

RITUALS AND DEVOTIONAL PRACTICES IN SUFISM

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ABSTRACT

Sufism, also known as “tasawwuf” - Islamic manifestation of mysticism, has been one of the most discussed topics between Muslim and non-muslim world. Historically there emerged serious argumentations around Sufism and in every possible aspect of it, including origin of the name of Sufism, which directly concerns the problem of Sufism’s background and divergent opinions about the late Sufism schools, within the traditional Islamic scholars and the muslim society, especially in middle ages. At some point the doctrine of Sufism might seem contradictory to the traditional Islamic creed, sometimes due to misinterpretation of esoteric conceptions and occasionally because of the appropriated concepts brought in to the Sufism by pseudo-sufisms. The late caused considerably major deformations to the original appearance of Tasawwuf, whereas these shifts changed the views towards Sufism, of not only ordinary people amongst the Muslim society and non-Muslims, but Islamic scholars as well. Mostly, such kind of misrepresentations are observed in the praxis and rituals of Islamic mysticism. Besides, the multiplicity of Sufism orders, each offering different approaches to Sufism, make it even more complicated for a research.

In this article, we are going to look through some Sufism rituals and issues related with them. Firstly, it is worth to notice that in order to be able to academically approach the problem of Sufism rituals, its necessary to investigate the history of Sufism.

Sufism had a long history already before the subsequent institutionalization of Sufism teachings into devotional orders in the early Middle Ages [1]. According to Carl W. Ernst the earliest gurus of Sufism is the Prophet Muhammad himself and his companions (Sahabah) [2]. Sufism masters consider they are directly connected to the Sahaba then to the Prophet through a pledge (bay`ah). The “bay`ah” (“pledge, allegiance”) that was given to Muhammad (p.b.u.h) by his Sahabah. By pledging allegiance to Muhammad, the Sahabah had committed themselves to the service of God. According to Islamic belief, by pledging allegiance to Muhammad, the Sahabah have pledged allegiance to God [3]. Verily, those who give Bay`ah (pledge) to you (O Muhammad) they are giving Bay`ah (pledge) to Allah. The Hand of Allah is over their hands. Then whosoever breaks his pledge, breaks it only to his own harm, and whosoever ful ls what he has covenanted with Allah, He will bestow on him a great reward. (Quran 48:10)

Its essential to mention that there exist particular mainstreams in interpretation of Tasawwuf. In one case, Tasawwuf is the teaching that emphasizes central aspects of Islam and sees as a main goal to purify one’s soul. In general, adherents of Sufism believe that “tasawwuf” is derived from the Quran and the Sunna of the prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h), as well as many other Islamic sciences. They offer many evidences to substantiate their claim. Hadith about the “ihsan” is one of the strongest arguments of Sufisms in behalf of foundation and reasonableness

of their teaching [4]. Prophet describes the *ihsan* following; “*Ihsan* is to worship God as though you see Him, and if you cannot see Him, then indeed He sees you”. (Al-Bukhari and Al-Muslim”). *Ihsan* is an Arabic term meaning “perfection” or “excellence”. It is a matter of taking one’s inner faith (*iman*) and showing it in both deed and action, a sense of social responsibility borne from religious convictions [5].

Moreover, following ayats from the Holy Quran constituted the basis of Sufism, according to its representatives. For instance, it is reported in the Sura al-Ala (87:14-15): “Indeed whosoever purifies himself (by avoiding polytheism and accepting Islamic Monotheism) shall achieve success, And remembers (glorifies) the Name of his Lord, and prays (five compulsory prayers and Nawa 1 additional prayers)” [6]. Relying on these and a few other ayats Sufisms made up a special ritual called “*dhikr*” which is translated from arabic as “to remember”. *Dhikr* is one of the most important rituals in Sufism. It is observed in every branch of it, in different forms. *Dhikr* is the remembrance of Allah commanded in the Qur'an for all Muslims through a specific devotional act, such as the repetition of divine names, supplications and aphorisms from hadith literature and the Quran. More generally, *dhikr* takes a wide range and various layers of meaning. This includes *dhikr* as any activity in which the Muslim maintains awareness of Allah. To engage in *dhikr* is to practice consciousness of the Divine Presence and love. The Qur'an refers to Muhammad as the very embodiment of *dhikr* of Allah (65:10–11). Some types of *dhikr* are prescribed for all Muslims and do not require Sufi initiation or the prescription of a Sufism master because they are deemed to be good for every seeker under every circumstance [7]. The *Dhikr* may slightly vary among each order. Some Sufism orders engage in ritualized *dhikr* ceremonies, or *sema*. *Sema* includes various forms of worship such as: recitation, singing (the most well known being the *Qawwali* music of the Indian subcontinent), instrumental music, dance (most famously the Sufism whirling of the Mevlevi order), meditation, ecstasy, and trance. Some Sufism orders stress and place extensive reliance upon *Dhikr*. This practice of *Dhikr* is called *Dhikr-e-Qulb* (invocation of Allah within the heartbeats). The basic idea in this practice is to visualize the Allah as having been written on the disciple's heart.

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