

Poly-symbolic Religiosity and the Dilemmas of American Sufism; an Ethnographic Study of *Zikr* at a Sufi Shrine in Manhattan

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Abstract

This ethnographic endeavor seeks to explore the ritual of *Zikr* and its association with the shift and dilemmas in American Sufism at a Sufi Shrine in Manhattan, The United States of America. The study highlights the ways in which Islam accommodate socio- cultural change without losing its traditional identity: It has not changed in essence. Also, it throws light on the ways such monotheistic religions create social relevance for their followers in a culture alien to universalizing discourses and identities. The paper argues that esoteric versions of traditional monotheistic religions, like Sufism are more suited to postmodern religious consciousness of modern day individuals. The study employs the conceptual lens of postmodern religiosity. Four formal interviews of the Sufi followers (dervishes) alongside field jottings that expanded from January 2012 till December 2012 were conducted. The analysis was thematic in nature. The structure of the *Zikr* ritual was elaborated followed by offering prayer the ‘Sushi’ way. This form of prayer ensures convivial co-existence amongst intra-religious collectivities. The study concluded that the concept of religiosity is poly-symbolic in nature. The *Zikr* ritual acts as a distinct plain that invokes a sense of belonging for the participants in diverse settings. American Sufism is multifaceted in essence and in spirits.

Keywords: American Sufism, *Zikr*, Ethnography, Sufi Shrine, Manhattan, Poly Symbolic, Religiosity

Introduction

In a spacious room with no furniture an elderly Turkish man sits down with his legs crossed on a dark navy blue sheepskin placed on the floor. He has a black turban on his head and small strands of curly white and grey hair peek from beneath it. He has a white moustache and side burns that have been neatly trimmed. Fair skinned and slightly heavy, he has a black shawl over his shoulders and he’s wearing a long beige silk shirt with dark brown narrow stripes. He is wearing a silver metallic belt over his waist and white cotton pant under the long shirt. He has a stern and solemn expression on his face and hardly smiles throughout the ceremony. He is sheikh Muzaffer, the sheikh of the *halveti-jerrah* Sufi order in Istanbul during a recorded ceremony of *zikr*.

Besides him, on either side is a red sheepskin where no one sits. Around the sheikh twenty [approx.] middle aged men dressed in crisp white long dresses, black/brown sleeveless jackets and white prayer caps on their heads kneel down on white sheep skins in a circle. Their heads are bent down and their arms are crossed over their chests in exactly the same manner. Five men sit on chairs

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playing musical instruments behind these men. All these men [clean shaved with moustaches] are singing *Illahis* [mystic hymns] in synchronized voices. The sheikh then offers a prayer in Arabic. As he completes, all dervishes collectively recite the *darūd* in Arabic, and prostrate together as they finish.

More than a decade later on a *zikr* night in a *dergah* in New York City, the scene is very different. The *sheikha* has returned in a crowded room full of dervishes, and with a smile has sat down humbly on the red mat. Dervishes [Arabs, South Asians and Americans] begin to sit down. Some are still talking at the table across the room. John, a middle aged American dervish is asking them to join the circle. The men and women in the main circle are sitting on small wooden stools, with their knees bent down. The rest of the dervishes spread out in the room choosing wherever and however they are comfortable. A young woman is lying down beside the wall. She has long wavy red hair that she has tied in a ponytail and has few piercing on her eyebrows, lips, and ears. She is wearing a cap over her head and colorful clothes- orange shirt, a yellow sweater, and a purple hoodie on top of it. Her eyes are closed and she is lying straight. Nobody is looking at her or attempts to wake her up.

The picture that we get of the two *zikr* ceremonies is very different in many ways. However, these two versions of *zikr* are of the same Sufi order- the *Halveti Jerrahi Sufi* order. The Sufi order in New York, a mystical order within Sufi Islam claims to be part of a Sufi lineage that receives its initiatory power from the founding *Pir* of the order, Muhammad *Nureddin Jerrahi* of Istanbul who was born in 1678 CE¹. The order is now headed by a female *sheikha*² that spreads their message of universal Islam every Thursday evening in a ceremony of *zikr*.

