

## Why everyone's Sufi now

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Whirling dervishes: poster boys of Sufism. (Daniele Chikhani)

Sufism's exact meaning is hard to define, but its appeal is easy to see. The approach to spirituality is considered in much of the world, particularly East Asia, to be a version of Islam. But it is interpreted by many - particularly Western spiritualists - as a non-sectarian path of tolerance, love and closeness to God. Its traditions include music, poetry written by many of its saints and mystical figures and, of course, the iconic whirling dancers who believe that in their ecstatic frenzy they get ever-closer to God.

A non-sectarian, non-aggressive religious approach is something that could well appeal to Lebanon's jaded population, hence, perhaps, growing local interest in Sufism.

Daniele Chikhani, a photographer who has worked closely with whirling dervishes, recently led a discussion about Sufism during a forum at Beirut's Galerie+10 last month. Speaking to Now Lebanon, she illustrates Sufi philosophy with a quotation by a Sufi poet: "Like a huge mirror has been thrown on the earth and broken in small pieces and we are each a piece of this mirror. And this mirror is God, and you are a part of God and I am a part of God... We are not the same shape, but we are pieces of this whole mirror."

"This is the meaning of unconditional love," she says, "to recognize that you and all other human beings are the same." Unconditional love is a key tenet of Sufism, she adds.

Chikhani herself first became interested in Sufism when working in Paris, when she met practicing members and became "touched by what they were doing."

She has photographed whirling dervishes extensively and attended the annual gathering of Sufis at Konya, in eastern Turkey. In Konya, in the first two weeks in December, Sufis from all over the world celebrate the death, or the "marriage with God" of Sufi founder and poet Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi.

The dervishes represent only one of the many tarika, or paths of Sufism.

"It is easy to take pictures, but less easy to capture the soul," she says, of her photography. The exhibition of these photos was shown internationally, as well as in Lebanon. Chikhani reports a good reception. "To tell you the truth, I think the world needs love... no, is thirsty for it," she says.

Gallery manager, Maya Hamdan, says Sufism is a currently a popular topic and there is, "a trend and more and more people are interested in it." Hamdan suggests that the combination of philosophy and religious

components draw people toward it.

Sufism also emphasizes the importance of service. "Why service? Because a Sufi is at peace with himself, he has nothing to prove," Chikhani says. This philosophy emphasizes a path which, after a great deal of discipline and hard work, leads to a place where there is no ego or, at least, where the ego is no longer able to control of our actions.

A Sufi's focus becomes, "to learn more, criticize less, to be a better man. So if someone asks him something, he will be the first one to answer."

The ego is associated with the ultimate fear, death, which is why Chikhani says Sufis believe it has such power. "Fear stops you doing 90 percent of the things you want to do. When you get rid of your ego you get rid of your fear," she says.

There are no magic steps, however, to reach this path. "Anything you want to get rid of needs to be worked on. The question is not how, but am I going to start or not?" she adds.

Musician Mazen Al Sayed was the inspiration behind the 'Forms of Oriental Sufi Music' concert held last week at the American University of Beirut. His Indian Tabla drum, ouds and Nisreen Hmiedan's haunting voice brought Sufi traditions and philosophy alive for the large audience.

Having worked for two years in Paris as an investment banker, Al Sayed decided to leave the corporate world and return to Lebanon six months ago to explore that "something else" that was driving him. He has turned to music to give voice to his poetry and other things that he feels cannot be expressed in words.

Musical performances, however, are not about spreading Sufism itself. "My concern is not about Sufism itself. My concern is about the feeling, the ideas... there are some questions I want to share that are not necessarily to do with Sufism," Al Sayed insists.

Such concerns relate to the goals of encouraging "peace, inner peace and harmony and seeing life under the light of bigger things," he says.

Event organizer, Ahli Halwa, agrees. Having run concerts inside universities for the past six years, he feels music is important for its own sake, and as a distraction, so as "not to let students think about politics all the time."

Sufism certainly offers a refuge from the swirling winds of Lebanese confessional politics, yet it is also something that Al Sayed insists resonates with most people.

"Everyone is trying to reach the same thing. Sufism is the expression of this essence in a particular, historic, geographic circumstance," he says.

"When I say Sufism, when we say it is Sufi music, we do not mean in its strict Islamic sense, we mean this quest for the absolute, the quest for direct contact with reality... this quest for truth is somehow an essence and it takes form differently following the circumferences. Sufism of the 11th century, is not, in my sense, could not be the Sufism of nowadays," he says.

Karim Shamseddine, a member of the audience who was --aware of Sufism but was attending a Sufi-inspired concert for the first time, said he was moved by the spiritual lyrics and the sense that "you have to surrender to the music to like it."

As he feels a strong pull to return to Islam's "old ways", he says he is happy to see an alternative to more fundamentalist Islam. "I hope it takes off, it is a wonderful experience to have a goal to be one with God, abstract morals and a deep awareness," he added.

But, despite the religious roots of the practice, many separate the spiritual path from faith. "I'm not a Muslim, but I'm a Sufi. But who cares?" says Chikhani.

