

Memory, Social Authority, and Composition in Damascene *Dhikr*

By

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Committee in charge:

Professor Stefania Pandolfo

Professor Charles Hirschkind

Professor Benjamin Brinner

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Abstract

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Professor Stefania Pandolfo, Chair

This dissertation examines the contemporary paradoxes, impasses, and new possibilities negotiated by Syrian Muslim men who practice the musical group worship of *dhikr*. *Dhikr* is group activity often associated with Sufism, and has long been an important part of Islamic practice in Syria and many other societies. Its historical tendency to rely heavily on song, movement, and affective expression within its ceremonies and discourses uniquely situate it as a site where questions are raised concerning the role music and emotion are to play in the building of ethical lives. Likewise, this dissertation takes *dhikr* as a site where modern transformations of society, of authority, and of norms governing the relation of religion and society are framed, and stances toward these issues worked out.

Dhikr does not cleanly map onto the categories that are typically deployed to describe and study it, including the categories of mysticism, orthodoxy, and music. This research therefore also examines the way these categories, which inevitably must be discussed to understand *dhikr*, introduce their own particular distortions. By addressing these distortions, I am able to make better sense of the input of the men I got to know at *dhikr* events, in listening to their stories and memories, and in informal discussions with them. These men make keen observations regarding the radical transformations and disenfranchisements which the modern state has visited upon Syrian society over the last half-century and more. Together with these men, I explore a specific case of the possibilities and limits generated by the transformation of societies along lines established by Western modernity and its norms.

Ethnographic research was conducted in Damascus, Syria among three main groups of Sunni Muslim men: *dhikr* participants and singers, Sufi sheikhs and others with formal and informal leadership roles within the *dhikr* community (including a prominent composer of *dhikr* music), and men who did not practice *dhikr* but who had serious and illuminating views on the practices and the questions I was researching. Part of my aim has been to explore the ways that certain modern Western framings of spirituality, mysticism, music, and art, which in many ways serve within liberal sensibilities as catch-alls for the highest good, serve to obscure other modes of religious practice, ethics, and

creative production. To the extent that these Western framings become normative or exert a normative force within modern configurations of life, they also extend the outer reaches of state power, despite not typically being considered part of it. In the interest of this question I have focused attention to the notion of musical art, and the types of social configurations and modes of creative production that, due to recent social change, are either no longer viable or have just recently become so.

I have written this dissertation during the years of horrible conflict which began after I returned to Berkeley from the field, and I want nothing more for this research than for its themes to be once again relevant to the lives of the men who helped shape it, whose sets of concerns and questions have been tragically reduced to the scope of bare survival.

*For Rajaa, Biso, and Sibal (for now)
and for
all who have suffered and been killed
in Syria while I have written*

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I thank William Morris for introducing me to the field of Islamic Studies at Oberlin College, and for being the first person for whom I understood scholarship to be a life-long journey and engagement.

I thank Noah Solomon, who I met in Damascus before graduate school, for suggesting anthropology might be a good field for pursuing the questions in which I was interested. Without him and our conversations, I would not have found anthropology.

I thank the graduate students with whom I participated in informal dissertation reading groups, who taught me to receive and give collaboratively-minded feedback. Their many comments pushed this dissertation forward. These colleagues include Dan Husman, Emily Wilcox, Mark Godwin, Shana Harris, Nick Bartlett, Zhanara Nauruzbayeva, Mika Tanaka, Mather George, and others.

My research has benefited from a great many people at Berkeley. Margaret Larkin's instruction in classical Arabic poetry gave me new understanding of the poetry of *dhikr*. In anthropology coursework, Paul Rabinow provided a stirring introduction to the field's theoretical foundations. Samera Esmeir and Alexei Yurchak challenged and encouraged my thinking in the earlier stages of my project, including by reminding me that taking walks and imagining your audience are good for you.

I thank Saba Mahmood for defining my sense of the types of issues addressed by postcolonial theory, and opening my eyes to what could be accomplished within anthropologies of Islam. Hers is a model of the kind of scholarship that illuminates questions, themselves illuminating, that had not previously been possible, much less asked. Without her, the research I have pursued at Berkeley would not have started.

Ned Garrett, Kathleen Van Sickle, and Linda Eason have provided much support during my time at Berkeley. I thank them for their kind help in navigating the circuitry of the department and the institution. Ned was the person I spoke with when I was making preliminary phone contact with graduate programs. He was the only one among those I contacted across the country who did not make me feel embarrassed for my ignorance of how graduate programs work. I thank him and the whole department for consistently providing a sense of welcome.

