

Palestinian Sufis in Gaza



By Naryman Daqqa

*"I follow the Way of Love,
and where Love's caravan takes its path,
there is my religion, my faith."*

T

his was the song of the Grand Sufi, Sheikh Muhi ud-Din bin Arabi, as he wandered the land of the Lord, humbly seeking divine love.

Have you ever thought of the meaning of Sufism? Sufism entered Islam as one of its schools, as a group that adopted a path different from that of Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. The origin of the name is disputed. Some connect it to the Ancient Greek *sofia* (wisdom), as Sufis strive to achieve wisdom by worshiping God and attaining a pure and loving soul. The British named the Sufis after the simple *souf* (wool textile) coats that the ascetic faithful used to wear as a form of practicing endurance in order to come closer to Allah. Sufism focuses on the spiritual dimension of Islam while also adhering to its other pillars. (The five pillars of Islam are *shahada*, sincere confession of faith; *salat*, prayer; *sawm*, fasting during Ramadan; *zakat*, giving of alms; and *haji*, the pilgrimage to Mekka.) Sufism is a path a believer undertakes to reach Allah; that is, to reach knowledge of Allah through efforts extended in rituals, by way of self-discipline, and by purifying the heart of any misconduct, hoping to reach a state called *Ihsan*. The belief is that *Ihsan* is to worship Allah as if you saw Him; and even if you do not see Him, He sees you.

Some attribute the emergence of Sufism in Palestine to sheikhs from the Al-Qawasmi family in Hebron who enjoyed strong relations with Iraqi sheikhs from the important Islamic centers in Kufa and Basra. Around 1270, they adopted their beliefs and began to carry out their *nook* (rituals) in special places called *khalua*. Some believe that Jerusalem is the capital of Sufism as it hosts important *zawiyyas* (meeting places, literally: corners) that include Qarmiah, Qadriah, and Afghaniah, all located in the Old City and East Jerusalem. In Gaza, the most common

turuq (orders, literally: paths) of Sufism include Qadiriah, following the teachings of Abdelqader Al-Jilani; Raifa'iyah, after Ahmed Al-Rifai; Al-Hamadiah after Ahmed Al-Badawi; and Al-Shazliah after Hassan Al-Shazli.

The *zawiyyas* in Gaza are mainly centered in the Al-Nusseirat, Zaytoon, and Daraj neighborhoods. The Gaza Sufis perform their rituals in full privacy, with a deliberate effort to hide, as the Gaza community is mainly Sunni, with a minority of Salafi. Any interaction with them might lead to conflict due to differences in beliefs. Equally, Sufis have worked hard to avoid any problems with the current [Hamas] and the former PNA governments. When there is a government turnover, they make efforts to ensure that some of their members

Fitr, as well as Eid al-Adha in the same way as the Sunni society around them. People wear new clothes and visit their extended families, they give gifts to children and female relatives, and they bake *ka'ek* and *ma'amoul*.

Sufis perform their rituals under the patronage of their sheikh. The faithful meet regularly to organize their *hadra* (prayer hall), a beautiful place that looks like a museum and shows a large image of their former leader, the grandfather of the current sheikh, Nabhan al-Babli, that covers most of the hall's middle wall. There are other pictures of key Sufis from around the world, ornaments, Arabic and Persian calligraphy, and tambourines and swords that are believed to date back hundreds of years. The faithful convene



Sufi celebration in Gaza. Photo by Nabhan Albabli.

enter public offices in order to avoid any interventions of government in their affairs. This is a sensible way to preserve good relations with everybody. Sufis celebrate Ramadan and Eid al-

on Thursdays and Mondays every week to recite their prayers, rhymes, and the glorification of Prophet Mohammad, accompanied by the music of drums and cymbals.

Their songs include one by the Egyptian Sufi Yasin Al-Tuhami:

*O my Inspirer,
you know who I am.
I have lived with your breath
since the first word you pronounced.
Nothing separates us;
we are fused in our love
with our whole heart and existence.
I was away from you for some time,
but you saw me
and I knew that our meeting has come.
Love united us
and we have become the one pulse
that makes us travel together across life.*



Photo by Nabhan Albabli.

Women are rarely present in Gaza's zawiyyas; some Sufi sects prohibit women's presence in the *hadra*. They may be allowed to enter to bring food, but they are not allowed to participate in the celebrations. Whereas most Gazans celebrate according to the Egyptian teachings and use little music, there are some that follow the Turkish traditions and engage in whirling, turning themselves in repetitive circles. This physically active meditation practice is performed during celebrations and ceremonies. The aim is to overcome one's *nafs* (ego, literally: self) and personal desires by listening to music and focusing one's thoughts solely on God. Whirling dervishes are aiming to reach the source of all perfection, known as *kemal* (whole).

The best-known Sufis of Gaza include Nabhan Al-Babli, known under the name of Al-Zien,

meaning the Exemplary One. He is in his fifties but looks as though he were only in his thirties. Al-Babli lives in the central Gaza Strip, more specifically in Nusseirat. He inherited the legacy of Sufism from his grandfather and father. He was called Al-Zien after a story, which he tells in this way: "Zien is the name given to my great grandfather whose name was Hussein. He lived in our hometown of Aqer and was a good man, respected all over the country. At that time, there was a gangster notorious for his wrongdoings. The gangster fought with my grandfather and dug a big hole and threw him in it. He then dumped in wood sticks and lit the fire to use my grandfather as a lesson for anybody who would dare object to what he was doing. Inhabitants of the town gathered around the fire and were surprised to see that Hussein was not harmed. Then they started calling him Al-Zien, and he became the wise man of the city. People came to him for treatment against black magic, the spells of jinn, and other superstitious harm."

It should be noted that for the past ten years, Sheikh Al-Zien, like other Sufis of Gaza, has been prevented from attending Sufi sessions that regularly take place outside the country because of the siege imposed upon the Gaza Strip. They cannot travel outside Gaza and thus cannot share with their Sufi brothers and sisters from Jerusalem in the *Mawsem Nabi Musa* (festival). However, factors such as the Israeli assaults and harsh living conditions have encouraged many young people to join the Sufis to reform their souls and establish spiritual communication with the Divine – connections they form when they meet in their zawiyyas and through their sheikhs and the regular performance of rites.

Article translated by Rania Filfil Almbaid

Naryman Daqqa is a law student at Palestine University in Gaza City.