

# Tarab in the Mystic Sufi Chant of Egypt

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## I. Introduction to Music, Emotion, and Sufism

The aesthetic concept of tarab finds no ready translation from the Arabic. Narrowly defined, it refers to musical emotion and the traditional musical-poetic resources for producing it, especially expressive solo singing of evocative poetry, in an improvisatory style, employing the traditional system of maqam (melodic mode). Traditionally, the singer is accompanied by a small, flexible, heterogeneous instrumental ensemble (the takht). Affective texts, precise intonation and enunciation, proper elaboration of the maqam, idiomatic improvisation, tasteful modulation, and correct execution of the qafila (melodic cadence) are all factors critical to the development of tarab in performance.<sup>2</sup>

Tarab also depends on consonant performer-listener interactions, in which experienced listeners (sammi<sup>c</sup>a) react to the music by expressing emotion through vocal exclamations and gestures, especially during the pause which follows the qafila; the singer in turn is moved and directed by such "feedback".<sup>3</sup> Through this dynamic relationship, emotion is shared, exchanged, and amplified among participants. The harmonious relation between the singer and the words he or she sings is also critical to tarab, since the singer must sing with sidq (sincerity), expressing true feeling in order to communicate emotion to listeners.

More abstractly, Egyptians describe tarab as a relation of harmony (insijam) or equilibrium (mu<sup>c</sup>adala) between performer and listener, or the exchange of feeling (tabadul al-shu<sup>c</sup>ur) between them, to the point of wahdat al-shu<sup>c</sup>ur (unity of feeling), or the affective melting (dhawb) of the two into one; or the harmonious coexistence (mu<sup>c</sup>aysha) of performer and listener, or poem and performer; or the connection (irtibat) between a person and anything of beauty, for all beauty has an emotional aspect.

Technically, only the singer of tarab ought to be called a mutrib, but the latter term has come to mean simply mughanni (singer). Mutribin are plentiful in Cairo, but most Egyptians say that after the passing of the great secular

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<sup>2</sup>For background on tarab, and musical aesthetics see A. Jihad Racy, "Music in Contemporary Cairo: A Comparative Overview." Asian Music 13: 1 (1981) 14-26; "Musical Aesthetics in Present-Day Cairo," Ethnomusicology 26: (1982) 391-406. Racy, "The Waslah: A Compound-Form Principle in Egyptian Music." Arab Studies Quarterly 5: 4 (1983) 396- 403.

<sup>3</sup>A. Jihad Racy, "Creativity and Ambience: An Ecstatic Feedback Model from Arab Music." World of Music 33: 3 (1991) 7-28.

tarab singers, such as Umm Kulthum, tarab has become rare in secular music. However, many describe Sufi inshad, the mystical music which is the subject of this chapter, as being rich with tarab. Indeed, in its musical features and performative dynamics, it is reminiscent of the older pre-1930 tarab tradition, and in its emotional impact it is far more powerful than other forms of contemporary Egyptian music.

Why should this Sufi music be so laden with tarab, while contemporary secular music is bereft? In part the answer is historical: religious music, inherently conservative, has preserved features of the tarab tradition which generally prevailed in Arab music before the 1930s, but which have gradually disappeared from secular music as a result of aesthetic transformations wrought by rapid political, social, and economic change. But historical factors cannot explain why Sufi music has also changed dramatically in recent years, but not in such a way as to displace tarab. The explanation is better to be sought in the Sufi system of belief, practice, affect, and aesthetics which facilitates the relationships of insijam and tabadul al-shu<sup>c</sup>ur among poet, singer, and listeners upon which tarab depends.

Moreover, the performance contexts of Sufi inshad outside the purview of the Sufi orders demand a high level of emotional communication, for this music has a key role to play in constructing solidarity within the fluid and ephemeral social groups of so-called “popular” (what I will call “informal”) Sufism. Thus tarab is not only expedited by Sufism, it is required. These factors are absent in secular Arab music, which has consequently undergone a variety of transformations resulting from political change, commercial interests, Western influences, demographic shifts, the impact of technology, changes in lifestyle, and so forth.

Here, I focus upon the role of the Sufi poet, the affective power of his<sup>4</sup> poetry, and his relation to the munshid (Sufi singer) and listener, in creating tarab in performance. I argue that it is the shared domain of Sufi thought, feeling, and practice which enables a Sufi poet to communicate intensive mystical emotion, through the medium of language, to a munshid, who perceives the poet’s words so strongly as to experience the affective state which engendered them. This emotional conformity is precisely insijam and wahdat al-shu<sup>c</sup>ur, and so the munshid yatrab min al-sha<sup>c</sup>ir (gets tarab from the poet). It is again this shared Sufi domain which allows for the development of emotional conformity between singer and listener, so that the listener yatrab min al-munshid (gets tarab from the singer), and hence transitively from the poet as well. In secular music, emotional level is lower, and emotional connections weaker, because the common ground furnished by Sufism is absent.

In what follows, I first present ethnographic sketches of Sufism and Sufi inshad in contemporary Egypt. Next I offer a detailed discussion of the Sufi poet, his status in Sufism, and the nature of his creative process, and the source of his poetry’s power. I then discuss the professional munshid, his expressive art, and his spiritual relations to poetry, poets, and listeners. Finally, I outline the dynamic communicative processes by which tarab is constructed in performance.

In examining these issues, I weave my observations of Sufi discourse and practice into speculative theories. Behind these problems in musical emotion thus stands an epistemological one: What is the relation here between “outsider theory” (my ideas about music, mysticism, and emotion) and “insider discourse” (an informally articulated quasi-consistent body of knowledge drawn from many participants in Sufi inshad performance, what might be loosely called a “theory”, combining mystical and aesthetic ideas). I have my theories, and my Egyptian Sufi colleagues have theirs.

This situation is not an instance of the well-known “etic/emic” dichotomy, which stresses the incommensurability of outsider and insider frames. Nor are my theories generalizations empirically supported by field data, as physicists’ theories relate to experiment. Rather, I regard theory and discourse as a continuum. Theory summarizes (and conditions) an interactive dialog between speculations of a weakly-aculturated outsider (with various abstract paradigms in tow) and insider discourse, generated in part by that dialog. This metaphor of “dialog” represents my own reflective thinking, as much as the social processes of fieldwork. After years of living with Sufis, their concepts permeate mine; I think with them. My own reasoning, in dialog with their discourse, thus becomes a part of it.

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<sup>4</sup>In this paper, I use the male pronouns to refer to any person. Women in Sufism include major saints (mostly within the Ahl al-Bayt), poets (such as Rabi<sup>c</sup>a al-<sup>c</sup>Adawiyya, and the contemporary Egyptian <sup>c</sup>Aliya al-Ja’ar), munshidin (such as Shaykha Sabah, who sings in mawlid around Cairo), leaders of Sufi orders (such as Hagga Zakiyya, buried next to the shrine of Sidi Abu al- Hasan al-Shadhili), members of turuq (muridat), and subscribers to the informal system of Sufi belief and practice (“informal Sufism”). However, women comprise a small minority in all categories except the last. See Valerie Hoffman Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1995.)

Thus I envision this chapter as a natural theoretical extension of Egyptian Sufi thought. Sometimes my role is merely to sift and codify what I have observed and experienced, filling gaps, sorting ideas, smoothing inconsistencies, and drawing logically proximate implications. Elsewhere, my reasoning leaps forward into the realm of speculation, but without implying a contradictory universe of critical reality (as “etic” theory tends to do). There is here no critical metalanguage. At no point do my theories call local discourse into question, or posit some true reality beyond the ken of Egyptians, but miraculously available to the researcher. Insider discourse does not contradict my theories, but only leaves gaps because of what remains unpondered, unanalyzed, or unspoken. My theories are perhaps best described as a kind of philosophical elaboration of Sufi experience, which might also have been written, albeit rather differently, by Egyptian Sufis with the inclination for such a project.

## II. Contemporary Egyptian Sufism<sup>5</sup>

At first glance, the processes of expressive emotion in Sufi inshad may appear similar to those of sha<sup>c</sup>bi (popular) singing. Indeed, Sufi and secular music in Egypt, rural and urban, do share many elements. But Sufi inshad is distinguished in that its music, poetry, performers, context, and listeners are informed by the rich and diverse world of Sufi practice, language, thought, and theory, a common ground providing avenues for expressive emotion which are not available elsewhere.

Orthodox Islam rests upon Shari<sup>c</sup>a, sacred law based upon Qur’an (Revelation) and Sunna (Prophetic custom), which describes the order of the cosmos, decrees the articles of faith, and regulates behavior. But a purely legalistic formulation of Islam would leave an emotional vacuum. That vacuum is filled by Sufism, which aims at suprarational religious experience, stressing Divine love (al-hubb al-ilahi) and the potency of the world of spirits (‘alim al-arwah), especially the saints who are objects of love and devotion, as well as a source of blessing (baraka) and intercession. Many Sufis maintain that while Shari<sup>c</sup>a is necessary to regulate society, it is al-tasawwuf (Sufism) which is the jawhar (essence) of Islam. Shari<sup>c</sup>a appeals to the intellect (‘aql), which is insufficient to comprehend spiritual Truth (Haqiqah). Rather, spiritual perception (basira, or shafaiyya) is situated in the qalb (heart). The ‘aql, is clever but veiled (mahjub), being limited to the visible and logical; the qalb transcends these limits to perceive higher truths constituted of feeling (ihsas). Sufism privileges the qalb over the ‘aql, and likewise affective insight over discursive intellection. As in the West, the qalb is also the locus of hubb (love).

In Egypt today, Sufism is commonly described as Kitab (Qur’an), Sunna, and hubb (love). In one way or another love, the capacity of one spirit (ruh) to join selflessly with another, forms the basis for nearly all Sufi discourse and practice. What stands in the way of this love are sensual and egotistical cravings (shahawat), rooted in the self (nafs; the luminous ruh and the earthly nafs are the two antagonistic elements of Sufi psychology). In the Sufi view, pure love is for God only, not for any selfish end. The Sufi strives towards tazkiyat al-nafs (purification of the self, seat of desire), in order to obtain tarqiyat al-ruh (ascension of the spirit towards pure love, and towards God).