As clear from the above demonstration of the two ceremonies, the American Sufis diverge from their originators in fundamental ways. It endorses a feminization of the Sufism in which women are given central positions within the order, the incorporation of English language into the traditional Arabic texts and the desegregation of gender in religious performance are some of the ways in which it fundamentally challenges its own predecessors. In what ways then can we explain this radical shift in the social manifestation of religiosity of a religious community of Sufi dervishes? And what central role does *zikr* play in formation and sustenance of such a community.

Religious scholars³ have argued that Islam should be defined and understood as a discursive tradition. Tradition here is understood as a continuous and ongoing dialogue between a discourse and its set of associated practices over a period of time. Amidst these debates is the question of correct practice. Any tradition's ability to assert both, authority and credibility depends on its ability to present itself as legitimate. Hence, the practices and point of views a tradition adopts or endorses is done strategically keeping in mind these questions of authenticity with reference to the discussions and debates from the past. These normative judgments therefore are crucial to the continuous evolution as well as existence, of traditions.

Commentators of religion have pointed out to a global drift toward the breakdown of traditional religious authority into a new, free floating, and highly individualized religiosity. The modern day globalized culture is characterized by a plurality of religiosities and the widened diversity of religious options for the religious person. The contemporary society of today as it is characterized by⁴ is based on "economic and institutional differentiation, the specialization of knowledge, the power of the sciences in the domains of technology, relativization of worldviews, mass communications and the urbanization of life, the pluralization and fragmentation of life-worlds, the separation of public and private spheres with the increasing privatization and subjectivization of the deepest layers of personal meaning" and it is making it more difficult for traditional religions to remain relevant with

¹<http://www.jerrahi.org/about-us>

²A female member of a ruling Arab family

³Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Qui Parle* 17, no. 2 (2009): 1-30.

⁴Gerard Delanty, *Challenging Knowledge: The University in the Knowledge* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001).

their narratives of universalism and historical determinism. Some commentators of religion view this pluralization of religiosities as indicative of a religious plausibility or legitimating crisis.⁵ However, in this paper we see in this plurality the revolutionary potential for formations of new ways of being religious i.e., a religious life not tied to any monolithic culture or tradition. However, postmodern religiosity is not without its own unique challenges and strategies to address them.

The study elucidates how traditional religions accommodate to social and cultural change without losing their traditional identity: they are not transformed beyond recognition. How do monotheistic religions construe social relevance for their adherents in a culture hostile to universalizing discourses and identities?

The paper argues that esoteric versions of traditional monotheistic religions, like Sufism are more suited to postmodern religious consciousness of modern day individuals. Their amorphous nature and their specific reliance on the process of rituals as arenas of religious performances make them more appealing to postmodern religious subjects. The process of ritualization “involves the differentiation and privileging of particular activities,” including the deliberate manipulation of time and space; “restricted codes of communication; distinct and specialized personnel”; special objects, texts, and dress; particular physical or mental states; and the “involvement of a particular constituency.”⁶

2. Poly-symbolic Religiosity and Rituals of Sufi Identity in Manhattan

Sufism can be understood as a multi-dimensional approach to spirituality that forms the non-theoretical and esoteric domain of Islam. The principle value of most Sufi practices is purification of soul believed to be attainable by means of abandonment of worldly desires and of material pursuits for love of God.⁷ Yet the sheer multiplicity of definitions of *Tasawwuf*⁸ by Sufi saints points to the fact that the spiritual progress of these saints, derived from their own individual esoteric states, indispensably influences and modifies their definitions of *Tasawwuf*. This implies subjectivity, adaptability and decentralization in the basic premise of the ideology.

It is important to note here that Sufism initially began as an experiential endeavor that required relying on local and indigenized religious symbolism within the percepts of Islamic tradition. Some of the essential Sufi doctrines include doctrine of unity (*tawhid*), intuitive knowledge (*ma'arifa* or *hikma*) in contrast to (*ilm*, exoteric knowledge based on reason and senses), the concept of annihilation of the mortal self (*fana*), and the concept of subsistence (*baqa*), directed towards love for God and achieved through doctrine of willful poverty, companionship (*suhbah*) and the value of tolerance and universalism. In addition, it is the doctrine of *wilayat* which reflects a Sufi Sheikh's spiritual domain.

