

Thesis Proposal Materials

- I. Abstract
- II. Description of Study
- III. Description of Methodology
- IV. Chapter Outline
- V. Working Bibliography

Abstract:

This paper focuses on the teachings of the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi Order. The emphasis of the research is twofold: 1. It will attempt to look critically at the normative approaches that have been taken with regard to studying Sufism in the United States; 2. It will be a descriptive analysis of the teachings of this Sufi group in order to synthesize a study of the philosophy, theosophy, theology, and history of the group as it stands today. The critique of current approaches will be informed by the results of the analysis.

Description of Study:

The Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi Order has been mentioned briefly in several survey studies on Sufism and Islam in the United States. Unlike many of the other groups which are discussed in these studies, little in-depth research has been done regarding this group. In the case of two separate, but related studies by Marcia Hermansen the data on this group is lacking considerably in depth and scope.¹ While the group is not necessarily directly misrepresented by these studies, the paucity of in-depth research into their teachings and practices makes for a weak example when attempting to categorize Sufi orders.

In the case of the first study by Hermansen, a dichotomy is drawn between “perennial” and “hybrid” movements. This is done in an attempt to explain the practices and teachings of Sufi orders in their context in the United States. The “perennial” movements are described as Sufi movements which have little or no Islamic emphasis. The “hybrid” movements are described as “those movements which identify more closely

¹ Hermansen, 1997, “In the Garden of American Sufi Movements: Hybrids and Perennials” and 2000, “Hybrid Identity Formations in Muslim America: The Case of American Sufi Movements”

with an Islamic source or content.” The hybrid movements are described as being generally led and founded by immigrants.²

Particularly troubling about this depiction of American Sufi movements presented here is that further discussion of the categories seems to suggest that Islam or Sufism must be hybridized specifically for application in the United States. Setting aside for the time being the category of “perennial” Sufism, it is assumed by Hermansen that the categories of “Islamic” and “American” are somehow mutually exclusive and so a new “hybrid” form of Sufism combining the two is created.

This hearkens to Orientalist scholarship and perpetuates the misinterpretation of the “Islamic World” as being somehow separate from the “West.” This is also an example of the conflation of the cultural forms found in the geographic Middle-East and Islamic practices to form a conceptual “Islamic World.”³ The geographic location and culture becomes then the main descriptor for this paradigm. If a phenomenon is identified as Islamic and exists in the Middle-East, then it is a native part of the cultural landscape. On the other hand, if a phenomenon is identified as Islamic and exists in the United States it is considered foreign.

In this manner, the Islamic world is defined only as the geographic area in which there is a Muslim majority population or in which the perceived Islamic cultural forms appear in art, architecture, food, etc.⁴ On the contrary, the Islamic world could be defined as any place where Muslims have settled or where people have converted to Islam, just as with any religion. By either definition, American locales such as Dearborn, Michigan are certainly parts of the Islamic world, as well as any place where there are mosques and halal food shops.

These definitions and categorizations are important to keep in mind when considering Sufi movements in the United States because there is such a wide variety of practice and philosophy among those who identify as Sufi. It should not be taken for granted, therefore, that we can simply label a group as either Islamic-American, or

2 Hermansen, 1997, 155

3 Clearly Islamic practice has a great deal of influence over the culture in Middle-Eastern (and Central and South-Asian) localities. I would be ignorant if I were currently living in the Middle-East and did not recognize this as Ramadan approaches. Islam also has its geographic origins in the Middle-East. However, we would not propose that the various brand of Christianity practiced throughout the United States are somehow not sufficiently American because they are necessarily Christian, or that they cannot be truly Christian because they have absorbed American cultural values. These categories are apples and oranges. It would behoove us to simply do away with false conceptual locations such as the Christian and Muslim worlds.