Sufi love is of many kinds and degrees, including the platonic love of one’s fellow Sufis, and shaykh (spiritual guide); the spiritual love of the awliya’ (saints) and the anbiya’ (prophets), especially the beloved Prophet Muhammad, and the Ahl al-Bayt (literally “people of the house”; the Prophet’s immediate descendants through his daughter Fatima and son-in-law ‘Ali); and al-hubb al-ilahi, Divine Love. The joy of love, described as widad (affection), mahabba, hubb, sababa (love), intensified as hiyam, ‘ishq, walah, wajd (ecstatic love, passion), is often commingled with the pain of longing, due to the absence or remoteness of the mahbub (beloved): the words shawq (passionate longing), law‘a (lovesickness), huzn, kadar, shajan, shajw, and asan (anguish, grief) are employed; the lover’s body may become weak, emaciated (saqim), and ill (symbolic of the destruction of the nafs, and the effect of unfulfilled passion). The source of all of these conditions is love and the desire for unification with the beloved, even to the point of self-sacrifice. In the most extreme degrees of love (‘ishq or wajd), the lover loses his or her individual attributes and becomes assimilated within the beloved, a condition technically known as fana’ (annihilation). A Sufi may seek fana’ in his shaykh, or in the Prophet, but the highest form of fana’ is in Allah. On a lower plane, Sufi love is manifested as selfless generosity,

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<sup>5</sup> The most comprehensive overviews of contemporary Egyptian Sufism are to be found in Hoffman, Sufism, Mystics and Saints; Julian Johansen, Sufism and Islamic Reform in Egypt: The Battle for Islamic Tradition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); and Earl H. Waugh, The Munshidin of Egypt: Their World and Their Song (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1989). Slightly outdated but still extremely valuable is Michael Gilsenan, Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt: An Essay in the Sociology of Religion (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973).

tolerance, compassion, and empathy for others, regardless of their religious affiliations. Nearly all Sufi poetry speaks about love, longing, or praise for the beloved, and the Sufi is often called a muhibb (pl. muhibbin), or Ḥashiq (pl. Ḥashiqin); both words mean “lover”. As one Sufi poet told me:

There is a hadith [Prophetic saying] which says: your faith is incomplete until you love God and the Prophet more than you love yourself. This love is a major theme for the Sufis as well. You must remember those whom you love. God gave to us through love; we return the love to Him, rapt in it.... The Sufi loves until he forgets himself.

Underlying the theory and practice of Sufi love is the notion of spiritual proximity. The Sufi cosmology is centered on the Ḥalim al-arwah (world of spirits), which--unfettered by the limitations of the physical world--allows one to establish emotional relationships with others irrespective of their physical-world existence in time and space.<sup>6</sup> The world of spirit existed in preeternity (al-Ḥalim al-azali), before Creation. During this time, some spirits established close relationships with others; the spiritual rapport two people on earth may feel indicates their spiritual relation before time began. Sufis say that after the death of the body most spirits go to the barzakh (isthmus), where they await Judgement Day. But the spirits of the salihin (virtuous people), including the awliya', are free to come and go as they please. In this way, they can meet with the living, often in dreams, and are present at their shrines, particularly on the occasion of saint festivals (mawlid; singular mawlid).

For the Sufi, God is not infinitely far, but rather infinitely near; one draws near to Him through spiritual closeness with one's shaykh, and with the awliya'. Indeed, the word for saint (wali) literally means “near” or “friend”. The Prophet, Ahl al-Bayt, and other saints are beloved by God, near (wali) to Him. Through great spiritual gifts or efforts, the wali receives mystical illumination and baraka (blessing) from God. The awliya' are thus objects of great spiritual love, respect, and devotion in Egyptian Sufism, especially the Prophet Muhammad, and the Ahl al-Bayt.<sup>7</sup>

While there is no official procedure for canonization in Islam, karamat (miracles) are indications of the wali's exalted mystical station, gifts God bestows upon the sincere seeker. Sufis constantly recount miracle-stories, reinforcing the reputation of the saint who performed them, the majesty of God who granted them, and the limitations of the ʿaql which cannot comprehend them; karamat are felt by the heart, not understood through reason. To love someone is also to praise them and ask for their blessings from God, and so Sufism is replete with praise poetry, called madih or madh, most of which honors the Prophet Muhammad.

Since spiritual proximity to God is possible, and not all are equally close, one seeks shafa'a (intercession) or madad (assistance) from another who is closer to God, particularly the awliya' who have His baraka (blessing). Thus relations to saints, while rooted in love, are also characterized by tawassul (petition), especially at the maqam (shrine) of the wali.<sup>8</sup> Shrines for important saints are always busy, but the pace of visitation intensifies on special festival days, especially during the yearly mawlid, the celebration for the saint. Visitors recite the Fatiha (opening chapter of the Qur'an) in front of the maqsurah (grill) surrounding the shrine, and make vows (nudhur), often to obtain intercession and

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<sup>6</sup> The concept of Ḥalim al-arwah illustrates the Sufi notion that everything has an inner (batini) aspect, visible only to those with spiritual discernment (shafafiyya). Eye-sight (basar), connected to mind (Ḥaql) and perceiving material reality, is thus distinguished from insight (basira), proceeding via the eye of the heart (Ḥayn al-qalb), and perceiving the more essential and permanent spiritual reality. Inasmuch as aesthetic experience and emotion depend upon perception, this mystical extension of perception from mind's eye to heart's eye implies a corresponding mystical extension of aesthetic sensibility, communication, and affect. A concise answer to the opening question (“Why should Sufi music be so laden with tarab. . .?”) is then possible: Sufi music generates emotion by harnessing mystical perception, while secular music relies upon ordinary perception only.

<sup>7</sup> On the subject of love and devotion to the Prophet see Valerie Hoffman-Ladd, “Devotion to the Prophet and His Family in Egyptian Sufism”. International Journal of Middle East Studies 24: 4 (1992) 615-637.

<sup>8</sup> The wali may or may not be buried at the location of the maqam; Sufis say that every wali has forty maqams.

baraka from the saint.<sup>9</sup> This system of saint veneration is linked to the respect shown to the living shaykh of a Sufi order, since when a great shaykh dies, his tomb becomes a maqam, and a locus for devotional and supplicatory acts. After a number of years, he may begin to be regarded as a saint, and an annual mawlid may be held in his honor.

Progress towards the goals of taming the nafs, and elevating the ruh, is formally accomplished within the tariqa (order; literally path; plural turuq), which is a social, practical, and doctrinal unit of Sufism, led by a shaykh. A Muslim wishing to join takes an 'ahd' (oath) from the shaykh or his deputy, upon which he becomes a murid (disciple; plural muridin). The members of the tariqa are collectively called ahbab or muhibbin (lovers), and the theme of brotherly love among tariqa members is emphasized in practice. Some turuq employ special greetings, such as the simultaneous kissing of hands, to signify the affection and respect between members. The greatest degree of love and veneration is shown to the shaykh, because of his knowledge, piety, refinement and elevated spiritual station. The shaykh is not only considered to be a spiritual teacher and guide, but also a source of baraka (blessing) inherited from his shaykh.

The shaykhs of Sufism comprise a single spiritual genealogy; every shaykh has a shaykh, and every shaykh's chain (silsila) of spiritual ascendants leads to the Prophet Muhammad through the Caliph 'Ali. All of the great Sufis and saints, indeed all Sufis everywhere, are thus linked in one spiritual family. However, the early Sufi teachers did not establish turuq as formal social organizations. It was only around the 12th century that major tariqa lines came into being.

In Egypt, Sufis trace the principal turuq to the arba'a aqtab:<sup>10</sup> Sidi 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (founder of the Qadiriyya), Sidi Ahmad al-Badawi (founder of the Ahmadiyya), Sidi Ibrahim al-Disuqi (founder of the Burhamiyya), and Sidi Ahmad al-Rifa'i (founder of the Rifa'iyya). To these names, Sidi Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili's (founder of the Shadhiliyya) is often added. These founders are considered awliya' of the highest order, and thus a copious source of baraka, flowing to them from God through the Prophet Muhammad and the Ahl al-Bayt. This baraka flows on through the silsilas to present-day shaykhs.

Most Sufis say that the different turuq are merely different paths to the same goal, just as the spokes of a wheel all lead to the hub. All turuq emphasize the purification of the nafs and the elevation of the ruh, in order to draw closer to God, the Beloved. All turuq stress fulfillment of furud (basic religious duties, such as daily prayer) as prescribed in the Shari'a, and emphasize refinement in word and deed. To be mu'addab (well-mannered), akhlaqi (moral), sadiq (truthful), khalis (sincere), muhtarim (respectful) are basic requirements for the murid, without which there can be no spiritual progress. Doctrinal differences between turuq are relatively minor.

The turuq are most distinctive in their social structures, and in their rituals. Each tariqa has its body of special prayers and poetry to be used in individual and corporate practices. Books of qasa'id (poems, singular qasida) often feature poems written or selected by the founder of the tariqa, or by one of his spiritual descendants. Many poems praise the Prophet or another holy spiritual figure, declaring love, or asking for spiritual intercession. Other poems express the shaykh's mystical feelings and teachings. Such poetry is rooted in the emotional experience of Sufism itself.

Under the tutelage of his shaykh, the murid performs supererogatory ritual acts, and thereby progresses along the tariqa (path) from one spiritual station (maqam) to another. Along the path, God may grant the seeker ahwal (sing. hal): transient states of mystical insight or emotional rapture. The murid attends to his character and behavior, performs daily devotions, and participates in group activities of the tariqa. He may be called upon to serve the shaykh in any number of mundane capacities, serving tea, cleaning the mosque, or running errands; the shaykh in turn monitors his spiritual progress, and assigns new spiritual exercises as he sees fit. Most turuq also conduct one or two hadras (group meetings) each week, either in a mosque or another meeting place. The hadra may include Qur'anic recitation, durus (teaching sessions), inshad, and dhikr.

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<sup>9</sup>F. de Jong, "Cairene Ziyara Days: A Contribution to the Study of Saint Veneration in Islam." Die Welt des Islams 17: 1-4 (1976-77) 26-43.

<sup>10</sup> The awliya' form a spiritual hierarchy, in which the highest rank is the qutb (plural aqtab), the pole or axis of the world. See Annemarie Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions of Islam. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); and Schimmel, As Through a Veil: Mystical Poetry in Islam (New York: Columbia University Press 1982); Hoffman, 1995.

Dhikr (“mention” or “remembrance” of God) is a term covering a number of practices, both solitary and corporate, in which participants concentrate on God. The central corporate Sufi ritual is dhikr al-asma’ al-husna (remembrance of the Divine Names). In this ceremony, muridin draw closer to God through collective rhythmic chanting of His names, often while performing tafqiir (rhythmic body movements). Alongside this chanting and movement, singers (munshidin) may perform inshad, sometimes with musiqa (instrumental accompaniment). In each segment of dhikr, there is a gradual buildup of chant, movement, music, and emotional level. In Egypt today, dhikr is performed both inside and outside the uruq.

Within the tariqa hadra, dhikr may include inshad, but melodic instruments are used only rarely, and never within a mosque. Intensive displays of emotion are curtailed, and trance behavior is generally forbidden. However when dhikr is performed outside the uruq, for social occasions such as weddings, and in mawalid, the strictures of the tariqa and its shaykh are absent. In such contexts, the use of melodic instruments is nearly universal, there is more spontaneity and less formal structure in performance, and participants display a much wider range of emotional behavior.