Hence, the Sufis respond to the socio-religious and political conditions of their time by organizing and mobilizing spiritual power. They divide world into consequent *wilayats* that are taken up by several Sufi order to form Sufi communities as Muslim groups distinct from those in power. As Muslim groups that were geared to emulating the community of Muslims set up by Muhammad (SAW).⁹

The challenge for the Sufi order in New York is very different from that of their predecessors in Istanbul. The *Nur Ashki Jerrahi* Sufi order is an importation from Turkey brought by Sheikh

⁵Charley D. Hardwick, “Elusive Religiosity, Illusions, and Truth Telling,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49, no. 4 (1981): 645-655.

⁶Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁷Tanvir Anjum, “Sufism in History and its Relationship with Power,” *Islamic Studies* 45, no. 2 (2006): 221-268.

⁸Tarek Ladjal, Bensaid Benaouda, and Mohd Roslan Mohd Nor, “Tasawwuf and Western Interests’ Perspective of History and Politics,” *Politics and Religion Journal* 6, no. 1 (2017): 113-131.

⁹Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) religious term used by Muslim

Muzaffer of Mevlevi-Halveti order. As discussed earlier, the first task that order faces is of Americanizing the order and its practices. The effort to deal with this challenge reflects in decision of Sheikh Muzaffer choice of an American to succeed him.

Today, the order is still headed by an American female *sheikha*, and it faces the challenges posed by modernity to any organization that requires loyalty and commitment based on volition. Those loyal to the order, the *dervishes* who have been initiated into the order are always on the move forced by the demands of a capitalist-industrial society. This means that while the order consistently has a high turnover, it has also a consistent turn-in of new dervishes all of whom have different and often diverging demands and diverse racial, religious, ethnic, professional and class based identities.¹⁰ Kliever (1979) Argues in "Poly-symbolism and Modern Religiosity" that the postmodern religiosity in global cities like New York is inherently poly-symbolic because experiences of 'relativism' and 'pluralism' make appropriation of religious symbols in literal and authoritative sense impossible. Therefore, each individual has to understand their respective religious symbolism from linguistically, historically, and culturally conditioned viewpoints. This requires the simultaneous adoption of symbols drawn from disparate cultural sources and traditions. However, it raises distinct challenges for religious groups that have to rely on culturally specific religious symbolism. In addition, predominance of science in modern societies renders these religious symbols void of any stable ontological reference and in turn leave them with a merely fictive status. Hence, religious symbols while being meaningful lack sacredness and cognitive authority for the most of its adherents. However tragic it may be, this lack of cognitive assessment dictated by any particular authoritarian worldview opens up an array of possibilities for "poly-symbolic play of religious imagination."¹¹

This postmodern religiosity therefore requires a particular self-consciousness that recognizes this possibility for religious imagination for the reasons mentioned above. A distinction between two levels of religious discourse is necessary for poly-symbolic religious imagination to function. At primary level of discourse, the religious tradition is recognized and affirmed at which "symbols function religiously in a form of life." At the secondary level of discourse, however, relativism, pluralism and fictiveness are recognized opening up spaces for religious transformation and poly-symbolic religiosity.¹² Repeated participation in traditionally recognized religious rituals like *zikr* provide the first level of discourse by providing a religiously recognizable *form-set* of symbols structured. In this way ritual at this level assists in maintaining an open ended yet coherent sense of group solidarity. However, at the same time, *zikr* allows a poly-symbolic play of religious imaginations by producing multiple and parallel readings and performances of religious symbols at the second level of discourse.

Rituals, like *zikr* allow practitioners of religion-dervishes to generate multiple dialogues with tradition, facilitating religious imagination and plurality of thought and practice while simultaneously reinforcing the foundational religious identity.

3. Methodology

This paper uses an analytical approach that captures the dynamism in practice of poly-symbolic religiosity by keeping all our analytical categories open ended instead of being fixed in time and space.¹³ This allowed us to map the ways in which "contexts, identities and motives shift or transform through the time and space" in our field. By adopting this approach, we were able to see the *zikr* night as not a "clearly bound event" but rather as a dynamic process where "Texts and

¹⁰Lonnie D. Kliever, "Polysymbolism and Modern Religiosity," *The Journal of Religion* 59, no. 2 (1979): 169-194.

¹¹Anne Hardwick, "From Muhammad to the Present: Islamic Law and Women," *Modus Vivendi*, (Spring 1996).

¹²Ibid.