4 See Hodgson's coinage of *Islamdom*, in the Introduction to *The Venture of Islam*.

American but non-Islamic, and be done with it. This would imply that there can be no Sufi movement which can be called indigenous or native to the United States because they must have been imported from some more appropriate cultural context.⁵

The Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi Order is one example to the contrary. There is an anecdote quoted by Shaykha Fariha al-Jerrahi—current leader of the order—in which Shaykh Muzaffer Ozak—the late leader of the Halveti-Jerrahi order—talks about the adaptation of Islam to different cultures:

“He said that Islam is like pure water and it takes the form and color of the bottles it's put into. He meant that we didn't have to impose any cultural form on America. It will simply blossom from within, and that is what we are seeing happening.”⁶

This sentiment has been theorized about in academic circles as well with regard to the cultural origin of certain practices such as the veiling of women and Islamic scholarly and legal traditions.⁷ The order was brought to the United States by the late Grand Shaykh of the Halveti-Jerrahi order from Istanbul. Shaykh Muzaffer made a habit of traveling around the world initiating dervishes into the order and setting up satellite groups. One group based in New York City, took on a life of its own. They began calling itself the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi Order after the deaths of both Shaykh Muzaffer—also known as Shaykh Ashki al-Jerrahi—and his successor in whose charge he left the group, Shaykh Nur al-Anwar al-Jerrahi—also known as lex Hixon.

This group was originally and is still primarily comprised of American Muslim converts from all social and economic ranges, as well as religious backgrounds. They have, as the current head of the order, a woman called Shaykha Fariha Fatima al-Jerrahi who was given transmission of spiritual authority during the same ceremony as was her predecessor, Shaykh Nur. Since her ascension to the position of head of the order in the 1994, she has done a considerable amount of work in the fields of social and interfaith outreach and *da'wa*—missionary outreach. They also, like many other groups, use very innovative approaches for generating interest in the group, Sufism, and Islam in general and in communicating their teachings to their dervishes around the United States. One particular innovation that drew them some attention was the establishment of a dervish group in a maximum security prison in Portland, Oregon. The initiation of dervishes

5 I have deliberately avoided mentioning the Nation of Islam here because they are not a Sufi movement. Also those Muslims who have come out of the Nation of Islam have typically taken up a Sunni practice that is strongly ideologically influenced by Salafis, which rules out Sufism for many. Hermansen, 1997, 166

6 Gooch, 345

7 For more on this, see Leila Ahmed, 1992, *Women and Gender in Islam*.

initially occurred over the phone and was conducted by Shaykha Fariha.

A failure of any study to categorize such groups occurs when there is a trend toward imposing an external theoretical model on a system that is well-mapped and defined from within. To elaborate this point: Hermansen makes the statement that there are numerous ways to

“impose conceptual order on the proliferation of Sufi groups in America today. For example, one could list and survey the numerous mystical orders or *tariqas* imported from Muslim societies. As an alternative, one could try to surmise a pattern of generational or chronological development of these groups in terms of style, orientation, and membership.”⁸

The effect of her second suggestion is to impose, as she says, a model that does not necessarily or sufficiently describe, in factual terms, the object of her study. In defining Sufi orders in this way, Hermansen is applying a classification system based on cultural factors and disregarding the classification system that already exists for Sufi orders: that of the *tariqas*, *ta'ifas*, and *silsilas*.⁹ This would seem to be the result of the above mentioned assumption of the mutual exclusivity of “American” and “Islamic.” She is here again implying that as soon as Sufism sets foot on American soil, so to speak, that it is no longer the same Sufism as before.

This group has come to employ what they refer to as “traditional” Sufi rituals and teachings making subtle adjustments along the way.¹⁰ They have managed also to not lose focus on what they define as the primary precept of Sufism and Islam that *la ilaha ila-Allah*—there is no god but Allah.¹¹ This is a central feature of their discourse and rituals. They are still also very much considered to be a part of their larger order, the Halveti-Jerrahis, as Shaykh Nur pointed out in 1992 that they “continue to operate[...] with the blessing, guidance, and permission of the present Grand Shaykh of the Jerrahi Order, Sefer Effendi of Istanbul.”¹² The most striking thing about them, however, is that non-Muslims can be initiated into the order, and begin studying the teachings of the order and participating in *dhikr*¹³. This appears to be a radical break, but only when

8 Hermansen, 1997, 155

9 These are the lines by which Sufi orders have been classically identified, *tariqa* meaning “way” or “path,” *ta'ifa* meaning “branch,” and *silsila* meaning “chain.” These are, respectively, the Sufi order, the branch, and the chain of transmission of spiritual authority.

10 Hixon, 1993, viii

11 Sheikh Muzaffer Ozak, *The Unveiling of Love*, “Author's Preface”

12 Hixon, 1993, viii-ix. As a side note, the quote continues here: “The history of our community foundation will make a significant study sometime in the future.”