Sufism is often identified with the orders themselves. This is a mistake, because in Egypt participation in the orders is relatively limited, whereas the underpinnings of Sufi belief and practice permeate a very broad segment of Egyptian Muslim society. What I term “informal Sufism” is the larger system of thought, feeling, and action which includes the uruq as particular crystallized social structures, but which extends amorphously beyond them as well, though without central authority, hierarchy, explicit doctrine, or fixed ritual forms. Others may call this system “popular religion”, but in fact it is essentially the same Sufi world-view as that found in the orders. The main difference between formal and informal types is the absence in the latter of the social structures and formal spiritual disciplines characteristic of the uruq. In fact, many “informal Sufis” are officially members of orders, but for various reasons may not attend a regular hadra. In colloquial parlance, they are often called muhibbin or ‘ashiqin.

Informal Sufism centers upon the veneration, love, blessings, and intercession of the Prophet, Ahl al-Bayt, and awliya’ in informal and individual practice. While the regular, structured hadra is the focus of corporate practices within the uruq, the most important social occasions for informal Sufism are the hundreds of yearly mawalid, carnival-like religious festivals which punctuate the calendar irregularly, each lasting from one night to two weeks.<sup>11</sup> Spiritually and spatially each mawlid centers upon the maqam of a particular wali.<sup>12</sup>

The mawlid gathers members of many Sufi orders, along with other muhibbin, who come to greet the saint, bask in the radiance of his or her baraka, and meet friends. Wealthier Sufis may set up a khidma (temporary dining/kitchen area where food and drink are served without charge), a focal point for informal and convivial gatherings of muhibbin; or may sponsor a munshid to sing for large informal performances of dhikr, “public hadras” which anyone may join. Sufi mendicants and majazib (Sufis who by birth or through excessive mystical practice have lost their intellectual faculties), often dressed in extraordinarily odd garb, are generously provided for. The mawlid also draws throngs of non-Sufi onlookers, who come to enjoy the festive atmosphere of food, games, rides; there are no restrictions on who may attend. The mawlid is open, creative, improvisational, and sometimes chaotic, as opposed to the closed ritual order of the tariqa hadra. It is an occasion glowing with good feeling and altruism, which demonstrates par excellence the nature of Sufi love. On a smaller scale, layali diniyya (lit. religious nights) lasting only one evening, and celebrating a variety of social occasions with a public hadra (including inshad and dhikr) exhibit much the same atmosphere.

Throughout Sufism (formal or informal), participants are bound together by shared feelings of love, for each other and spiritual entities, based on a common world-view and experience. In the tariqa, emotional unity is the result of initiation, shared allegiance to the shaykh, long familiarity with one another, common beliefs and teachings particular to the tariqa, and regular devotional practices, including performance of the corporate dhikr. Here, hadra is only one factor out of many, manifesting unity at least as much as constructing it.

Informal Sufis attending a mawlid or layla are likewise bound by love. However, the lack of fixed ritual formats and attendees, regular meetings, or definite ritual boundaries means that the emotional power and unity of these events is more transient, and constructed largely through hadra performance alone. The emotional force of these rituals is sufficient to forge a kind of collective affective order, at least for the duration of the mawlid. That order is

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<sup>11</sup>J.W. McPherson, The Mawlid of Egypt (Cairo: Nile Mission Press. 1941).

<sup>12</sup>The sole exception is the mawlid of the Prophet himself, which is celebrated everywhere in the Islamic world on 12 Rabi' al-Awwil.

never manifested as social structure or rigid ritual form; rather, it is the order of shared mystical-emotional experience. Within the public hadra of mawlid or layla, Sufi music is more critical to the construction of this emotional unity than in the tariqa hadra. For this reason, tarab is more urgently required in the public hadra performances of informal Sufism. At the same time, it is the inherent flexibility of the public hadra, combined with the emotional potentialities of Sufism, which enable tarab to flourish there.

### III. Inshad Sufi<sup>13</sup>

Though frowned upon by conservative Islam, musical sound is widely accepted, both in theory and in practice, within Sufism. Emotions stirred by organized sound, together with movement, breath, and chant, have long been used as tools for the generation of mystical feeling in the Sufi hadra.

In Egypt, Sufi music is generally called inshad, or al-inshad al-Sufi. Here I use the word music to cover “sound designed for perceptual concentration.” But I must clarify that the English word “music” has a different semantic scope than its Arabic cognate “musiqā”. The latter implies the use of musical instruments, which have negative connotations derived from association with the haram (forbidden) aspects of secular entertainment (e.g. dance, alcohol), while most Sufi “music” consists of singing (ghina) only, with emphasis on mystical or devotional poetry; such music is not “musiqā”. But even the word ghina is too laden with secular connotations, and so Sufi music, together with other genres of Islamic singing (ibtihalat, tawashih, and qisas diniyya), is referred to as inshad (hymnody); the singer of religious song is called a munshid.<sup>14</sup> While most Egyptian inshad consists of solo or choral singing, instruments, such as the duff (frame drum), riqq (tambourine), tabla (goblet-shaped drum), kawala (reed flute), kamanja (violin), ud (Arab lute) and even orj (synthesizer) are commonly found outside the mosque, especially in the mawalid.

In Sufi exercises, focusing on spiritual closeness to God, His Prophet, and other holy figures, and the negation of sensual desires, the aesthetic ought not be an end in itself, but rather a means of developing mystical feeling. The danger that the sensual means may be mistaken for the spiritual goal accounts for the controversy that has constantly swirled about the issue of music in Sufi ritual. Most contemporary Egyptian Sufis carefully distinguish spiritual uses of music from the production of tarab as a sensual end in itself. The avoidance of the Arabic word “musiqā” and substitution of “inshad” for “ghina” is one example. Another is the emphasis placed upon the didactic function of Sufi poetry, music sometimes being held to be nothing more than a means of attracting people to the spiritual benefits of its texts, even though much mystical poetry is intellectually incomprehensible for most listeners.

Sufi inshad employs a variety of poetic forms in both classical and colloquial Arabic, including the qasida, murabba<sup>c</sup>, mukhammas, and muwashshah (in classical Arabic); and mawwal, sharh, and zajal (in the colloquial). The preeminent themes are al-hubb al-ilahi (Divine love), tawhid (praise and glorification of God), ibtihalat (supplication of God); tawassul (requests for intercession); madih (praise) and ghazal (love) of the Prophet Muhammad, the Ahl al-Bayt, and awliya<sup>?</sup>; mawa<sup>c</sup>iz (exhortations); expressions of mystical experience (often employing the metaphors of love, longing and intoxication); and gnostic affirmations (ma<sup>c</sup>rifa).<sup>15</sup>

Sufi inshad is frequently used within the turuq, as an accompaniment to corporate dhikr, or at other occasions within the hadra. In dhikr, the extent of musical accompaniment varies with the tariqa, but normally does not include more than percussion (drums and handclaps). Songs also function as pedagogical devices for the muridin, who imbibe the poem’s content through group singing, for poetry used within the turuq is often composed (or at least selected) by the founding shaykh, to express and promote his mystical philosophy or teachings. The presiding shaykh or his deputy

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<sup>13</sup>On the Sufi inshad of Egypt, see also Earl H. Waugh, The Munshidin of Egypt: Their World and Their Song. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press. 1989). His approach differs from mine in significant ways, but most of our conclusions are congruent.

<sup>14</sup>For an overview of Egyptian inshad see Frishkopf, “al-Inshad al-Dini (Islamic Religious Singing) in Egypt”, Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, vol. 6 (New York: Garland Publishing, forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup>For portions of this classification I am indebted to Dr. Ibrahim <sup>c</sup>Abd al-Hafez.

strictly controls the performance of munshidin, who are amateurs drawn from the ranks of the tariqa.<sup>16</sup> Many songs are responsorial: leaders sing a verse, while others respond with a refrain, unless they are engaged in dhikr; there is no “audience”.<sup>17</sup> The structure of this participatory music is necessarily relatively simple. Choral songs are metric and strophic, employing brief precomposed melodies of narrow ambitus. Short solo passages may be improvised and wider-ranging, but without deploying the full resources of Arab music which could produce powerful tarab, due to lack of freedom, skill, or necessity. The tariqa munshid is controlled by his shaykh, and must time performance to fit within short allotted segments tariqa ritual; being an amateur, he is only rarely a virtuoso. Tarab is not required, and may not even be desired, particularly in туруқ which view the power of music with suspicion.

Outside the туруқ, in the realm of “informal Sufism”, the roles of music and tarab are vastly expanded. Here, inshad occurs within the “public hadra”, featuring a skilled professional munshid accompanied by a takht (similar to the format of secular tarab music before 1930), whose musical performance regulates and energizes the dhikr. Mawalid provide sacred spatio-temporal settings for public hadras, near the maqam (shrine) of the saint. More often, the munshid is hired to sing for a variety of socio-religious occasions, such as the return from the hajj (pilgrimage), farah (wedding), subu<sup>c</sup> (the celebration held seven days after child’s birth), dhikra (memorial), or in fulfillment of a nadhr (vow made to a saint in exchange for intercession and baraka). All of these performances (called layali) are public and open.

Because these occasions transcend the bounds of any one tariqa, they are not usually directed by a Sufi shaykh. Instead, the munshid himself takes control of all dimensions of performance, choosing poetry and constructing melody in an improvisatory style according to his taste and mood. Unlike the inshad of the туруқ, the takht is heavily amplified, creating a concert atmosphere, in which musical performers are sharply distinguished from other participants (and here the term “audience” is more appropriate, if not ideal) by their access to a microphone and exalted status atop a platform of some kind. The audience does not sing, although they may perform dhikr, clap, or express feeling through exclamations. They too are largely free from any central controlling authority (although there is always at least one mustaftih to coordinate dhikr movements with the music), and so emotional expression usually reaches a much higher level than within the туруқ.

Due to the freedom and skill of performers, the musical structure of inshad in the public hadra is much more elaborate than in the tariqa hadra, drawing upon the full resources of Arab music, and borrowing musical styles, techniques, and melodies from secular music, both urban and rural. Such inshad is heavily influenced by the tarab aesthetic. Most of the performance is designed to facilitate dhikr and thus employs a metric line (sounded at least by the percussion section), although completely non-metric segments are also used.

In the Delta area, professional Sufi inshad draws heavily on the mawwal (colloquial poetry featuring varied rhyme schemes with clever paronomasias, sung in an unmeasured style), the sharh (a monorhyme mawwal), and the taqtuqa (colloquial strophic metric song), all performed over the regular beat of dhikr. These poems are usually handed down anonymously, and learned orally, although modern poets sometimes write for the munshidin, and poems may be published and learned from books as well. Musical accompaniment is close to secular folk music, adapted to accommodate dhikr, and often evokes a dance-like ethos.

