



SOCIETY

u
l &
t
u
r

Review

Sufism: An experiential tradition

Eleni-Panagiota Stoupa*

One of the most interesting, controversial and challenging religious forms that has shaped and constructed different kinds of beliefs and believers is Sufism. Sufism constitutes a combination of mystical form, spiritual ethics and traditional religion that represents the internalistic and spiritual side of Islamic belief. What Islamic mysticism represents through Sufism is not something separate from the Islamic religion and philosophy, nor a different type of religious ideas coming from Islam. Instead, Sufism portrays another spiritual behavior where bodies, experiences, emotions and embodiment intertwine in an esoteric path.

* Researcher of the Centre for Mediterranean, Middle East and Islamic Studies of the University of Peloponnese.

A mystic communication between humans and God

Islam is not -and should not be treated- as a homogenous worldview doctrine. Instead, a variety of ideas and internal directions have constructed Islam and interpreted the human image inside a multidimensional concept. In these interpretations, an anthropological perception underpins a paradigm with an esoteric character, wherein the spiritual transformation of a person that is associated with his/her obligations, is expressed through Sufism.¹ In Islam, the union with God that follows a spiritual mentor (shaykh or pir) and constitutes a lifelong process (tariq), depicts the concept of mysticism. Sufism has been developed as the synonym of Islamic mysticism, by corresponding to a spiritual and ascetic lifestyle. During an internalistic process of the self, the believer rejects earthly concerns, purifies his/her soul, follows the spiritual stages of esoteric awareness and therefore walks along God's path. For Sufi mystics, spiritual introspection and exploration gives them the chance to perceive the hidden world, find the truth and return to God. By releasing the self of apprehensions and worldly issues, he/she becomes God. This kind of annihilation, according to Karim Mitha, is illustrated as the death of the individual self and reascent as a piece of a Whole, of the Objective Truth.²

The word Sufism has its locus in the Arabic word *sufiyya*, illustrating someone that follows *tasawwuf*, which shares several meanings, such as the wearing of woolen clothes. The origins of Sufism have been traced to the Prophet of Islam, who according to believers, is the first and greatest Sufi. The Prophet Hazrat Muhammad, who dedicated his life to Islam, has been described as the epitome of Islamic Sufism.³ During the revelations, besides Qu'ran's canons, the Prophet also received inside his heart divine inspiration that could be transmitted from one heart to another. In this framework, Sufism represents the philosophy and practices that pursue a lineal esoteric communication between humans and God.

Sufi philosophy epitomizes an esoteric essence of contact with God. By hunting the Truth (*haqiqah*), Sufis focus on the hidden meaning (*batin*), where they search for the 'reality of religion', namely God's knowledge.⁴ Therefore, the process of learning depicts a journey to discover what really exists. An amalgam of performances, practices and rituals define Sufi's experience of faith. It initiates and, at the same time, feeds the emotional and bodily frameworks of Sufi tradition, which focuses in the 'mundus imaginalis', the *Alam Malakut*, namely the real world.⁵ In order to attain this stage and find love (*mohabba*) the worshipper should believe in God (*tawakkul*), turn to austerity (*faqr*), attrition (*tawba*) and, reverence (*zuhd*). Furthermore, he/she should also turn to tolerance (*sabr*), appreciation (*shukr*), remembrance of God (*dhikr*), as well as gratification (*rida*).

While in the scholar world and academic discussions Sufism's nature, origins and essence are controversial, the doctrine does not consist something outside Islam or is a new religion that emerged from within it. Instead, Sufism is the spiritual and inward dimension of Islam, an esoteric part of Islamic life and belief. As every other phenomenon, it developed through the centuries as a livable organization that received many and different types of influences from a variety of Christian and other religious mystical expressions, and quickly was transformed into more organized forms such as brotherhoods.⁶ Whilst Sufism has a unique character inside Islam, through the centuries it has gained an adaptability that allows it to be translated in other beliefs.⁷

Sufism, the human body and embodiment

Books are considered not enough for the teaching of Sufism. The understanding of truth comes as a corollary of direct experience and the ultimate belief.⁸ Therefore, Sufism is not only a doctrine, but most importantly, it is a concept inscribed first and foremost through the human body.

