

# Sufism: The “Heartbeat” and Soul of Islam?

- Objectives** As a result of this lesson, students will be able to
- outline the fundamental beliefs of Sufism
  - evaluate the role of Sufism within Egypt
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**Materials** Student Handout: **The Sufis**

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**Note to the Teacher**

When I was in graduate school at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, working as the caretaker at the YWCA, I was privileged to observe on a weekly basis the ritual ceremonies of a local Sufi Muslims group. I was impressed by their friendliness and the harmonious and peacefulness of their ritual dances.

Many years later, I was fortunate to be able to see and hear Africa’s most famous Muslim singer, Youssou N’Dour, as he performed with Fathy Salama’s Cairo Sufi Orchestra at the Arab World Music Festival. The world tour entitled, “Egypt” documented his musical pilgrimage to the heartland of Sufism, combining Egyptian and Arab orchestral sounds while celebrating Islam’s mystical culture.

I was in the process of reading the spiritual poetry of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi poet, Jelaluddin Rumi, who is the most read poet in America today when Yusef Islam (the former Cat Stevens) released his first new album in decades, *An Other Cup*. The album, his first since his conversion to Islam, was very heavily influenced by Sufi Muslim ideals. These last events took place just as I learned I would be able to participate in a trip to Egypt, at the heart of the Islamic world. I found myself wondering if we would be able to find some living Sufi presence within modern Egypt

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**Sources**

**Suggested Readings**

- Coleman Barks. *The Essential Rumi*. San Francisco, Harper, 2004.
- Huseyin Bingul & M. Fatih Citlak (Ed.) *Rumi and His Sufi Path of Love*. New Jersey: The Light, Inc. 2006.
- Carl Ernst. *Teachings of Sufism*. Boston: 1999.
- Ira Friedlander. *The Whirling Dervishes*. New York: Collier Books, 1975.
- Martin Lings. *What is Sufism*. Cambridge: 1993.
- Idris Shah. *The Way of the Sufi*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1970.

**Websites**

- [www.whirlingdervishes.org](http://www.whirlingdervishes.org)
  - [www.youtube.com/dhikr](http://www.youtube.com/dhikr)
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## The Sufis

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### Who are the Sufis?

According to the Sufi tradition the origins of Sufism date all the way back to the practices and life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the Qur'an.

Islam was spread throughout the world by Sufi Muslims who formed local Sufi Orders led by Sheikhs or Sufi masters who provided leadership, guidance and spiritual help. Sufi Islam focuses on the worship of God, personal and community development, tolerance, love, service, and moral responsibility. The Sufi path is a way of life rooted in loving service to the human community in the name of God.

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### The Sufi Vision

The Sufis believe that true understanding of the nature of the universe and humanity's in it can be achieved only when reason has been abandoned for love."

"The experience of love represents the most universal station on the Sufi Way, for it is love---not theology and certainly not the law---that engenders knowledge of God."

--- Reza Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*

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### Dhikr and Sema

*Dhikr* (*zīkr*, *jīkir*, *zicker*, *zīkir*, *zēkr*) is Arabic for "remembrance." *Dhikr* is an Islamic practice and ritual act that focuses on worship and remembrance of God which the Qur'an mentions should be done often. *Dhikr* frequently includes the repetition of the 99 names of God and pronouncements from other Islamic sacred sources.

The Sema Ritual is the sacred dance ceremony performed by the Sufi Order of the Whirling Dervishes begun by Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273) and influenced by Turkish customs and culture. The Order of the Whirling Dervishes has come to symbolize the values of love and service in the hearts and minds of millions throughout the world.

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**Encounters  
with Sufi Islam  
in Egypt**

When we were invited to tour Egypt it was my hope that we would be able to encounter some living representatives of the Sufi tradition. Somewhat to my surprise the Sufi tradition is very alive in modern Egypt especially in Upper Egypt but also in Cairo and other parts of the country. During time for Friday Mosque at the end of the first week in Egypt our group was able to spend the entire day at the Al-Tayyeb Saha Sufi Center, on the West Bank of Luxor. We were able to attend and participate in the the normal Friday Mosque Services, attend a Lecture & discussion with the Head Sheikh, and the men in our group were even invited to participate in the ritual, chanting ceremony known as *dhikr*. Participating in *dhikr* is always something I have wanted to do, and so when offered the opportunity I took it. The purpose of the repetitive rhythmic movements is to lose normal consciousness and achieve a state of consciousness that is in union with the divine. I found it to be one of the most powerful spiritual experiences of my life. The *dhikr* ceremony went on for almost an hour and even though the temperature that day was over a 100 degrees and the ceremony requires constant and very physical exertion I found myself getting cooler and cooler as the ritual intensified.

I found that Sufi Islam is very alive in modern Egypt and peasants and workers in the underclass are among the most devout followers of Sufism particularly in the many towns in Upper Egypt. Local Sufi sheikhs hold an enormous and heart felt popular appeal and as we traveled around Egypt it was not difficult to find the influence and presence of Sufism.

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