By contrast, in the Sa’id (Upper Egypt), and especially in the province of Assiut, many professional munshidin perform classical Arabic qasidas, including difficult Sufi poetry by masters such as ‘Umar Ibn al-Farid, Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya, al-Hallaj, Ibn ‘Arabi, ‘Abd al-Karim al-Jili, ‘Abd al-Rahim al-Bur’ai, al-Busayri, and many others. The vocal style is free, but does not employ melodic patterns typical of the secular mawwal or invoke dance music, as in the case of Delta singing. The Sa’idi style is generally considered more serious and difficult than Delta inshad. This Sa’idi tradition of Sufi inshad for public hadra is the principal subject for the analysis which follows, although most remarks would apply equally to the Delta tradition as well.

Shaykh Yasin al-Tuhami, from the village of Hawatka near Assiut, is the premier performer of the Sa’idi tradition today, a tradition which he has been instrumental in defining over the last twenty-five years. Besides having spawned a wide circle of imitators in the Sa’id, he has become so famous that he has widely influenced the style of

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<sup>16</sup>For a discussion of the role of the munshid and inshad within the tariqa, and the relation between shaykh and munshid, see Waugh The Munshidin of Egypt, 68.

<sup>17</sup>In this chapter, the word “audience” is sometimes used to denote all participants other than singers and instrumentalists when the distinction between musical performers and others seems clear-cut. This is often the case outside the Sufi orders, but only rarely within them.

Sufi inshad, even in the Delta. Thus, in studying Shaykh Yasin one is indirectly examining a widespread musical, social, and religious trend extending across Egypt, of which he is the leader and primary exponent.

#### IV. Shaykh Yasin al-Tuhami<sup>18</sup>

Shaykh Yasin al-Tuhami, widely acclaimed as the greatest professional Sufi munshid in Egypt today, leads a largely nocturnal existence. Arising at seven or eight in the evening, he dresses in a fine jallabiyya (robe), colored shal (shawl), and brilliant white 'imma (turban), entertains visitors, and conducts business (he is always booked many months in advance). About nine or ten in the evening, with his sibha (string of prayer beads) in one hand, he descends from his apartments, boards his vehicle, and together with his musical group (firqa) travels to the site of the layla.

There he is met by the layla's sponsors, and hundreds of muhibbin who have flocked to see him, some of them having traveled hundreds of kilometers. He pushes through the thick crowd which immediately gathers about his car, shaking hands and exchanging greetings with his many admirers. Slowly he makes his way to the sponsor's home, where he and his group, together with other special guests, are provided a supper, often consisting of soup, rice, salad, bread, and roasted meats, followed by highly sweetened tea.

The performance area (saha) is clearly marked by its colors and light. A tent (suwan), constructed out of heavy cloth imprinted with brightly-colored Islamic designs in red, black, blue, green, and white stretched over a lashed wooden frame, usually encloses the saha on all sides except one, which is left open to accommodate the crowds and dhikr which spill over into adjoining areas. Against the back wall of the suwan is a carpeted wooden stage (masrah), upon which the musicians sit or stand in a semi-circle around the munshid, and which also supports a sound system, including microphones for Shaykh Yasin and melodic instrumentalists. Just in front of the masrah is a wide carpeted strip, upon which dhikr will be conducted. On the fringes of this carpet are rows of chairs, though many more will stand than sit. Large speakers are placed on stands around the periphery of the performance space, directed inwards. Strung upon the wooden frame of the suwan and adjacent buildings are strings of thousands of tiny colored light bulbs, and powerful floodlights irradiate the area with such power that the cool night approaches the heat and light of noontime.

Generally, the sponsor must pay Shaykh Yasin and rent equipment for the layla; however, the performance is open to all without charge. At several of the largest and most important of the mawlid, including those of Sayyidna al-Husayn, Sittina Sayyida Zaynab (grandson and granddaughter of the Prophet, respectively, and patron saints of Cairo), and Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi (the famous saint of Tanta, whose mawlid allegedly draws more than two million participants), Shaykh Yasin performs gratis. Many fans bring tape-recorders, bravely holding them aloft in clusters just in front of a speaker for the entire performance in order to make the best possible recording; later, these tapes will be widely copied, traded, and distributed throughout Egypt.

The crowd gathers all evening in anticipation. Shaykh Yasin's audience comprises mainly villagers and recent urban immigrants, who are not necessarily poor or uneducated.<sup>19</sup> He also draws a small but significant number of upper class nouveau riche, and intellectuals; many of these subscribe to the Sufi world-view, if they are not actually members of туруq. Most of his audience is drawn from the locale in which he performs, but a large number of fans travel about with him, and can be seen at his performances throughout Egypt.

Around 11 p.m. Yasin emerges from the home of the sponsor, and together with his firqa makes his way to the suwan, where he ascends the masrah (stage), tests the microphone, adjusts gain and reverb levels on the amplifier, and supervises precise placement of the speakers, so as to avoid feedback problems. Musicians unpack their instruments, and take their seats. One of Yasin's innovations was his popularization (some say introduction) of alat al-tarab (instruments of secular tarab music), such as kamanja (violin) and 'ud (lute), which (unlike the reed flutes, nay and kawala) are not traditional in Sufi music. Including also a small percussion section (riqq, duff, and tabla), his group resembles the takht of tarab tradition. Shaykh Yasin, dressed like the imam (prayer leader) of a mosque in his white

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<sup>18</sup>Shaykh Yasin is discussed extensively in Waugh, The Munshidin 63,116,150, and elsewhere.

<sup>19</sup>In Egyptian society it is important to differentiate between economic and cultural class structures. Thus a man may migrate from his village to Cairo, and open a shop, gradually becoming wealthy enough to afford an upper-middle-class lifestyle, and yet cleave to a relatively traditional lifestyle in a "popular" (sha'bi) neighborhood full of less fortunate immigrants.

‘imma, is considered imam of the hadra when he performs. He maintains ultimate control over the event, combining the functions of both munshid and shaykh in the turuq; the mustaftih follows his lead.

Shaykh Yasin usually divides his hadra into three waslas (parts).<sup>20</sup> (The Sufi use of the term wasla to describe a unified segment of music and dhikr, featuring an escalating emotional level, is reminiscent of its use in older secular tarab music of Egypt, and thus illustrates another connection between Sufi inshad and the tarab tradition.<sup>21</sup>) The first wasla incorporates a percussive metric base, and lasts about ninety minutes. Following a break of 20 minutes or so comes the second wasla, which contains neither percussion nor meter, lasting about half an hour. The second wasla may be followed by a second break, or may plunge straight-away into the third wasla, which is similar to the first, but a good deal shorter. The whole performance lasts from two and a half to four hours.

Yasin may precede the inshad performance proper with solo recitation from the Qur’an, beginning with the Fatiha (opening chapter), in the clear and simple tartil style, followed by recitation of the hizb (extended prayer) particular to the Sufi order represented by the layla's sponsors. The recitation of Qur’an and hizb serves as a kind of benediction for the layla, a prayer for its success, and the inspiration of the performer. Yasin finishes after about twenty minutes.

After a break, melodic instrumentalists connect to the sound system, and tune-up; percussion is not usually amplified. Tuning moves imperceptibly into a non-metric prelude, in which the first maqam (musical mode) is established with a short taqsim (improvisation), as in the secular tarab tradition. During this time, the coordinator of the dhikr (the mustaftih) begins to arrange those men who wish to perform dhikr into facing lines, perpendicular to the front edge of the platform.<sup>22</sup> Shaykh Yasin begins the dhikr by rhythmically intoning “Allah...Allah”; the mustaftih picks up the beat and sets a pattern for the others to follow, swaying his body and clapping his hands.

At a cue from Shaykh Yasin, the percussion section enters, and the first wasla is underway. He then launches into a standard opening piece, “Ya A‘zam al-Mursalin” (“Oh Greatest of Messengers”), a madih (praise) for the Prophet Muhammad. Next, he sings an initial madad section, in which the word “madad” (help) is repeated over and over, followed by various names. Each instance of the word “madad” is a plea for assistance from the following named entity (e.g. “madad ya Sayyida Zaynab”), to the extent of his or her capabilities. Normally requests for madad are directed towards God, the Prophet, the saints, the Ahl al-Bayt, and the great Sufi poets (who are also regarded as saints), although in theory anyone could be named. Who is mentioned depends upon performance locale; hadra participants often hand Yasin slips of paper upon which are written the names of local saints they want him to call. The mention of saints whose shrines are physically proximate--particularly the saint in whose honor a mawlid is being held--always creates a great emotional stir. In Yasin’s performance, madad also functions as a release from the difficulties of the poetry, and is performed at the fastest tempos.

Following the initial madad comes a sequence of “buildups”, each comprising segments of poetry interspersed with musical interludes. The interludes, which function to give the singer a rest, and to solidify changes in maqam, consist of taqsim (instrumental improvisations) or musical lazimat (melodies, often taken from songs of Umm Kulthum and other famous Arab singers). Shaykh Yasin draws his poetry from many sources, but there are normally one or two principal qasidas in a layla, with other short poetic excerpts inserted here and there. This poetry is often extremely difficult, densely symbolic mystical language in classical Arabic, and while everyone understands fragments, few are able to grasp it completely. Still, they appear to feel it, and respond with gesture, movement, and vocal cries, particularly at the close of each musical-poetic phrase (qafila). Shaykh Yasin is free to choose poetry to match his own mood, and the mood of his listeners as expressed in their feedback, and he is skillful in manipulating musical and poetic resources to raise the emotion of performance to a high pitch. The tempo increases, and the meter moves from low, to mid, to high “gear” during each buildup, until its culmination in madad.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>When performing at mawlid Yasin sings one wasla only. This wasla resembles the first wasla as described below, but longer (lasting from one and a half, to two and a half hours).

<sup>21</sup> For a thorough discussion of the wasla in older Egyptian music, see Jihad Racy, “The Waslah: A Compound-Form Principle in Egyptian Music.” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 5, 4 (1983) 396-403.

<sup>22</sup>Women, if they participate in the dhikr at all, stand at the edges of the crowd, rarely in the main dhikr lines. However, many women do attend these events, often watching from balconies and rooftops.

<sup>23</sup>See also Waugh, *The Munshidin*, 123.

The dhakkira (those who perform dhikr) must follow tempo and meter changes, guided by the mustaftih. Their emotional responses, expressed in movements, facial expressions, cries, and shouts, are much more pronounced than in the turuq, since there is no authority to impose restraint. One frequently witnesses varieties of “trance” behavior not tolerated in most turuq. Dhakkira may jump wildly up and down, flail their limbs, or fall unconscious, sometimes interrupting the dhikr in the process. During this metric section, emotional behavior generally correlates with the tempo of the music, and the transparency of the text; being occupied with the dhikr, it is difficult for dhakkira to concentrate on poetic meaning. When Shaykh Yasin reaches the climax and begins to sing madad, great emotion is unleashed by the mention of saint’s names (understood easily enough), as well as the rapid tempo. The entranced is variously described as fi hal (enraptured), mitdarwish (in a mystic’s state), nashwan (ecstatic), fi halat wajid (in a state of ecstasy), hayman (madly in love), tayih (lost), or sakran (intoxicated), among other terms. The same adjectives can be applied to the munshid or poet, as we shall see later.