13 I was fortunate enough to be a casual observer at a Nur Ashki Jerrahi *dhikr* after which two non-Muslims were initiated.

looked at normatively. From the point-of-view of the teachings of the order, there is no problem with this particular practice. Rather, it is indicated that this is a specific adaptation to “the West” where it is not as easy to follow *sharia* law without having a great deal of conviction to support adherence. It is therefore the intent of the leadership of the order to give initiates “a taste of the Honey” which will cause them to embrace Islam eventually as part of their initiation into Sufism.¹⁴

This particular point comes under much scrutiny when dealing with Sufi orders, as most of those which initiate non-Muslims would be considered “perennialists” in normative categorizations. In this case of this particular innovation, it still has the purpose of *da'wa* which, for the the leaders and adherents of the order, is their responsibility.¹⁵

It has always been the case that Sufis have traveled the known world spreading religion, engaging individual spiritual seekers and leaving in their wake new communities of Sufis in places where Sufis did not exist before. It has always been the case that the Sufi orders split, that groups branch off, or that several branches of different orders may come together to form a new order.¹⁶

For Sufis, information, teachings, and practices are passed down from teacher to student. The particular teachings and practices may change over time as the students mature into teachers themselves and as an order expands its membership to new locales, but if the chain of transmission remains unbroken, the current leaders of a given order are regarded as legitimate. This provides, for scholars, a simple way to trace the pedigree of any particular Sufi. It also provides a way to identify missing links in the chain and in doing so, to evaluate the legitimacy of any Shaykh—or Shaykha, in this case—who claims to hold spiritual authority.

The information passed through this chain, not just the chain itself, can be looked

The ceremony was in no way sterilized of Islamic formulaic speech or symbolism. The initiates faced East and took four protracted steps toward the appointed officiant, who sat kneeling with his back toward Mecca. The ceremony contained a great deal of referenced to Qur'an and the Hadith and included a recitation of Qur'an.

14 In a talk on Sufism in 2004 by Shaykha Fariha, the c, urrent leader of the order, she indicated that the reason why non-Muslims are encouraged to join the order is that the “Honey” of Islam is the study of Sufi philosophy, which is considered by this order to be the second of four steps toward complete union with God, the first step being *sharia* or Islamic law. She indicates that beginning with the second step does not mean skipping it altogether. Rather, it is understood that it will encourage those in “the West” to take up Islamic law as part of their practice once they begin to have a sense of understanding of the reasons behind it. This talk is available for mp3 download at <http://nurashkijerrahi.org/events>.

15 Hixon, 1993, 1

16 For a very elaborate depiction of this, see chapters 2 and 3 in Trimmingham, 1971.

at as another mode of legitimation for these groups. Shaykh Muzaffer Ozak was relatively prolific in his authorship and teaching. He authored a good deal of books on Sufi practice and Islamic law—all of which have been translated into English. He also managed to travel around the world establishing a foothold for the Halveti-Jerrahi order in places far from those in which the order has its roots.

The teachings of Shaykh Muzaffer have utilized in a slightly different way by the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi Order than they have by another more conservative branch of the Jerrahi order existing in the United States—also established by Shaykh Muzaffer. This does not mean, however, that the more conservative of the two branches should be looked at as somehow more Islamic than the other. They both derive the same legitimacy from the chain of spiritual authority of which their leaders are both a part. These two branches have frequent contact, and are in no way opposed to each other. Islam is clearly not homogeneous: there have been and are variations of Islam practiced around the world throughout the history of the religion. Due to these particular modes of leadership succession and the branching of Sufi organizations, to impose another system of classification so far removed seems unsuitable.

The approach that will be used for this study will differ greatly from the normative approach which has just been described. Rather than looking at surface descriptions of the group and picking the bones of previous scholarship, it will look at the data that has been produced by the this group of its own accord in order to draw out recurring and main themes and contradictions in the works of the individual contributors as well as the entire body of work between the contributors and over time. This will allow for a rich explanation of the practices and teachings of this group and help to bring this data to light in academic circles so that it may be used in future studies of the sort described above.

Description of Methodology:

To treat data in such a wide range of formats, an innovative approach is indicated. In this case, text written by three authors, interviews and rituals recorded in both audio and video formats, lectures and sermons both recorded and transcribed must all be viewed as one body of data.¹⁷ The vast majority of the text and recording has one thing in common, however: information is presented anecdotally. There are stories associated with any of the teachings being illuminated and they are used cohesively to explain and demonstrate Sufi practice and Islamic law, according to this particular lineage.

