

Experiencing the Divine Word:

A Women's Spiritual Gathering in Beirut

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Fifteen-to-thirty women come together on a weekly basis in a Sunni neighbourhood in Beirut to practice the *dhikr*.¹ *Dhikr*, the remembrance of God, is a central rite of mystical Islam. Trimmingham (1998) describes the practitioner of mystical Islam as: "... anyone who believes that it is possible to have direct experience of God and who is prepared to go out of his way to put himself in a state whereby he may be enabled to do this" (p. 1). Most mystics trace *dhikr* back to the *qur'anic* injunction "... remember God frequently and glorify Him morning and evening" (33: 41). The performance of *dhikr* varies according to the rules of the different mystical orders and local practices. It mostly includes the invocation of God by the repetition of his names, control of breath, bodily movements, often also chanting and the employment of musical instruments.²

Dhikr exhibits a special relationship between the believer and the Divine word. It may be described as the embodiment of the above quoted *qur'anic* injunction. On a particular level, a distinctive use of text is employed. *Dhikr* often features the performance of poems speaking about the love for God and the prophet and the perpetual yearning of the human for beauty and perfection. It always includes the articulation of the names of God in an elaborated manner. A texture set up by word, rhythm, sound, and body is used to induce a direct experience of God and his Divine power.

This communally constructed act is the focus of my paper. The analysis presented here is based on fieldwork conducted between April and July 2009 at a women's *dhikr* group. It involved participant observation, interviews, and informal conversations with the women. Descriptions of the course of events are based on notes taken during or shortly after

the meetings and on my fieldwork diary. I was also allowed to audio record parts of the sessions, and the women demonstrated some parts of the *dhikr* in a spontaneous supplementary meeting. What follows is the report from a work in progress and not a final reading addressing every aspect of the gathering.

This study is part of a broader research project about religious chanting and follows an ethnomusicological approach. Ethnomusicology is a fusion of musicology and cultural anthropology. It combines musicological analysis with the methodological framework of cultural anthropology. By studying music in its cultural context, ethnomusicology does not take "music" or "art" as a given but asks how they are defined by members of a given society. As a leading ethnomusicologist, Bruno Nettl (1983), put it in his classical study:

(...) one must (...) study each music in terms of the theoretical systems that its own culture provides for it, be this an explicitly articulated, written system or one that must be derived from interview and analysis; and (...) one must study musical behavior in terms of the underlying value structure of the culture from which it comes. (Bruno Nettl, 1983, p. 55)

Setting and Course of the Events

Dhikr is used in a general and a more specific sense. Whereas the term *dhikr* is usually used to label the gathering as such, the ritual practice of *dhikr* is often only part of the gathering.³ In the following, I will outline the course of the activities and highlight some features of it.

The meetings take place in the house of the group's *sheikha*. It is a modest house with only two rooms

and a small veranda. The main venue is the living room, but when there are many women, they also sit along the corridor and the veranda. Many of the participating women have to reconcile this activity with work, travels, or family duties. Therefore, their number constantly changes. Usually, around twenty women are present. Some of them arrive later or have to leave earlier. The group is quite mixed in terms of age, social background, and dress code. Most of the women wear a scarf. Those who do not will wear one in the later parts of the meeting. The atmosphere is marked by openness and concentration.

The *dhikr* depicted here follows the rites of the Tijaniyya order, founded in 1781/1782 by Ahmad al-Tijani in North Africa (Abun-Nasr, 2000). The *sheikha* was initiated into this order in the late 1960s, and after five years of studying she obtained the licence (i.e. *ijaza*) to teach. But it was not until 1982 that she built up her own group. Naturally, she is the religious authority and spiritual guide for the women. She leads the gathering, marking the beginning and end of each section, and she acts as a kind of lead vocalist.

The gathering consists of several sections. It starts with a short recitation from the *Qur'an* by the *sheikha*. After that, a kind of lesson or instructive reading starts, called by the sheikha *hadith*. The *sheikha* often reads from one or more books about the life of the prophet or about proper behaviour and ethics. She also comments and explains the texts in her own words. At some point she indicates that the time has come to start with the next part of the gathering, and she announces the *wazhifa* (i.e. task).