After several of these buildups, the first wasla concludes, and there is a break, during which muhibbin wishing to greet Shaykh Yasin mob the stage. Some consider him to have baraka, for he is an inspired munshid whose father was a wali. He is beloved and respected by his listeners, whose behavior towards him is similar to that of muridin towards their shaykh. Indeed, the muhibbin who follow him from one performance to another may be considered as a virtual tariqa-in-flux constituted in and by performance, for which Yasin is the shaykh and teacher, as well as hadra leader.

In the second wasla, Shaykh Yasin sings ametrically, accompanied by melodic instruments only. There is no meter or dhikr; instead, everyone sits quietly, concentrating on the singing of poetry. Here, emotion is more closely tied to the poetry than the music. When Shaykh Yasin finishes a phrase, cries of appreciation (“Allah!”, “Aywa ya Shaykh Yasin!”) rise from his “audience”. The longer the poetic phrase, the greater the emotional response, although the number of people who can actually explain its poetic meaning may be few. These interactions between Shaykh Yasin and his audience intensify the emotional tension of the moment. It is here that a central enigma of this music--how esoteric Sufi poetry may generate such a powerful emotional impact--presents itself most clearly.

Following this wasla, there may be another break, or Yasin may enter the third wasla directly. The third wasla is a shortened version of the first, consisting of two or three buildups only. The final buildup leads to one of several conventional closing pieces (such as “Salla Allah <sup>c</sup>Alayhi wa Sallam” (May God bless him [the Prophet] and give him peace)). After the percussion has ceased, Shaykh Yasin calls for the Fatiha to be read, and the hadra ends.

## V. Sufi Poets, Poetry, Sufism, and Emotion

The poetry of Sufi inshad is one of the primary keys to its power. Poetry is a main criterion for the aesthetic evaluation of a munshid, and is the most salient feature of his performance. During the hadra, listeners appear deeply affected by specific phrases, and often memorize them, even though they cannot explicate their meanings. What is the source of this poetry’s power? Why might the affective impact of Sufi poetry far exceed that of its secular counterpart? The answer is intricately bound up with the nature of the Sufi system out of whose meanings this poetry comes, in which it is embedded, and for whose sake it exists.

### A. The Sufi Poet and the Sufi Tradition

Sufi poetry is qualitatively different from ordinary poetry, just as the Sufi poet is qualitatively different from the ordinary poet. The mystic is filled with powerful inner feelings, which demand expression through word or deed. When the expressive medium is poetry, he is called a Sufi poet. But he is first and foremost a Sufi; writing poetry is essentially the expression of mystical experience, not an artistic effort. For the Sufi, being a poet is a spiritual necessity, a response to the inner pressure of feeling which demands release, not an external vocation. The Sufi poet thus stands at an interface, communicating the Sufi reality he experiences on the one side, to the reader or listener on the other.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>The great Sufi poet Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi remarked: "By God, I care nothing for poetry, and there is nothing worse in my eyes than that. It has become incumbent upon me, as when a man plunges his hands into tripe and washes it out for the sake of a guest's appetite, because the guest's appetite is for tripe." Schimmel, As Through a Veil, 12.

The spiritual station of an individual poet is critical to the affective efficacy of his words, because his poetic creativity requires spiritual inspiration, and will be judged in the context of his spiritual reputation. To write true Sufi poetry requires iman (faith), safa' (purity), qurb min Allah (closeness to God). One Sufi told me that the great Sufi poets were tahir ma'a Allah (in a state of purity with God), qulubhum minawwara (their hearts were illuminated). They were truly Sufi masters, a status critical to understanding their words. Shaykh Yasin himself refers to important Sufi poets as asyadna al-kubar (our great masters).

Socially and mystically, the Sufi poet is well-connected to the Sufi genealogy, participating as a conduit for its flows of baraka. He is first of all a murid, and a muhibb. Generally he has taken the 'ahd from a shaykh (at least after the advent of the turuq), and may have had other spiritual teachers as well. From these teachers he inherited the accumulated riches of Sufi spirituality, in which he immersed himself. It is the palpable presence of this legacy, sincerely expressed in his poetry, which authenticates him as a Sufi poet, and his work as Sufi poetry.

Originality is not important in this poetry; authentic feeling is. The mysticism of his own shaykh often reverberates powerfully through his own writings, to the point where their voices merge. Indirectly, his poetry echoes meanings of the entire tradition. One Sufi stated that all Sufi poets are spiritually related to Imam 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, and through him to the Prophet. The Sufi poet may also have had disciples of his own, to whom he bequeathed his spiritual insights in poetic form, or he may have been the shaykh of a tariqa, for which he composed poetry, thereby expressing mystical feeling for the benefit of his muridin.<sup>25</sup> Because the Sufi poet is firmly placed in the great spiritual genealogies of Sufism, and because he conveys true mystical feeling in his poems, he is the lynchpin joining the inshad tradition to the vast spiritual universe of Sufism, a conduit through which meaning can flow from its wellspring in the Absolute into performance.

Saint and poet exist on a continuum in Sufism; any distinction is hazy. The great Sufi poet is regarded as a wali, even when he did not found a tariqa. In Cairo, 'Umar Ibn al-Farid has been venerated as a saint since shortly after his death, and is credited with karamat (miracles); his mawlid is celebrated today.<sup>26</sup> During "madad" sections, when he is calling out the names of the saints, Shaykh Yasin often names the great Sufi poets, such as Ibn al-Farid, Ibn 'Arabi, Rabi'a al-Adawiyya, and al-Hallaj. The saintly position of Sufi poets means that their work is regarded as qualitatively different from that of ordinary poets; it is imbued with ma'rifa, the gnosis of mystical illumination, and is authenticated by the baraka, accumulated meanings, and the authority of the author's spiritual silsila. For the ordinary secular poet there are no comparable sources of power.

Likewise, the wali is a poet. Poetry is attributed to the great saints of Egypt, such as Sayyid Ahmad al-Badawi, and Ibrahim al-Disuqi, and to members of the Ahl al-Bayt as well. Sometimes these saints composed poetry themselves; other times they inspired a spiritual disciple to do so. Many poems are received by a Sufi from his shaykh in a dream; he then attributes the poem to his shaykh, 'ala lisanihi ("on his tongue"), as an instance of shared feeling. This creative collaboration between shaykh and disciple glorifies the former, while bestowing authority on the latter.<sup>27</sup> In this way the attributed poetic output of a shaykh comprises far more than what he composed in his lifetime; rather, his spiritual force becomes an impetus for creation in his name among all of his spiritual descendants. Thus Ahmad al-Rifa'i (founder of the tariqa al-Rifa'iyya), who (apparently) never wrote any poetic works directly, inspired disciples (such as the 19th century Syrian scholar Abu al-Huda al-Sayyadi) to write in his name. The stature of the attributed author endows his putative words with tremendous affective power.

Despite the essential interiority and ineffability of mystical experience, the meanings and forms of Sufi poetry are universal within Sufism. For Sufi feeling is shared, through common training, common experience, and the continuity of tradition via the shaykh-disciple relationship. Poetic phrases and images expressing that feeling are borrowed from a common Sufi literary heritage. The Sufi poet is wholly original neither in experience, nor in

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<sup>25</sup>Such is the case for example with two modern and prolific shaykh-poets of Cairo: Shaykh Salih al-Ja'fari, and Shaykh Muhammad Madi Abu al-<sup>c</sup>Aza'im.

<sup>26</sup>Th. Emil Homerin, From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint: Ibn al-Farid, His Verse, and His Shrine. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1994).

<sup>27</sup>Another means of creative collaboration occurs through the poetic techniques of takhmis and tashtir, involving the interpolation of new material into an existing qasida while maintaining rhyme and meter; such poems are common in Sufism. See Schimmel As Through a Veil, 46.

language; he is inspired by common streams of rich tradition, flowing from his spiritual ascendants. In the other direction, following the linkages of Sufi mentoring, his language and feeling is likewise not only his own, for it is shared and reaffirmed by those who follow, in a line leading ultimately to the living shaykh of a tariqa and its muridin, or the munshid and listeners at a performance of Sufi inshad. Significantly, one often finds collections of Sufi poetry in which the attribution preceding a poem is anonymous, such as “li ahad al-afadil” (attributed to one of the learned), or even plural-anonymous, such as “li ba’d al-muhibbin” (attributed to some of the muhibbin). Authorship is thus explicitly distributed across the tradition, rather than located in any one person; meaning is thereby empowered by the tradition as a whole.<sup>28</sup>

The rich spiritual genealogy of the poet; shared authorship; inspired authorship; invocation of common Sufi tradition: together these factors provide Sufi poetry with a collective force unavailable to ordinary poetry: the force of shared and accumulated metaphysical experience. Because they express ultimate reality, meanings of Sufi poems are universal, perennial, infinitely rich. Shaykh Yasin says that the poetry of the saints is unlike other poetry, because it is always bikr (novel), revealing new meanings at every reading. This property results in part from the weight of the shared tradition which it expresses in such condensed form (“every word a world of meaning”, said one Sufi poet), although its meanings are comprehensible only for those who have already experienced the like. In a sense the poet is a corporate spokesperson for the entire tradition, encoding in language what others only feel with their hearts. This is one of the secrets of his words’ power for those subscribing to the Sufi world-view.

### B. The Sufi Poet and Mystical Experience

Yet, the poet is not merely the scribe of common experience and tradition. The poet writes in order to express veritable personal mystical experience, casting molten inner feeling--grief, joy, love, pain, or desire--in linguistic forms. The greatest Sufi poetry, that which expresses the experience of the advanced mystic, is the spontaneous linguistic expression of hal, a transient, non-cognitive state in which one is plunged into an awareness of Divine Realities, or is overcome with emotion resulting from such awareness. To be in hal implies the absence of the intellect, often together with the presence of strong emotions of love or longing. Synonyms for the poet’s hal include hayman (madly in love), walhan (mad with love), fi halat wajd (in a state of ecstasy), sakran (intoxicated), mushtaq (yearning), hazin (grieved).<sup>29</sup> The emotional force of the poet’s hal, his creative condition, is mysteriously imbued in his words as a non-objective quality, capable of tremendous affective power for the Sufi possessed of spiritual insight and sensitivity (shafafiyya). For the non-Sufi, cryptic and emotional language expressing mystical experience, especially shathiyat (ecstatic expressions of Divine Union<sup>30</sup>) sounds at best unintelligible, at worst heretical.