The human body has a significant role in the formation of the religious self. It constitutes the vehicle for the ultimate connection with God, since it signifies the locus of all the reflections and actions upon the world.⁹ Following Merleau-Ponty, the relationship that a person has with the world is defined through his/her body. Human values, and the special circumstances that arise within the historical world, are shaped and formed into embodied behavior.¹⁰ For instance, the oral performance of Allah's name (dhikr) is more essential for Sufi believers in comparison to prayer. The daily remembrance of God allows someone to deluge in Allah's nature and gradually integrate his characteristics. Dhikr brings personal practice into a social ritual where emotions and physical feelings are present. During dhikr believers can actively participate in the Sufi community and constitute an incorporation into the mystical path (adab), an embodied virtue.

The embodiment of Sufi tradition through mechanisms such as teachings, ritual performances, mystical practices and bodily hardships, which represent the mystical initiation (tarbiyya) in the Sufi journey, construct believers' religious identity. During the embodiment of traditional disciplines that construct the religious self, the body becomes the mediator among humanity and divinity; this is -what Paulo G. Pinto refers to as- a 'mystical body', which represents one among other types of religious subjectivity.¹¹ Therefore, Sufism constitutes an experiential tradition, where the locus of its rituals and the arena of performances, wherein the spiritual processes communicate, is the human body. Through the positions of the body, the rhythmic steps and moves, as well as the breathing techniques, a spiritual mysticism and religious self is constructed. By means of all these processes, practices and symbolism Sufism has captured the individual as it becomes attached to the soul. The attachment is so strong that according to Sufis, the separation from the Divine provokes an emotional sickness.¹²

The attention and discussions that Sufism has received all these centuries, not only coming from Islam but also from other religious doctrines, has transformed it into one of the most controversial and dynamic dimensions of Islam and personal expression. According to Sufis the interfered cosmos consists of misinterpretations, and Sufism provides the methods that would help go beyond superficial awareness, where Objective Truth and divinity lies. Through the years, the doctrine has gained and lost a lot of believers and followers. This inconsistency, along with the controversial character that has been shaped through its analysis and research, should not be treated as a clue of a forbidden structure. Instead, this is a sign that we should delve deeply into the research of this spiritual path.

REFERENCES

All links accessed on November 19, 2018

1. Nesprava, M. V, "Human Image in Classical Islam And Sufism: Philosophical Analysis", *Antropološki Vimiri Filsofs'kih Doslidžen'*, 2018, Vol 13, 166-172, <https://bit.ly/2zegahB>
2. Mitha, Karim, "Sufism and healing", *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 2018, 1-12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19349637.2018.1464423>
3. Ajay, Kumar, Ghosh; Sumeer, Ahmad, Mir, "A Short Introduction to Origin, Beginning and History of Sufism or Tasawwuf", *International Journal of Management and Applied Science*, Vol. 2, No. 12, 2016, 75-82, <https://bit.ly/2TgN1ea>
4. Stanton, Andrea; Ramsamy, Edward; Seybolt, Peter; Carolyn M. Elliott, M. Carolyn, *Sufism: Prehistory to 1250: Middle East, Cultural sociology of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa an encyclopedia*. California: Thousand Oaks, SAGE Publications, 2012, 2-4, <https://bit.ly/2DOWogE>
5. Nouriani, Steven "Mundus Imaginalis: Bridging Body and Spirit", *Psychological Perspectives*, Vol 60, No 3, 2017, 386-394 <https://bit.ly/2qSLPAN>
6. Stanton, Andrea; Ramsamy, Edward; Seybolt, Peter; Elliott, M. Carolyn, op. cit. 2
7. Cook, David, "Mysticism in Sufi Islam", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2015, 1-17, <https://bit.ly/2zYmKsm>
8. Ewing, Katherine "Dreams from a Saint: Anthropological Atheism and the Temptation to Believe", *American Anthropologist*, Vol 96, No 3, 1994, 571-583, <https://bit.ly/2KkR7xP>
9. Lock, Margaret, "Cultivating the body - anthropology and epistemologies of bodily practice and knowledge", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol, 22, 1993, 133-155, <https://bit.ly/2QKO6cx>
10. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of perception*, London: Routledge, 1962
11. Pinto, Paulo, "The Anthropologist and the Initiated: Reflections on the Ethnography of Mystical Experience among the Sufis of Aleppo, Syria", *Social Compass*, Vol 57, No 4, 2010, 464-478, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0037768610383371>
12. Mitha, Karim op. cit.