The *wazhifa* contains several recitations and prayers in the way they have been passed on by Ahmad al-Tijani to his followers (Abun-Nasr, 1965). Between parts of the *wazhifa*, the *sheikha* recites a prayer for all the prophets with a warm, deep voice. First, all women loudly recite the *istighfar* (i.e. asking for forgiveness) thirty times. It is followed by a prayer for the prophet, recited fifty times. The first part of the *shahada* or Muslim testimony (*La Ilaha Illa Allah* (i.e. there is no God but God), which comes next, is

the shortest text within the *wazhifa*. It is recited a hundred times. The last part is a long prayer for the prophet, repeated eighteen times.

The next section is generally referred to as *madh* (i.e. praise). It includes the chanting of poems and songs speaking about the love for the prophet Muhammad and for God. The single parts of it vary according to seasonal feasts or the personal demands of the women. In the season of the prophet's birthday a *mawlid*⁴ is done. A *mawlid* can also be performed at any time of the year when a woman asks for it and the *sheikha* agrees.

Mostly, but not always, two or more *daff* (i.e. frame drums) of different sizes are distributed in this part of the gathering. The number of drums depends on how many women are present. The *sheikha* has her own instrument, skilfully manufactured from wood and skin and ca. 50 cm in diameter. The rest are played by different women. Many women clap their hands during rhythmically intense passages. Some even rise up and perform some movements. Others stay rather calm; they keep the beat by tapping one hand on the back of the other and exhibit greater motion only towards the end of the session. At one point all women get up and stand with their face towards the *qibla* (i.e. the direction one faces, towards Mecca, in order to pray). They silently recite a greeting for the Prophet Muhammad.

This last section or the *dhikr* proper is also termed *hadra* (from h-d-r: to be present, i.e. the presence of God or Muhammad). The women form a circle, holding hands. The drums are put aside. The *sheikha*'s place is usually inside the circle. Only those who are physically not able to get up will stay seated. They do the same articulations and movements while seated. The *dhikr* generally starts with the first part of the *shahada* articulated with a loud voice and in rhythmically varied versions. The *sheikha* at one point will commence a solo chant, which forms a counterpoint to the singing of the women.

The complementary character of the *sheikha*'s and the women's chanting becomes even more apparent when the women move from the first part

of the testimony to the utterance of “*Allah*” and additive syllables. In fact, it is less an addition of syllables than a shortening of the name “*Allah*”, as the syllables heard are “ha”, “al”, and “ah”. The atmosphere becomes more intense, as the chanting gets faster and the rhythmic patterns of the syllables become shorter. Often, a shift in the pitch also occurs. The women move the upper part of their bodies either back and forth or side-to-side. When they fall into a trance, they shout “*Allah, Allah*” in a rapid manner or they groan in a high pitch.

After this climax, the circle is dissolved, the women sit and the *sheikha* recites a part of the *Qur’an*. The slow recitation forms a beautiful contrast to the multilayered climax before. After a prayer, many women start leaving. Some sit on the veranda and socialize, some stay for coffee. The length of the different sections may vary; altogether every gathering lasts approximately two hours.

Oral Tradition and Contextual Realization of Music

When it comes to the musical rendering of words during the gathering, one important distinction must be made. Most women do not use the term “singing” or “song” when referring to *madh* or any other chanting in the religious context. Rather, they speak of “chanting” (i.e. *inshad*) and “hymns” (i.e. *anashid*). Structurally, there is little difference between music as a secular art form and ritually employed sound. Both are organized sound, following the same musical rules – here, the rules of the Arab musical tradition – in terms of time and pitch organization. One can also find melodies that are sung in the Levant to accompany both religious and non-religious texts. Nevertheless, for the women this would not be the same song, as the religious text carries a different message and is realized for different purposes.

Although there is a trend in modern times to use a dichotomized terminology for sound in the religious and secular spheres, it is insufficient to reduce this phenomenon to a terminological issue. For the participating women, to distinguish between “singing” and “chanting” is not simply a matter of terminology. Many of them assured me that they

feel different when they chant. Such difference is shaped by their motivation and, above all, the orientation of the heart (i.e. *tawajjuh al-qalb*). It is therefore the inner attitude and the context that mark the distinction between “singing” and “chanting”.⁵

The composition of the repertory in the *madh* section changes every week. Some well-liked hymns appear frequently, but there is no fixed order of hymns. The *sheikha* chooses the musical pieces according to the ambience. When appropriate, individual wishes of the women can be integrated.