Many Sufis say that Sufi poets are not shu’ara’ (poets) at all, because true Sufi poetry arises from ilham (inspiration), as a verbal translation of hal, not out of studied craft (sina’ca), which requires intellect.<sup>31</sup> The Sufi poet is not so called by profession. The professional poet must rely upon craft in order to write--promptly, upon request--about subjects of little personal concern. But the Sufi poet is a mystic first; his poetry cannot exist apart from his

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<sup>28</sup>The critic may view this confusion over authorship as symptomatic of the ignorance which fuels emotion. Many fans of Shaykh Yasin, for example, wrongly believe that he sings primarily the work of ‘Umar Ibn al-Farid, and seem to derive emotional power from this belief. “And what if they were to be disabused of this belief?”, the critic asks. “Would the poetry then lose its affective power?” But such a critique betrays a misunderstanding of the notion of creation within the Sufi tradition. It is true that many poems attributed to Sidi ‘Umar cannot be located in his diwan (collection of poetic works), and are found instead in the diwans of other lesser poets. However, attributions of poetry in Sufism are intimately connected with belief in the interconnected network of Sufism as a whole, in which meanings and expressions are freely shared, and spiritual inspiration is transferable.

<sup>29</sup>In the Sufi treatises these words may have distinct technical definitions, but in practice they are used more or less synonymously.

<sup>30</sup>Carl W. Ernst Words of Ecstasy in Sufism. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).

<sup>31</sup>See Waugh, The Munshidin, 86 for a discussion of ilham and the application of this concept to inshad.

feeling and inspiration. Indeed, sina<sup>c</sup>a is denigrated in Sufism; the great Sufi poets composed naturally, without artifice, even without ego or intellect. Craft is a construction of the ‘aql, which is viewed as a veil upon Truth, while true expression emerges from the ruh, whose origin is Allah.

Thus, the Sufi poet exemplifies the principal Sufi value of sidq (truthfulness) in his writing. Unlike the professional poet, he can only write what he feels in his heart. This quality lends power to his poetry; as Sufis often say: "alladhi yakhruj min al-qalb yadhkhal al-qalb wa alladhi yakhruj min al-lisan yadhab ila al-udhn ("What comes from the heart enters the heart; what comes from the tongue [only] reaches the ear.")

Shaykh Yasin prefers to describe the great Sufi poets as "mukhatibin al-arwah bi al-arwah" (addressers of spirits via spirits) to shu<sup>c</sup>ara, because their words come from "the tongue of their hal" (kalamhum min lisan halhum), "the result of their feeling" (natijat ihsashum) translated into language. Such poetry is "khali min al-madda" (free of the material). Another Sufi explained that the great Sufi poets wrote from inspiration provided by mystical experiences: tajalliyat (theophanies), nuraniyat (Divine light). While writing, they were absent from themselves, as if madhub (dissolved) in water,<sup>32</sup> or fana' ma'a Allah (annihilated in the Divine).

Most Sufi poetry is about and inspired by love, and thus incorporates themes and images of secular love poetry. But Sufi love is spiritual; its source is intense longing for God, the Prophet Muhammad, the Ahl al-Bayt, and awliya'. As one Sufi poet told me, when the beloved is present, poetry is unnecessary. Poetry is born of a painful yearning (shawq) for the beloved, expressing the lover's grief (kadar) of separation. Since the beloved exists only in the spiritual realm (alim al-arwah), it is not possible to quench this shawq through physical unification. These emotions are expressed poetically as praise, love, or desire.

The most potent Sufi poetry arises from hal. For hal entails an excess of spiritual feeling (wajd), which may be painful to bear. The great Sufi poet is a mystic able to translate hal into poetry. The expressive act of composition, the communication of inner feeling to others, and the consequent socialization of that feeling, all help to relieve the pressure and pain of hal. Unexpressed, uncommunicated, hal can produce madness. Composition of Sufi poetry is thus spiritual expression and therapy more than art. One contemporary Sufi poet says that his inspiration is a superfluity of emotion, such as ziyadat al-shawq (excess of longing), or ziyadat al-safa' (excess of joy). Another told me that the expression of religious emotion for him is paramount; without release, one will surely burst. Shaykh Yasin told me that he writes poetry in order to awaken from hal, to free himself from it, only incidentally providing others with spiritual benefits. A contemporary Sufi shaykh said that when wajd (the ecstasy of mystical love) increases to a certain point, one must translate it (yutarjamu) into words. Thus, she explained, all the great Sufis have diwans (books of poetry); for "you cannot just sit with all of that wajd inside of you; by writing the Sufi yinaffis 'an halat al-wajd (vents his wajd)".<sup>33</sup>

The Sufi poet composes rapidly, from a sudden flood (fayd) of inspiration from God, obviating craft (sina'a). Subsequent revisions are usually minimal. Often he composes out of the vivid memory of a state of hal, or while in the state itself. In the latter case, he may utter the poem spontaneously, while disciples capture his inspiration on paper. Sufi poetry is capable of great rhapsody because the speed of its composition enables it to trace the ebbs and flows of the mystical-emotional experience, matrix of its inception. Thus 'Umar Ibn al-Farid is said to have entered into a state of trance, upon awaking from which he spontaneously uttered poetry.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, Shaykh 'Abd al-'Alim al-Nakhayli, a contemporary Sufi poet, writes a mystical love qasida in minutes, immediately following a deep spiritual experience.

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<sup>32</sup>The metaphor of dissolution or melting (dhawb) for the assimilation of one spirit into another, or into God, is common in Sufi parlance; the same trope is sometimes used in describing the emotional exchange of tarab.

<sup>33</sup>The emotional state which requires expression is not found only in the poet. Tarab, wajd, hal-all of these conditions require release, whose form depends on the capabilities of their bearer. Thus the poet writes, the munshid sings, some dance; others may fall unconscious, or exhibit violent or bizarre behavior.

<sup>34</sup> Homerin, *From Arab Poet to Muslim Saint*, 39.

Poetry written from hal may trigger hal in the spiritually sensitive listener, even though his intellect cannot comprehend it. The process of composing poetry the Sufi way is a prismatic refraction of feeling into word, resulting in affective, often enigmatic, language carrying with it the emotional power of the state out of which it was born. Such poetry can be difficult to interpret rationally, because its meaning is primarily non-intellective; Shaykh Yasin says “*kalam asyadna al-kubar yuhass wa la yufassar*” (the words of our great [Sufi] masters are felt, but not explained). Yet, spontaneous genesis in hal guarantees that this poetry will be felt by the spiritually sensitive reader or listener, who will thereby establish an intimate spiritual connection with the poet himself, since “that which comes from the heart enters the heart”.

Nor does the effect of such poetry diminish with familiarity or age. This is another remarkable attribute distinguishing the “words of hal” from ordinary poetry. Shaykh Yasin told me that because Sufi poetry is written in hal, its meanings are inexhaustible, always “bikr” (novel) at every hearing; the product of hal is infinitely rich, concentrated. Although many of these poems are very old, the words come from “*lisan halu*” (the tongue of his [the poet’s] hal), and so “you feel as though they were spoken to you directly”. Such poetry thus has the power to address everyone individually, across space and time, from heart to heart.

The Sufi values this poetry for its authentic, forceful, and spontaneous expression of hal, not for technical polish. Perfection in wazn (meter) and qafiya (rhyme) is not critical in Sufi poetry, (though some Sufi poets followed the rules of ‘arud (prosody) impeccably). A Sufi shaykh writing for his tariqa may compose technically imperfect poetry; so long as it expresses his hal, it will be treasured.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, ignorance of the formal rules of poetry is widely considered a touchstone of true ilham (inspiration), since craftsmanship can easily produce cleverly arranged words lacking in feeling.<sup>36</sup> As we shall see, the value placed on the expressive force of spiritual language in Sufi poetry, possibly at the expense of craft, precisely parallels the value placed on emotional expression in the munshid’s performance, even at the expense of vocal refinement. In the case of secular poetry, and secular singing, the situation is reversed.

#### VI. The Munshid, and his Relations to Poet and Listener

The Sufi poet’s status as wali and privileged position within the spiritual genealogies bestows authority upon his words, while his mystical experience saturates them with meaning. But it is left to the munshid<sup>37</sup> to give the poet a voice, making this meaning palpable and public, in performance. The two mystical artists, poet and munshid, exhibit structural parallels. The Sufi poet, mystic and writer, mediates Sufi reality (al-Haqiqa) and poetry, standing astride that colossal divide which separates mystical feeling from language. The munshid, mystic and singer, mediates language and listener via sonic expression, giving the poet’s mystical experience an affectively compelling voice so as to create tarab in performance. Alone, the poet quietly encodes his feeling in words, sending it to a future audience, of unknown extent in space and time. The munshid interprets that code sonically, according to his own belief and feeling, instantaneously producing a communal spiritual ecstasy, bounded by the space-time of performance, through social interaction with listeners. In so doing, he creates tarab--a socialized version of the poet’s inner feeling--even for those who do not understand the poet’s words.

Tarab requires relations of insijam (harmony) and tabadul al-shu’ur (exchange of feeling) among participants, or even the “melting” (dhawb) of individual identities into one. Tarab is an emotional resonance among participants, powerful enough to create wahdat al-shu’ur (unity of feeling). How is the munshid able to produce this profound transformation? And why is he better positioned to do so than the secular singer? The answer is to be found in the

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<sup>35</sup>Thus Schimmel comments upon one qasida of Rabi’<sup>a</sup> al-<sup>c</sup>Adawiyya with the words “the author’s feeling is stronger than her art” Schimmel, *As Through A Veil*, 18.

<sup>36</sup>Similarly, the illiteracy of the Prophet Muhammad is a touchstone for the authenticity of the Qur’anic Revelation.

<sup>37</sup>The discussion in this section concerns the professional Sufi munshid, performing outside the framework of the Sufi turuq. The tariqa munshid sings similar poetry, but operates under the authority of a shaykh within a more rigid ritual form which usually precludes a comparable buildup of tarab. On the other hand, the tariqa is an on-going social structure which does not depend exclusively upon dhikr performance for identity or emotional cohesiveness.

munshid's Sufi experience, especially "living with the poetry" (mu'aysha ma'a al-kalima); his expressivity and musicality; and his status as shaykh. We now examine each of these in turn.

#### A. The Munshid as Sufi

The professional Sufi munshid grows up immersed in a world brimming with Sufi thought, feeling, and practice. In mawalid, and later as a member of a Sufi tariqa, he imbibes the Sufi world-view together with its affective models; he learns to feel love for God, the Prophet, Ahl al-Bayt, awliya', and shaykhs. He performs Sufi practices, and attains to a mystical level in which he experiences the exultation of wajd, and the pain of shawq. He comes to know the Sufi luminaries--saints, shaykhs, poets---and to appreciate the weight and authority of their writings. He learns the poetic repertoire of many turuq. This diversity gives him more flexibility in singing to heterogeneous audiences outside the tariqa hadra, in which many Sufi orders may be represented.<sup>38</sup>

There is no formal training to detach music from context; the munshid learns his art aurally and imitatively, by attending mawalid and layali in which the established munshidin perform. Thus he absorbs inshad in rituals awash with Sufi feeling; the meaning of the text he learns is reinforced by the meanings of its context, a feature uncommon in secular music.<sup>39</sup> These experiences also help establish common emotional ground with other Sufis, including poets, and listeners.