¹³Lee Anne Fujii, *Killing Neighbours: Networks of Violence in Rwanda* (New York: Ithaca University, 2009).

conditions change, sometimes in an instant. These can shift actors' relations, perspectives, motives, and identities."¹³

Hence, this approach recognizes that the Sufi order provides participants of the *zikr* with a *script*- a narrative template that they act out together. This *script* is "A dramaturgical blue print for an imagined social world, one that is self-contained and populated by specific characters that say and do specific things at specific moments in time."¹³

Taking this approach frees us from the fixity of specific narratives. The idea is that while people are constrained by several socio-historical factors they can still switch between narratives and utilize multiple narratives at the same time. This also opens up the possibility of co-existence of multiple narratives and multiple voices. However, this approach is not insensitive to the aspect of power but rather foregrounds it. This means that there is a conscious awareness of, on the part of performers, the "world of the play" and the "world outside the play" and that only one is inhabited at a given moment. Second, it helps us position actors within the field not in terms of categories but in terms of their *intentionality*- their directedness towards the world formed in part by their histories and memories. This means that this approach helps us uncover the dynamics of power relationships that may seem invisible to the outsider. Moreover, while the script must be created by some actor/s within the field, other actors are not simply passive followers. They come to *dergah* for different reasons, with different level of "skills" and "level of commitment" which consequently determines a different position.¹⁴ This implies that the position that one assumes in the field is constantly negotiated between the actor and the community leading to a constant movement of actor-positions within the field of narratives. What one gets from this approach is a "welter of diverse performances" of memory¹⁴. In order to gain access to the narrative of these actors situated differently within the field I conducted both formal and informal interviews during the 12 month long ethnographic study at the *dergah*. I began in the last week of January and stopped going to my field site by the end of December, 2012. While I had informal interviews/conversations with dervishes and visitors during the *zikr* I couldn't speak to the dervishes of the Sufi order since they were busy in either different tasks or in meditation. However, interviewing them was not as simple. I was told I could not interview the *sheikha* [the spiritual head of the order] and a male middle aged dervish that shadowed her all the time. My way of accessing their narrative was then to focus on their conversations and on the sheikh's informal lecture during the *sohbet*. It was also generally difficult to approach the *sheikha* as she was always surrounded by some of her dervishes or would move into a room if she was unaccompanied.

3. Gate keeping, In-depth Interviews, Field Jottings and Analysis

I was allowed to interview dervishes but I could not approach them on my own. I had to go through John who takes care of the administrative matters of the order. While I was very uncomfortable with this arrangement in the beginning it proved to be helpful as well. Going through John set up a level of trust between me and the dervishes and helped them open up during our meetings. Later I identified the dervishes I wanted to interview and John arranged the meetings without much delay. After the dervish had agreed for the interview, John left it on us to arrange for the meeting. Sometimes I met the dervishes in the *dergah* and other times in a coffee shop or a restaurant. I conducted exactly four interviews with these dervishes.

During my fieldwork I took field jottings as I observed in the field as I found people as almost indifferent to my taking notes. When I was having an informal conversation I would immediately take notes by going in a corner after the discussion had ended. For formal interviews I used both tape recorder and jottings so I could both focus on the conversation and the gestures. I also tape recorded the *sohbets* (Lectures/sermons by the *sheikha*) and took jottings as well. If I missed recording the *sohbet*, as I did once, I asked Musa to provide me with a recording as they record the sessions as well. I found the *dergah* administration as very co-operative in my gathering of data. These scripts were shared with my fellow researcher who was taking care of the analytical

¹⁴Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

phase of the research. The findings are based on the thematic analysis conducted later after all the data in the form of interview verbatim and field notes were finalized.

4. Findings

4.1 Primary Level of Discourse: the Unchanging Structure of Ritual of *Zikr*

Any *Zikr* in Sufism has three main components; Place; the sufi lodge/shrine (*dergah*, *zaawiya*, *khanqah*, *tekke*) i. e., a place where it can be performed. Time is crucial meaning that it has to be performed at some specific time i.e. often between the *maghrib*¹⁵ prayer and the *isha* prayers.¹⁶ More importantly, time is important in sense of the temporality that *Zikr* is designed to accomplish. Time in Sufism is understood as boundless, nonlinear and transcending the material world. It allows for parallel continuity with and simultaneity of multiple temporalities that connect this world with that of spirits, deceased Sufi saints, angels and the Divine Reality. Finally it is the community. This refers to the strong bondage between the dervishes which brings meaning to the performance. Also the performance of *Zikr* is determined by who is participating in it.