The women know the vast majority of the texts by heart. Aside from this, the *sheikha* has a collection of poems which serve as song texts that she sometimes uses as a memory aid. This is especially true for longer texts, like the famous *Burda* by al-Busiri (d. around 1295) which contains at least 160 verses. The *Burda* is a poem praising Muhammad and narrating events from his life. Its name refers to an older poem by a contemporary of the prophet, Ka’b ibn Zuhayr. He first mocked the prophet, later converted to Islam, and recited for Muhammad a poem so touching that the prophet gave the poet his *burda* (i.e. cloak). The *Burda* by al-Busiri has a similar story. According to tradition, the poet wrote it while ill and dreamt that the prophet heard him recite it, afterwards rewarding the poet with his cloak (Al-Azhari, 1966). It is one of the most famous poems in the Arab world, widely used for religious purposes and serving as a model for many other poets. During a session only extracts of the poem are performed.

The *sheikha*’s collection features only texts; the music is not written down but is expected to be known. The women have learned the repertory by listening to it week after week. Also the *sheikha* has learned a good part of her repertory from the sessions she attended during her education with her *sheikha* back in the 1960s. The women therefore memorize a huge musical repertory which either particularly belongs to the Tijaniyya order or is part of a common repertory of religious

chants. The repertory which is specific for the Tijaniyya has been for the most part transmitted orally from master to student. The more general repertory can also be adopted from different contexts, for instance during religious celebrations of other institutions or by listening to tapes.

Musically, the repertory is heterogeneous. It contains group songs, responsorial⁶ forms and solo pieces. Group songs are almost always strophic.⁷ Strophic songs with a refrain frequently appear as responsorial forms in which the *sheikha* performs the stanza and the group performs the chorus. The solo forms are entirely performed by the *sheikha*. Whereas the group singing is rhythmic, the solo singing tends to be metrically free. Group singing is also mainly syllabic whereas solo performances include elaborated melismatic⁸ passages.

In most Oriental musical cultures, it was until recently unusual to write down musical processes in any form of notation. Written sources about music mainly discussed musical theory. The rules of performance practice and concrete compositions were transmitted orally. This corresponds to the nature of the musical process. Complex musical processes are created during a performance in accordance with the context and ambiance. Many performers in the *dhikr* context will study the rules of performance and the framework of a single rendering of a poem.⁹ A skillful and talented musician is then allowed and expected to further explore a poem's performative possibilities individually.

Clarity of text, proper articulation, and correct distribution of syllables are the criteria for a solid performance. To this are added the artistic devices of musical realization that distinguish the individual performer. These include voice, timbre, and techniques of ornamentation. Passages with important content often feature a high pitch and melismatic elaborations on key words. Skilled performers create great suspense by playing with pauses and employing retard elements like repetitions, additional syllables, and other means to stretch the text. This is especially the case in solo vocalization of poetic texts. The rhythmically free solo passages are performed

without drums. Far from being a solo performance in the strict sense of the term, these passages feature a fair amount of vocal interaction. The structure is built up as follows: musical phrase – pause – musical phrase etc. Between the phrases, women would respond with sighs like “ah” or acclamations in form of shouting “*Allah* [God]” or “ya *habibi* [oh Beloved]”. Sometimes the utterances are even longer, like “God bless Muhammad” or “oh Messenger of God”. These responses exhibit a religious as well as a musical function. They are signs of devotion, resulting from the emotionally overwhelming status the women find themselves in. Moreover, they signal to the *sheikha* that her endeavours are effective and encourage her to move on in that way.

The performance thus follows the structure of the Arab musical culture where interaction between the performer and his/her audience (Arab.: *tajawub*, *tafa'ul*) is an integral part of the musical process.¹⁰ We find other elements of mutuality employed occasionally: Some of the women produce a continual tone in a low pitch, which serves as a drone for the solo elaboration. Sometimes, a few women would accompany passages of the *sheikha's* chanting by following some phrases of the melodic line in a higher octave. These audience reactions not only underline the participatory character of the musical process but are also a necessary tool for the performer as they acknowledge and guide his/her elaborations.