He "lives with the poetry", internalizing it until he can feel its meaning as expressing his own experience. Shaykh Yasin stresses the importance of mu'aysha, saying that until he has lived a qasida internally, he cannot learn it or sing it. After he has "lived with it", when it accords with his inner spiritual state, he memorizes it effortlessly and sings it easily. The munshid need not be capable of providing a lucid explanation of the qasida's meanings. Rather, he understands it affectively, resonating with his experience; he senses its weight as a parasacred text, a crystallization of the numinous; he intuits the immense scope of meanings to which it alludes. His feelings are intensified by his appreciation and respect of the poet's status as advanced mystic, as saint, as shaykh, and as the affective voice of a vast tradition.

The great munshid possesses special talents, including ihsas (spiritual feeling), basira, and shafafiyya (spiritual insight). Such gifts may result from his religious training, or may have guided him into Sufism in the first place. Because of these spiritual gifts, he is deeply affected by poetry, and can sense the feelings of the poet from his words. He is also able to perceive the emotional state of his listeners, and can choose poetry addressing their spiritual conditions. These talents greatly facilitate his role as mediator between poet and listener.

Muhibbin credit Shaykh Yasin's spiritual capabilities to his tarbiya diniyya (religious upbringing). Shaykh Yasin's religious family inculcated in him proper Islamic values; he studied at the local al-Azhar secondary school for training in religious sciences and Arabic language, where he developed an appreciation for Sufi poetry. He attended countless mawalid and layali, and joined a Sufi order. Shaykh Yasin's father was a wali to whom are attributed many karamat; his mawalid has become a great yearly festival in his home village. This religious and Sufi upbringing is thought to be responsible for his ihsas, and hence his success in inshad, beyond mere musical talent or vocal gifts.

#### B. The munshid as expressive singer

But the professional munshid must also possess certain basic musical skills. Most importantly, he must have the ability to express feeling vocally by manipulating musical resources, such as timbre, dynamics, timing, rhythm, tempo, pitch, melody, and tonality. He is an experienced improviser, capable of adjusting musical and poetic dimensions of performance in real-time in order to maximize emotional rapport with the audience. This is the art of tarab, once widespread in secular Egyptian music, but today virtually lost.

He differs from the secular singer in that he sings poetry representing what he feels in his heart; his expression is truer because his ihsas, welling out of a permanent source in his inmost being, is truer. Unlike the secular singer, the

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<sup>38</sup>Waugh rightly describes this diversity of repertoire as an "ecumenical" requirement placed upon the munshid who sings outside of the turuq. See Waugh, The Munshidin, 74.

<sup>39</sup>Thus secular singers rarely learn their love songs while in love, or in a context in which love predominates; rather, love is an emotion feigned in performance.

munshid can always sing with perfect sidq (sincerity). As for the poet, Sufis say that “what emerges from the heart [of the singer] enters the heart [of the listener]; what comes from the tongue goes to the ear [only]”. If the munshid feels the words deeply in his heart, then he will be able to express this feeling in performance such that he reaches the hearts of others.

True ih̄sas is possible at every performance because the munshid is a Sufi believer; when he sings words that describe his beliefs, feeling always flows spontaneously. The munshid's song is thus always an aesthetic expression of an authentic mystical condition. The secular singer is more like an actor; at best, feeling may be artificially and temporarily synthesized to support expression, but even this much cannot be guaranteed, since there is no special belief system available to assure the correlation of words with feeling. Further, the Sufi singer performs within a religious context that reinforces and conditions his expressiveness, and to a sensitive audience of Sufi listeners searching for true feeling, many of whom can detect emotional forgery through their shafafiyya. His words not only describe his own state, but also the states of his listeners, creating emotional feedback that intensifies his performance. Finally, many Sufi poems overtly describe mystical practices such as music or dhikr, which are actually taking place during the munshid's performance: such words are objectively true. This self-referential aspect of inshad constitutes another level of sincerity, supplying emotional power.

The aesthetics of expression in Sufi inshad of public hadra is quite different from that of secular Arab music. In the latter (as in Western art song), a premium is placed upon vocal beauty and precision. A singer who maintains perfect vocal timbre and intonation, though lacking in emotional warmth, may be criticized as overly calculating, but will not be dismissed entirely. Sufi inshad exhibits just the opposite situation. In the context of dhikr, emotional expression is paramount, vocal purity and control secondary, because sidq (not craft), tabadul al-shu'ur, and emotional buildup are central to the ritual's purpose. Furthermore, since there is no presiding shaykh, the munshid is freed to take risks towards greater expressiveness, and he will not be criticized for an occasional slip in vocal timbre or intonation. It would be much worse for him to deliver a cool, calculated performance in perfect vocal form but lacking expression.<sup>40</sup> These priorities facilitate tarab.

### C. The Munshid as Shaykh, and his Relation to the Listeners

The great Sufi poet is regarded as a wali, because of the depth of feeling and ma'rifa (spiritual knowledge) he expresses in his poetry. Accordingly, he is addressed with the honorific “sayyidi” (my master). Correspondingly, the professional Sufi munshid is regarded as a shaykh, and the title “shaykh” is prefixed to his name, in honor of his mystical experience, and the depth of true feeling he expresses in his voice.

In Islam, the title “shaykh” denotes the ‘alim’ (religious scholar), muqri’ (Qur’an reciter), imam (prayer leader), khatib (preacher), and tariqa leader. The munshid is perceived to combine one or more of these statuses. Because of his extensive religious poetic repertoire, he may be regarded as an ‘alim’, particularly if he has studied at al-Azhar. He has often learned ‘ilm al-tajwid (the science of Qur’anic recitation), and may recite Qur’an in public (Shaykh Yasin does so). Sufi experience and broad knowledge of tariqa prayers and poetry lends him the status of Sufi leader; although he does not usually give the ‘ahd, he does attract dedicated followers, muhibbin who flock to hear him at mawalid and layali.

In public hadra, outside the authority of any one tariqa shaykh, the munshid is regarded as the imam of the hadra, and dresses accordingly, with turban, flowing robes, and rosary. In his texts, which may contain mawa‘iz (exhortations), and in his moving extemporaneous performance before a large and responsive audience, he resembles the khatib. Thus, the munshid is addressed as shaykh, and shown deference and respect.

This shaykh-status provides the munshid with self-confidence as an interpreter of Sufi poetry, and helps ensure expressive communication with his audience. Unlike the secular singer, the munshid is perceived as an expert in the subject about which he sings. Listeners respect him, for his spiritual knowledge, and for his spiritual feeling. Believing in him, they believe his words, and emotional expression. Just as the khatib moves and convinces his congregation at a Friday prayer, or the Sufi shaykh at a dars (teaching session), so does the munshid as shaykh move his audience while singing for hadra.

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<sup>40</sup>This contrast between the munshid and the secular singer of tarab is the counterpart of the contrast between the ordinary poet (who is primarily concerned with literary composition) and the Sufi poet (who is primarily concerned with expressing an experience).

The relation between munshid and listener is based upon more than respect, however. The munshid is a trusted and beloved figure of authority. He maintains personal relations with many of his listeners, and knows many more by name, or at least by sight, as he sees them again and again at mawalid and layali. They in turn love him in his various statuses as munshid, shaykh, and muhibb. These relations are augmented on the metaphysical plane through connections established via shafafiyya. Such relationships facilitate empathy between performer and listeners, and thus the free flow of emotion in public hadra, which contributes to the rise of tarab, and serves the feedback and control mechanisms of performance, as we shall shortly observe.

#### D. The Relation between Poet and Munshid

The munshid is ideally situated to establish a close relationship with the poet and his words, one which will facilitate the development of tarab in performance. He understands the poet's mystical feeling via his poetry, living the words (mu'aysha ma'a al-kalam) in order to align his emotional state with the poet's. A Sufi poet explained the relationship between poet and munshid as follows: "The munshid must be completely familiar with the ahwal of the poet, his power, and his methods in poetry. He must know that the poet is truthful, and that his feelings are truthful; that his feelings come from the heart, and not from poetic craft (sina<sup>c</sup>a shi<sup>c</sup>riyya)." If he can do this, then his singing will be imbued by tarab from the poet.

Personal relationships between munshid and poet are also possible in the Sufi context. Many munshidin request living Sufi poets to compose qasidas for them, just as in secular music. However, in the context of Sufism, in which relations between the muhibbin are based on love and mutual spirituality, the munshid and poet often are emotionally much closer than a mere professional partnership would allow. The poet may teach the munshid his poetry, perhaps recording it for him. He may coach the munshid in singing it, and accompany him to layali, standing by him and encouraging him with exclamations and praise. He may even be the munshid's shaykh.

On a more ethereal plane, Sufism provides the possibility of intimate spiritual relationships across gulfs of time and space between munshid and poet since the spirits of Sufi saints are "free" after death to travel as they please. In Egypt, the precise meaning of poetry is commonly said to be in the batin al-sha<sup>c</sup>ir (interior of the poet), and thus generally inaccessible. Sufism has produced some of the most recondite poetry of the Arabic language, while at the same time enabling forms of spiritual insight (basira) that reveal its meanings. Thus, one may access the poet's hidden meanings via direct spiritual connections with him, or through an intermediary. Such connections sometimes take the form of dreams, visions, or even physical encounters. Thus one shaykh affirms his ability to contact 'Umar Ibn al-Farid directly, in order to obtain explications of his poems. The munshid may develop an intimate spiritual relation with the poet whose work he is singing, to the point that his listeners feel that they are hearing the voice of the poet himself.

### VII. Poet, Munshid, and Tarab in Hadra

In the ideal performance, the munshid becomes the channel through which the poet's voice is heard in hadra. In order for this to occur, there must be unity of feeling among poet, munshid, and listener, a dhawb (melting) of emotional boundaries, an emotional exchange that is the quintessence of tarab. We now examine how this unity is constructed in performance.

#### A. The Adaptive Quality of Sufi Performance

Part of the role of Sufi inshad in hadra is to intensify the emotional atmosphere. Through performative decisions regarding poetry, pacing, tempo, tonality, and many other variables, the munshid creates and molds emotion in hadra; he feels and expresses emotion, and his listeners empathetically feel with him. He must also adapt his performance to the prevailing mood according to feedback provided by listeners, in the form of gesture, movement, or audible responses. Such adaptation is possible because Sufi inshad is improvisatory (hence inherently flexible), because listeners may express themselves freely, and because communicative channels from listeners to munshid exist. Furthermore, the emotional feedback from listeners to munshid not only provides the latter with a means of making performance decisions, but also is the tabadul al-shu'ur (exchange of feeling) required for the production of tarab.

Indeed, this cycle of feedback and adaptation is also part of the tarab dynamic in secular music. However, due to commercial factors, contemporary secular music is seldom performed live, and improvisation is downplayed in favor of predictable and repeatable melodies, which are quicker in rehearsal, and more efficient in the studio. Furthermore, musical aesthetics drawn from western classical music has contributed to audience passivity, an emphasis on precomposed and notated music in fixed arrangements, and a general decline in the authority and control of the singer in favor of the composer, conductor, and arranger. All of these factors, inhibiting musical flexibility and performer-audience interactions, have contributed to the demise of tarab in secular music.