The purpose of the *Zikr* as discussed in beginning is also to keep it meaningful for the dervish community which requires continuity and less disruption. This I argue is achieved through a structuring of *Zikr* that is open-ended and allows for spontaneity through production of a specific order.

By bringing focus on the form rather than content the *Zikr* ceremony allows the dervishes and others to draw multiple meanings from the performance. The *Zikr* at the shrine is performed in distinct stages through which it develops in progression. The breakdown and gradual progression of performance through clear stages allows the Sufi order to alternate between forces of centripetal fixity and centrifugal flux. This I demonstrate is achieved by dialogism between binary oppositions that allows positioning of performers based on Familiarity and unfamiliarity, Specificity and ambiguity, and Participation and non-participation. Along with this the performance is structured in a way that performers can join or quit at any point without disrupting its overall coherence and rhythm. With progression from first stage to the last, the level of intensity in performance increases. This means that the degree of freedom for personal interpretation narrows and script tends to become mono-logic. This is reflected in the decrease in participation around the end of *Zikr*. Yet, the *Zikr* in its last stages requires concerted and coordinated efforts that require familiarity with the text and structure. This in turn serves as an advantage for dervishes who can perform the *Zikr* with less disruption. Also this helps the *dergah* measure the level of commitment and competence displayed by new comes that helps them identify them for possible mentoring into the order.

In order to fully understand the performance, as discussed above it is important to uncover the spatial-temporal matrix that *Zikr* enables as well as depends on during the performance. The *Zikr* I propose is performed in a multi-spatial setting that allows for the co- presence of several temporalities. This in turn makes diversity of narrative plots within the generic frame during the performance possible. The spatial differentiation works at three overlapping, mutually inclusive levels of space:

1. *Wird*-Recitation of Qur'ānic verses- The first phase involves a simple reading of a number of Qur'ānic¹⁷ verses printed on small pink booklets both in English and Arabic. Everyone sits in a circle on green floor seats. *Sheikha* sits in front of the *minbar* (a wooden platform for leading prayers) and every one follows her lead. This is fairly simple as the Arabic verses are printed in both Arabic and Roman English. The translation of the verses is also more interpretive and less specific than traditional orthodox translations. In this way it displaces authority of any

¹⁵Prayer offered at the time of sunset

¹⁶Prayer offered at night

¹⁷Relating to the Holy Book 'Holy Qur'ān'

single voice and opens up room for more interpretation.

2. *Sohbet* literally meaning listening is a 15 to 20 minutes' talk given by the *sheikha*. While *sheikha* does most of the talking, people often ask question or interact by reading Sufi poems or sharing dreams. However, in this phase the *sheikha*'s voice dominates and the performance tends to lean towards being monologic.

4. Break- these 15 to 20 minutes are utilized by dervishes for setting up the room for the next stage of *Zikr*. This involves creating a circle in the room by placing white sheepskins and small wooden stools. More sheepskins are spread around the room for the circle can only accommodate 15 to 20 people. The rest of performers sit behind those in the circle and participate. In this time the non-dervishes use this time to socialize and so one sees at this point emergence of diverse voices.

3. Mystic hymns and chanting/leaving the world- this phase involves singing of mystic hymns written by preceding sheikhs of the order and then moving to chanting of specific Qur'ānic verse "*la ilaha illallah*" translated as 'there is no God, but God' and names of Allah in Qur'ān. Here people can choose to sit in the circle with the dervishes or choose to sit behind the circle if they want to simply listen to the hymns (*illahis*). This part of *zikr* opens up the space to struggle between centrifugal flux and centripetal fixity. Those who sit in the circle of dervishes have to perform particular body gestures as they chant. This involves moving body from right to left and then forward and backward. At the same time people who sit behind often chat with each other in whispers, leave to smoke a cigarette or chant without following the bodily gestures.

4. Whirling together/Being in the world as a community- the centripetal forces within the performance begin to dominate here and most of the public leaves before this point. During this phase all the sheepskins and stools are removed and the room is emptied of everything to clear the space for performance. The performers now form two concentric circles by holding hands and rhythmically move in small steps in anticlockwise direction. The performers and some dervishes are in the outer circle while *sheikha* and main dervishes sing hymns standing in the inner circle. This a metaphoric performance

Whirling alone- this phase breaks the tension of centripetal forces and allows for its displacement. The circle at this point breaks out and everyone whirls on their own with eyes closed and both hands wide open. Each person turns at their own pace, some awkwardly while others brimming with grace. People who do not want to whirl stand beside the walls with their hands folded on their chests.