Many of the above described elements can be heard in this part of the *sheikha's* solo passage about Muhammad: “All hearts bend towards the Beloved/ Therefore I have a witness and a guide”. The *sheikha* extensively elaborates on some syllables of the text. If we take a closer look at these, we will see that she hereby marks the words *qulub* (i.e. hearts) and *habibi* (i.e. beloved). These are keywords within the text. The *sheikha* also takes great liberty in time organization and phrasing. All these devices are employed to underline the text's meaning and induce emotional reaction. The women shout “*Allah*” and “ah” when the first phrase ends. Some of them sing “*Allah*” on the tonic that provides a drone for the following line. These techniques

demonstrate the communally constructed character of the process.

Genres and Performance Practice

Some of the songs belong to a widely shared religious heritage and can also be heard in different contexts by other groups, like the famous *Tala'a al-badru alayna* (i.e. the full moon [Muhammad] has appeared) which is said to be one of the oldest songs praising Muhammad. It is especially performed in the *mawlid* season. These songs share some common features: they have strophic forms, and their texts consist of short modules which might be combined with flexibility.

As it is the case with an orally transmitted repertory, modifications in text and music are an integral part of the performance. Sometimes single words are exchanged without altering the meaning of the text. Poetically creative persons add new verses or use them as a substitute for neglected passages. Melodic variations are developed, and an individual variant may be taken over by many and become a standard form. Therefore, more than one manifestation of one song exists, and the rare collections of songs in book form represent only one possible version. This clearly indicates a lived tradition, not a distortion.

Sometimes, the repertory features *muwashahat*¹¹ which do not necessarily stem from a religious context but indicate a well-liked and highly acknowledged musical tradition. However, many texts of *muwashahat* can be easily provided with a religious meaning. On the other hand, religious texts are sung to the same melody as secular songs. *Tabat al-hadra* [The *hadra* has been delightful] has the same melody as a well-known folksong named *Al-Bint al-shalabiya* or *al-'Adhuba* [The Sweet Girl]. *Talama ashku gharami* (i.e. I permanently complain about my love) is sung to a melody also known under the title *Ya banat Iskandariyya* (i.e. oh girls from Alexandria). It is a common phenomenon to find different texts with the same melody. In Aleppo, a special phrase – the “Aleppine *qudud*” – refers to a body of melodies whose texts are used interchangeably.

A different part of the repertory is marked by the

performance of long poetic texts from the Arab-Islamic literary heritage. These include extracts of single poems or from the literary genre of the *mawlid*, like the *Mawlid al-'arus* (known as the *mawlid* of al-Jawzi from the 12th century). These texts are often performed in a responsorial form, changing between the solo performance of the *sheikha* and the chorus of the women. A very well known example of praise for the prophet from this part of the repertory follows.

The phrase “*Mawlaya salla wa-sallim da'iman abadan/ala habibika khairi l-khalqi kullihimi*” (i.e. Oh Master, pray for and bless always and forever Your Beloved Muhammad, the best of the creation) can be heard often and in different contexts of Islamic worship. It is originally performed in close relationship with the already mentioned *Burda* of al-Busiri (1955). The tradition places this verse as part of the *Burda*, which should be recited after each verse of the poem (Mubarak, 1971). In my recording, the above quoted phrase actually serves as a chorus between the different verses of the *Burda*. It is performed by all women whereas the lines from the *Burda* are mainly performed by the *sheikha* alone.

The recording presents only a small part of that long poem. It starts and ends with the chorus, and in between five verses of the poem are performed alternately with the chorus. It is obvious that the poetic text is known very well by the women. Some of them not only accompany the solo singing of the *sheikha* with a quiet voice but respond to certain beautiful passages of the text with exclamations. This knowledge cannot be taken for granted, for the 13th-century poem not only refers aesthetically to an older poetic model but also uses religious terms and vocabulary that in modern editions need to be explained in footnotes. For instance, verse 13 starts with “*fa-inna ammarati bi-s-su*”. “*Al-ammara bi-s-su*” is a powerful expression of the soul (i.e. *al-nafs*) in the mystic context. The *sheikha* emphasizes this part of the text by abandoning the usual melodic model. Spontaneous musical modifications, especially the highlighting of textual passages, give the performance a fresh character and provide a

balance between the litany character of the melodic repetitions and intense passages.

