of what they are seeing, and often interpret it as wild, uncontrolled behavior or even a manifestation of demon-possession. While scholars of ritual might be better equipped than ordinary tourists to do their own interpretations, one cannot expect undergraduate students to be able to do so. Furthermore, one of the main values of the video, from my perspective, is that it explains the meaning of the lyrics of the songs and their relationship to the experience of dhikr participants and Sufi teaching in general, as well as their connection to social relationships and setting. This could not have been done

without narration. Feedback from scholars of Islam, especially experts in Sufism, has been quite positive, especially concerning the quality of the narration.

My experience indicates that even technologically challenged scholars like myself, using "homemade" videotapes, can produce quality audiovisual materials for educational purposes that make up in quality of scholarship for what they might lack in artistry. Scholars may face many challenges in doing so, not the least of which is convincing funding agencies that their project is worthwhile. In this case, issues of language, controversy and admission into foreign countries (mine in Egypt, Shaykh 'Izz's into the United States) complicated the task. However, the pedagogical and historical value of the product makes the effort to overcome such hurdles worthwhile.