5. Returning to the world as a community- this phase is total domination of Sufi order's voice in the performance and leaves little to no room for personal interpretation. The *sheikha* and dervishes move back into the center of the room and the rest form a circle again by holding hands. The circle moves in closer towards the dervishes and *sheikha* in the center, until the two groups merge. However, no voice can dominate completely and others push back. Sometimes performers outpace the group or chant more loudly when in trance. At times people stumble and break the flow of the circle. However, dervishes are conscious of such disruptions and only at this stage you find them intervening with the performers, directing them and bringing them in rhythm. The *sheikha* then offers a prayer and the *zikr* ends. People disperse.

6. Post *zikr* interactions-Dinner or prayers- sometimes if there's a special event food or dates are served and people socialize before leaving.

1. Poly-symbolic Religiosity of the Sushi Prayer

The following interaction highlights the way tradition is challenged and modified in every day interactions at the *dergah* at the secondary level of discourse during the ritual of *zikr*.

It is Muhammad's birthday and at the time of evening prayers [*maghrib*] the order has decided to offer two *nafl*, the non-obligatory prayers for Him. Sheikh stands up and looks at her dervishes and asks,

1. Sheikh: "How should we do the *namaz*?
 - a. The Sunni way or the Shi'ite way?"
2. Male dervish: "Maybe we can do the sushi way" and laughs.
3. Sheikh [laughs] "Yes, the sushi way may be good."

On the face of it, the utterance is a simple question. But when we see it in terms of the function it is meant to serve.

First of all the question is ambiguous and therefore compels the listener to think about it. Asking for the dervishes to make a choice implies that there are a number of ways to offer *namaz*. But why should this be problematic for dervishes? The prevailing conception in orthodox tradition is that *namaz* and the way to perform it has been specified by God through Qur'an and *Sunnah*.¹⁸ And if it has been specified there has to be only one way to do it correctly. The dominant traditions stress their version as the correct one. Failing to perform correctly not only annuls the *namaz* but also if done purposefully is an act of blasphemy. But acknowledgement of existence of a variety of ways of performing *namaz* opens up room for interpretation in its every form.

Many dervishes who come to *dergah* are from these several traditions that the question is meant to displace. However, the use of term "we" positions the dervishes in a specific way. This means that dervishes are compelled to approach this question not as individuals with their own religious preferences but rather as dervishes of the order that has a specific philosophy of religious universalism, a brutal history with orthodox Islam in Turkey, and its progressive approach to religion. Hence, the connotative function in this question is suppressed and the referential function is dominant.

The Sunni way or the Shi'ite Way?

The second part of the statement is marked by a selection across the paradigmatic axis on part of sheikh for words '*Sunni*' and '*Shia*.' These two words could have been replaced by a number of other choices. For instance, "*Deoband*" or "*Barelvi*" -the *Sunni* factions could have replaced *Sunni*. In the same way '*Shi'ite*' could be replaced by "*Zaydi*" or "*Ismaili*." However, staying general allows sheikh to refer to each tradition comprehensively. This also means that the chances of personally offending some dervish are also reduced as generalizations make it more collective rather than personal.

In addition to making the selection of these words, sheikh here has made another strategic choice by placing '*Sunni*' before '*Shi'ite*.' This implies the relation that the two terms share with each other. Placing *Sunni* first shows its position of authority and dominance with relation to *shi'ism*. This means that the choice of first word implies the choice of second word in the statement and the same statement with the order of these words reversed would have a very different impact.

The Sunni way or the 'Zaydi' Way

Among some major points of differences in the two mentioned traditions, many disputes are based on seemingly trivial differences in practicing Islam. However, many incidences of violence and bloodshed have ensued based on these little differences. Hence, this generalized specification within the question allows sheikh to make it explicit in what terms she wants the dervishes to approach the question. In addition the choice of these two and not of Sufism performs another important function. It removes Sufi tradition from the line of possible attack in the

¹⁸Practices of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW)

anticipated response and the context of critique. The third statement is a response by the addressee reveals the extent of statement's successful uptake.