The analysis of these data will be conducted in two successive steps: first, a sample will be selected from the texts and transcriptions of interviews, lectures, and sermons for an introductory content analysis. Whole chapters from the books and similarly sized sections of the transcriptions of the recordings will be taken for use in the sample. The sample will be comprised of approximately fifteen different excerpts. This sample will be coded and evaluated using a thematic content analysis approach in order to draw out themes and patterns within the sample.¹⁸

After the initial content analysis, the themes and patterns will be used in a survey analysis of all of the texts and recordings in order to identify trends within the corpus. The trends identified will likely include: thematic repetitions, deviations, and contradictions, increasing and decreasing prevalence of and emphasis on certain themes over time. This will allow for the synthesis of a comprehensive yet straightforward descriptive analysis of the teaching of the order.

This particular phenomenological research method is based upon the methodological theory of Clark Moustakas. His books *Phenomenological Research Methods* and *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications*

There are a number of reasons selecting such an approach, but the primary reasons are time and convenience, as well as the strength of the model for handling these types of data. There is such a large body of data to be analyzed that to pick through all of it with a fine toothed comb and code thousands and thousands of pages of text and transcripts would take an exceedingly long time and lead to very little more than a repetition of the same findings *ad infinitum*.¹⁹

17 For the purposes of this project I will set aside discussion of ritual, except to illuminate descriptions of practice outlined in the other sources.

18 This evaluation will be tested against itself by conducting coding validations with several research assistants, or with the use of a Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis tool, such as nVivo.

19 *ad nauseum*

The particular strength of a thematic/phenomenological research model such as this one is that it eliminates the need for such nit-picking by training the researcher in what to look for during the first part of the analysis and then simply applying what has been learned during the second part of the analysis. Due to the firsthand, first-person nature of this material, this approach is again particularly well suited as these types of research models are designed for social sciences research—often with interview and survey data. In this case, the interviews, lectures, sermons, and writings have simply been served up, waiting to be collected. This will allow for a considerably deeper study without the need for a great deal of additional data gathering.

Chapter Outline:

- I. Introduction and critical review of literature (10-15 pages)
 1. Identification of problem/Research Question
 1. Does the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi Order fit into the categorization that has been applied to them by previous scholarship on Sufism in the United States?
 2. Description of need for further study
 1. Weaknesses in Hermansen's categorization of Sufi orders in the United States
 2. Perpetuation of Hermansen's categorization in other studies
 3. Proposed further study of teaching materials, recordings of lectures/sermons belonging to the order, as well as interviews with members/leaders of the order
 3. Brief review of other sources on Sufism in the United States
 1. Marcia Hermansen
 2. Jocelyne Cesari
 3. Peter Wilson
 4. Yvonne Haddad
 5. Gisela Webb
- II. Historical introduction of the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi Order (10-15 pages)
 1. Brief history of the order outside the United States including their origins in the Halveti (Khalwati) order
 2. History of the establishment of the group that would later become the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi Order by late Grand Shaykh of the Halveti-Jerrahi order Muzaffer Ozak
 3. Discussion of current activity, and their identification as a new *tai'fa* in the mid 1990's
- III. Methodological introduction (≤ 10 pages)
 1. Content analysis
 1. Description of sample
 2. Description of method for analysis
 1. Reasons for utilizing this method
 2. Coding and manual identification of thematic patterns
 3. Validation/Computer-aided qualitative data analysis
 4. Identification of deviations/contradictions within sampled thematic patterns
 2. Thematic survey
 1. Description of sample (including sample from content analysis)
 2. Description of method for analysis
 1. Reasons for utilizing these methods
 2. Manual identification of themes identified in content analysis
 3. Identification of thematic repetitions, deviations, and contradictions based on those found in content analysis
- IV. Report of findings from initial content analysis of teaching materials and recordings (15-20 pages)
- V. Synthesis of findings from wider thematic survey of teaching materials and

recordings (30-40 pages)

VI. Summary, implications, and outcomes (10-15 pages)

1. Summary
2. Differences in findings from literature review and from research outcomes
3. Limitations of study
4. Relevance

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