Tarab in Sufi music, by contrast, has remained relatively impervious to commercial and western influences.<sup>41</sup> It is not enough to point to historical factors which tend to insulate religious traditions from rapid change, for there is always some change, and indeed Sufi music has changed considerably, even since the late 60s (before which there is a dearth of recorded evidence). What is striking is that this music has not changed in such a way as to preclude tarab (as has the bulk of secular music). The reason must be located in the fact that this music has a particular religious purpose in the non-tariqa dhikr--the buildup of intensive nashwa ruhiyya, spiritual emotion--for which it requires attributes of live performance, flexibility, improvisation, feedback, and adaptation, and these are the enabling attributes of tarab in Arab music.

The munshid enjoys wide improvisational flexibility with regard to his text, which he effectively constructs in performance (albeit on a macro scale, by choosing and arranging lines from various poems in his repertoire), in response to feedback from his listeners, enabling him to adapt to the circumstances of the moment (who is present, the purpose of the event, the general mood) in order to build and focus emotional intensity. One Sufi told me that the true mutrib always sings words which he or she feels; this is what distinguishes the mutrib from the mere mughanni (singer). However the fixed texts of secular music render this process more difficult. It is easier for a singer to bring words and feeling together when he completely controls his text, as in Sufi music.

### B. The Influence of Performance Context

The emotional level at a performance of Sufi inshad is much higher than the typical secular event, in part because of the context of performance. Public hadra performances display an especially festive atmosphere, replete with milling crowds. At mawalid, the sacred atmosphere is more palpable, and performances usually take place next to the saint's maqam (shrine). The words of the Sufi poet are both energized and illustrated by the religious environment in which they are presented; one feels their meanings by reference to contextual experience, not merely in a literary-musical sense. Participants are sensitive to this spiritual atmosphere, and the informality of the event allows everyone to experience and express freely, thus adding to the overall level of energy.

Performance context makes the singer receptive to the poet's words, often putting him into a hal similar to that in which the words were engendered. Shaykh Yasin says that he obtains ihsas from specific individuals present, the crush of the crowds, the presence of shrines radiating baraka, the purpose of the event, all of which exerts a special ta'thir (influence) upon him. A mawlid has greater ta'thir, he says, because of the sacredness of time and place, and because of the spiritual presence of the wali. This context helps him to prepare for the layla emotionally. The munshid's mental state as he prepares to sing resembles the poet's as he prepares to write; he is awash in feeling. He is now ready to "compose" his text.

### C. Munshid, Listener, Poetry, and Feeling in Performance

When he climbs onto the stage, the singer is in a particular emotional and spiritual state. As he performs, he observes audience feedback, mustering all of his powers of spiritual insight to glean their emotional-spiritual conditions. He brings to the performance a large memorized poetic reservoir: many poems of Sufi poets, old and new, on a wide variety of themes. Drawing on this repertoire, he spontaneously constructs a text that expresses his own state, while addressing the state he detects in his listeners, in order to make emotional contact, and create harmony in the layla.

But once he selects his text, sung poetry produces an emotional effect upon him, and upon his listeners. The munshid tries to feel the meaning of his poetry as deeply as possible, so that he can sing with greater sidq. Other participants, too, are moved by his words, which are imbued with the hal of the great poets who wrote them. The emotional-spiritual states of participants consequently shift, inducing changes in feedback from listener to singer. One can only broadly outline this complex dialectic between performed texts, and emotional states of participants; both texts and states are continually in flux, and influencing each other. This feedback dynamic relies upon the flexibility and improvisatory nature of Sufi inshad. By carefully manipulating the improvisatory variables at his disposal--especially poetry--a munshid can maximize the degree of shared feeling among participants.

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<sup>41</sup>The active business in the recording and sales of Sufi inshad on cassette tapes has only tended to promote the primary role of this music in live performance, whereas the dominance of the cassette tape industry in popular music has led to the virtual disappearance of the live concert. For Sufi purposes, live musical performance is always required.

Shaykh Yasin claims that he never selects his poetry prior to performance; rather, all of his words emerge naturally from the ihsas of the moment, that they are imposed upon him (yufrad 'alayh) out of his feeling. Due to the improvisatory flexibility of Sufi inshad, he doesn't have to sing a text he doesn't feel. Even within a poem, he can repeat or skip lines of poetry as he desires.

Textual improvisation leads to the fragmentation of Sufi poems in performance, which further accentuates the priority of feeling over understanding within this music. While Sufism generally values the qalb (heart) over 'aql (mind), many dimensions of Sufism are nevertheless both theoretical and articulate; indeed, some Sufi poetry exhibits a narrative line. However, in public hadra the goal is emotional expression, communication, and unity. Towards that end the munshid crushes his repertoire into its constituent elements—lines, phrases, words, even phonemes—then brandishes these fragments as emotional stimuli, often singing only a line or two from one poem, before moving to another. At times he may repeat one phrase or a single word over and again.

He thus concentrates attention upon individual thoughts, images, concepts, and sounds, at the expense of narrative flow and logic. The comprehension of Sufi poetry, difficult enough for the intellect when presented whole, is here turned over wholly to ihsas, the affective interpretive faculties of the heart. As Shaykh Yasin has remarked, it doesn't matter if no one understands the words; the jawhar (essence) of the hadra is in ihsas, tabadul al-shu'ur, and shafaiyya.

As a result of inshad and dhikr, participants may enter hal—including the munshid. According to one shaykh, hal provides Shaykh Yasin with inspiration (ilham) and creativity (ibda'). While in hal, there is no fasl (disjunction) between tongue and heart; he sings only according to what he feels, said another. Without hal, he sounds like any one of his lesser imitators. A Sufi poet stressed that the munshid must be absent from his self (yaghib 'an nafsu) while performing:

Hal is an absorption (indimaj) into the dhikr and into God; when one listens in the dhikr, becoming lost (tawhan), or withdrawing from the people (yaghib 'an al-nas), then one may enter hal. In hal one is always occupied with God (inshighal billah), who brings upon one states (ahwal) according to His nature. God is the Basit (The Expander), and the Qabid (The Contracter), and so brings upon one occupied with Him the hal of bast (joy) and qabd (pain). Hal occurs when you think of the beauty of creation (al-kawn), and of the Beloved; then that beauty overwhelms you, and you withdraw with God.

Hal is a direct connection to God, ultimate source of all true meaning and feeling. The words a munshid sings may be triply imbued with hal: by the poet who wrote them from hal, by the munshid who sings them in hal, and by the listener whose hal the munshid addresses. If the munshid can unite these three ahwal in performance, then the level of tarab will be exceptionally high. But this mystical source of tarab is unavailable to the secular singer.

#### D. The Role of the Poet in Hadra Performance

The poet may play an active role in the performance of Sufi inshad, by virtue of his relation to the munshid. This role is most evident in the case of living poets, who may attend hadra and encourage the singer. Several muhibbin reported that Shaykh Yasin always sang most powerfully when one of his poets, Shaykh 'Abd al-'Alim, was standing beside him. The poet could inspire Shaykh Yasin using physical channels of communication, in addition to their spiritual rapport.

Even a deceased poet may play an active role in performance, because the 'alim al-arwah (world of spirit) is not bound by the physical laws of the visible universe. The chanting of dhikr, the great concentration of muhibbin, and mystical poetry, may attract spiritual presences, including the poet-saint. Some say that the poet inspires the munshid with the inner (batini) meaning of his words, so that he sings with greater impact. Shaykh Yasin affirms that to sing a poet's words is implicitly to ask for his presence. He performs at the annual mawlid of the great Sufi poet 'Umar Ibn al-Farid, invariably focusing upon the latter's poetry. One murid told me that Shaykh Yasin always gives a powerful performance at this mawlid, for Sidi Umar gives him material and inspiration. If Sidi Umar weren't with him, he wouldn't be able to perform at all.

#### VIII. Conclusion

Out of both possibility and necessity, informal Sufism outside the purview of the turuq has engendered a music of great emotional power. Because its world-view is so richly saturated with feeling; because it idealizes relationships of love, empathy, and spiritual proximity between persons; because it emphasizes metaphysical means of non-cognitive communication, Sufism as a commonly-held spiritual system is ideally situated to provide the basis for emotional development and interaction in performance, and hence the affective exchange, resonance, and unity of feeling among performers and listeners upon which tarab depends. Secular Egyptian music, lacking access to a system

of belief and practice of comparable scope and depth, is consequently unable to generate performances of equal affective power.

At the same time, because informal Sufism is a system of belief, feeling, and practice largely devoid of permanent social structures or explicit doctrines, there is necessarily an emphasis on shared affect and emotional harmony--tarab--as the principal means of constructing social unity in performance. Thus the Sufi context and purpose of this music renders tarab both more possible, and more necessary.

In this chapter, we have traced the role of poetry in the generation of tarab for inshad performances in informal Sufism. The Sufi poet, at once author and saint, is a luminary firmly positioned within the unbroken chains of Sufism, whose words, rich with shared sentiments, bear upon the reader with the full weight of the tradition behind them. At the same time, the poet writes out of his own subjective mysticism, and his words, sincere even if not always technically perfect, communicate the affective impact of that experience forcefully to those who have tasted the like.

The munshid, at once singer and shaykh, shares the Sufi world of the poet, and so comes to taste his experience, live his words, and thereby establish a relationship of mutual feeling with him. His spiritual gift of ihzas facilitates intuitive understanding of poetry and poet, and the states and needs of listeners; his status as shaykh provides him with authority and power in performance; his musical gifts enable him to express the affective essence of Sufi poetry in musical sound. The munshid is thus ideally positioned as a mediator of feeling between poet and listener in performance. Moving himself and his listeners with the poetry he selects, and selecting poetry according to his hal and feedback from listeners, he carefully tunes the performance, seeking that elusive frequency of emotional resonance among poet, munshid, and listener, that melting point at which individual boundaries dissolve away, leaving the emotional unity which is tarab.

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Waugh, Earl H. 1989. *The Munshidin of Egypt: Their World and Their Song*. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press.

Sound recordings:

A large number of commercial tapes are available only in Egypt; the visitor need only ask for “inshad Sufi” or “madih nabawi” at cassette kiosks around the country. Two CDs of professional Sufi inshad are widely available. However, the listener must bear in mind that these performances have been specially formulated and recorded for the western market:

al-Tuhami, Shaykh Yasin. *The Magic of the Sufi Inshad: Sheikh Yasin al-Tuhami*. 1998. [Two compact discs.] Long Distance 3039552 ARC 338. [Sufi Inshad, representing middle Egypt]  
Barrayn, Shaykh Ahmad. *Sufi Songs*. Long Distance 592323. [Sufi inshad, representing southern Egypt]