“Maybe we can do the sushi way”

The response by the dervish is itself ambiguous in sense that it does not specify what should be done. Instead the dervish in his response implies what could be done-doing it the sushi way is a suggestion. This is reflective of hierarchical relationship shared between dervishes and *sheikha*. However, there is no sushi way of doing things in Islam. The term represents a Japanese food dish. Therefore, what stands out in this statement is not its ambiguity but rather its absurdity. The term ‘sushi’ has no reference in the context of either Sufism or Islam. But deeper look at the statement and use of ‘sushi’ actually reveals the successful uptake of sheikh’s original intent. Hence, here the poetic function takes most dominance.

The absurdity of sushi therefore is associated with the disputes between not only Muslim factions but also between different religious groups. It is the very absurdness, the emptiness of the word in Islamic tradition (the context) that displaces the narrative, shocks the hearer and breaks down the narrative. And it is the absurdity and the emotional response that it generates that is meant to signify the absurdness of *sunni-shia* split within Sufi context and their philosophy of religious universalism. It is therefore, understandable that those who share the context can only make these associations.

In addition, the choice of sushi is also significant. It could have been replaced by a number of other food items more relevant to Sufi traditions like “date” or ‘honey.’ But the word sushi here has a linguistic import i.e., it deconstructs the words and reconstructs a word selectively integrating fragments from the original words. Hence, it is poetic. But it also does much more within the context of the order’s philosophy and history. It combines the terms *Sunni* and Shi’ite representing them as one. This means to imply many things. Firstly, there is really no difference between the two traditions that are in essence the same. Secondly, by referring to a cooked item that involves human activity, it makes a reference to the constructed nature of variety of ways of doing *namaz*. Most importantly, the introduction and then successful assimilation of a foreign term represent the assimilative nature of the Sufi tradition.

Also the decision to make parody of *namaz* at time of a non-obligatory prayer is also crucial. Contrary to the five daily prayers that have been made compulsory by Qur’ān, and Sunnah, obligatory prayers reflect the volitional aspect of prayers. Hence, by displacing the prayers at this specific movement reflects the effort to differentiate the divine and the human aspects in the performance of prayers. In doing so this also reduces the risk of blasphemy.

“Yes, the sushi way may be good.”

The final statement is in turn an uptake by the *sheikha* of the dervishes’ intent. It shows that the suggestion has been affirmed.

5. Conclusion

Zikr is characterized by attempts to theorize the intersections of the individual, cultural, social and political that occurs in processes of religious memory making. It creates an awareness of the multiple scales and directions, temporal and spatial, typifying religiosity – ranging from the local, through the national and regional, to the transnational and global, while traversing past, present and future temporalities.

The *Zikr* ritual is analyzed in relation to lived experiences and public spaces. The potential of religious performativity (ritual) as a means to have a broader impact on social developments and to illicit cultural transformation is explicated. Approaching cultural change from the perspective of rituals implies observing the gradual alterations of cultural processes and analyzing their adaptations to equally changing cultural contexts. Such an approach highlights the interference of continuities and

discontinuities, and the simultaneity of the dissimilar as fundamental features of cultural transformations.

The study focused at deciphering *Zikr* ritual as a vantage point from which to examine the multiple ways in which poly-symbolic religiosity is practiced in multicultural context of modern industrialized societies by traditionally monotheistic religions. *Zikr* acts as a way through which the boundaries of perception are relocated from the finite known to the infinite unknown-the sublime. It attaches new and very diverse experiences to such 'rooted' self-understandings as the one provided by ethno-national, familial, or religious belonging.

As an onslaught of competing and sometimes contradictory views on religion available, Muslims who have found an affiliation with a Sufi order offers an appealing alternative: a single, more tolerant and reliable source of information on Islam that comes with a personal spiritual guide. The new wave of enthusiasm for Islamic mysticism suggests that this tradition will continue to have a pervasive influence across American Muslim communities.

Thus, the religious performances like *Zikr* are cataclysmic of reproducing convivial settings. These ritualistic settings involving around 'doing sushi' carry an emotional fellowship and serve as a pathway to achieve religious merit without getting into the constricting ethno-religious boundaries. The desire is to achieve that level of sublimity as is promised in the visual-kinetic imagery of the 'Whirling Sufi' where he oscillates to achieve a balance between individual and communal harmony in seeking and locating God within himself.

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