For the *dhikr*, the *sheikha* selects poems which suit the nature of a *dhikr*. This choice is from a vast repertory she has accumulated over the years from teachers and studies. During the *dhikr*, the *sheikha* spontaneously chooses a poem which would suit the ambiance. There is no fixed course with a pre-arranged selection of poems. In the first part of the *dhikr*, the women recite the first part of the *shahada* (*La ilaha illa llah*), stressing every second syllable. After a while, the *sheikha* starts a rhythmically fluid solo chant above this recitation. In the later part of the *dhikr*, the women change to an abbreviated version of the first formula, articulating only “*Allah*”. Interestingly, the musical formula is not shorter in the beginning, as “*Allah*” is repeated and both formulae cover eight beats. Only later does the rhythmic pattern become shorter, with single syllables like “ah” and “ha” being used.

Now, the solo chant of the *sheikha* is also rhythmic. The utterances of the women form a rhythmic accompaniment to the *sheikha*'s chanting, which in musical terms is known as a rhythmic ostinato. A multilayered climax is created by shifts in tempo and rhythm: As the *sheikha* accelerates the tempo, the rhythmic patterns become shorter, the beat becomes faster. Simultaneously, there is a shift to a higher pitch. The intensity is further dramatized by the shortening of the text: the poetic verses gradually become shorter, and the text ends with the invocation of God by His names.

Lived Word – Word Alive

The weekly gatherings illustrate different relationships to scriptures and words. The *qur'anic* injunction of remembering God is celebrated

during the *dhikr*. *Qur'anic* recitation marks the beginning and the end of the gathering. During the meeting, a large variety of texts are employed. For this paper, I focused on the musical rendering of poetic texts. These texts are performed in an effort to seek spiritual experience. Listening to the *sheikha*, reciting the *wazhifa*, and chanting during the *madh* grant a preparatory character to the *dhikr* proper. There, a web of poetic texts, vocal art, multilayered rhythmic structures, and bodily movements is employed in creating a carefully constructed climax. Technically speaking, the *dhikr* in its poetic and musical structure represents a highly elaborated art form.

Memory and body play an important role. The women not only memorize a huge repertory – great parts of it nowhere documented – they also master musically complex processes and sophisticated literary texts. Bodily techniques like movements and rhythmic breathing are used to facilitate the process of inducing and remembering an emotional state and experience. At the same time, *madh* and *dhikr* are far from perfectly rehearsed processes. Rather, a flexible structure is possible which allows them to correspond to the needs of the women and to reflect the ambiance of a given gathering. The *sheikha* has the role of a conductor, but equally important is the interactive process she creates with the other women.

The women master a sophisticated repertory, both musically and literally. They know and internalize a poetic heritage which for average readers would provide more than some difficulties. Moreover, they do not venerate texts as part of a religious and cultural heritage disconnected from contemporary realities and daily lives. They perform the texts and live the Word.

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ENDNOTES

1. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Hosn Abboud who introduced me to the group and inspired me to write about it. I am likewise grateful to the *sheikha* of the group for her hospitality and the women who welcomed me warmly and made this research possible.
2. There is also a silent *dhikr* which I will not discuss here.
3. See also Pinto 2002: 198; Shannon 2006: 113.
4. Place or date of birth. Here, it denotes the birthday of the prophet and the literary genre that emerged from the celebrations of it, i.e. the poems about the birth and life of Muhammad which are performed.
5. For stylistic reasons, I sometimes use the word "singing" as a technical term (i.e. something musically happens), being aware of the fact that most women would differentiate.
6. Responsorial is the singing in dialogue between a solo singer and a group.
7. Strophic song: a song with several verses or stanzas, sung to the same melody.
8. Melismatic singing: In syllabic singing, each syllable corresponds to one tone or musical note. In melismatic singing, various tones or musical notes are used to articulate one syllable. Melismatic singing is often employed as an ornamentation to highlight important words of a text.
9. Today, different kinds of learning can be found: using staff notation is as common as learning by audition.
10. For a concise exploration of this concept see Racy 2003, especially pp. 64-66; 129-133.
11. Muwashaha: a strophic poetic and vocal genre which originated in Andalusia at the end of the 9th century and subsequently traveled to the Arab East and North Africa.

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