In my teaching-assistant role I have had the pleasure of learning course material and pedagogy from many compelling perspectives. My work as a teaching assistant has played a large role in my understanding of anthropology and my broader sense of the possibilities inherent to intellectual life. For their instruction and inspiration in this regard, and for providing me the tools with which all my future teaching will be geared and tuned, I thank Liu Xin, Luca D'Isanto, Aihwa Ong, Raya Shani, Charles Briggs, Cori Hayden, Lawrence Cohen, Deborah Gordon, and Christine Hastorf. I especially thank Stanley Brandes for his generous support and care, and for the many helpful suggestions he gave regarding my writing and future academic career.

The members of my dissertation committee, Stefania Pandolfo, Charles Hirschkind, and Benjamin Brinner have brought this research to its fruition through their guidance, encouragement, comment, and criticism. In different ways they have each shaped the course of my interests and questions, while making me feel all the while that my research is my own and important. For their patience and support during the arduous process of writing I am grateful. My adviser Stefania Pandolfo has been the central facilitator of my navigation of the sometimes bumpy road of becoming an anthropological scholar. Her interventions, from applying theoretical correctives to demanding I examine my motives in a particular phrasing or approach, have shown me how one situates scholarship in life, and her input often put me back on track when I had lost sight of the way forward. Charles Hirschkind has provided comments and suggestions on my work which have somehow always ended up turning into magic keys that secured again the evanescent sense of my research's purpose. With his help I have seen that dry spells end, and have ends—an important lesson. Benjamin Brinner has made me understand that love of music, and being moved by particular elements and junctures, energizes the thinking and writing process like little else, and does so in a way that is none the less effective for being hard to qualify. His input and advice gave my writing fresh starts at points where it was most needed. I am deeply indebted in these ways and more to each member of my wonderful committee. Thank you.

On to Syria, I am grateful to all the *dhikr* participants in Damascus who allowed me to be part of their worship and lives. I am grateful to the many *dhikr* participants and sheikhs for receiving me, teaching me, and often for simply being unimpressed or indifferent enough that in their midst I felt free to wander, and to discover unexpected turns. I thank the men who shared their views with me, and the sometimes vulnerable positions from which they articulated them. Most of all, perhaps, I am grateful for being able to enjoy with all these men the wonderful song, rhythm, dance, and touch of *dhikr*.

I thank Jonathan Shannon for his kind advice before I headed to the field, and for so generously directing me to Zuheir Mnini and his calligraphy workshop in downtown Damascus (quite literally: "...then walk to the right, go into a little passageway off to the left, and just before it ends..."). I can only hope that the work that has resulted provides him some pleasure in recognizing the places and people he knew before me.

I am most grateful to Zuheir Mnini, for all the times he welcomed my visits, my questions, and my tagging along with him to *dhikr* ceremonies and other events. I could not have had a better guide to *dhikr*, or to the patient work of love, craft, and art. His generosity in sharing with me the thoughts and experiences, the joys and frustrations, of his sixty years of work as a composer will remain with me. I feel truly honored to know a human being like him.

Last but not least I thank my family for their patience and understanding: my mother, father, and brother. I thank my second family in Syria, my in-laws with whom I feel as at home as I have anywhere. They are a remarkable group of people without whom this research would not have begun. I thank Biso for the joy she has endlessly provided, and I thank Rajaa Hussien for everything good in my life.

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RESEARCH INTERESTS

Anthropologies of religion and secularism, reason and affect, music, art, postcolonialism. Histories of change in religious practice and music practice due to pressures associated with the discourses, norms, and forms of power of Western modernity. Areas of interest include Islam, Syria, the Middle East, and West Africa.

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Chapter One
Introduction

INTRODUCTION

At al-Aita with Mnini

I arrive at an unoccupied Arab-style house in the Old City of Damascus to attend a *dhikr*, a meeting of Islamic chant and song. In the narrow alley a few men stand by the door greeting those who arrive. I go in with my host, Zuheir Mnini, a seventy-eight year old composer of traditionally-styled songs performed in *dhikr*. It is early in my fieldwork, and this is my third time attending a *dhikr* meeting with him. Inside the home is a brightly-lit courtyard open to the sky, and toward the back, opposite the entrance, there is an *īwān*, a large alcove with its floor raised slightly higher than the courtyard's. The stone walls are painted with horizontal black and white stripes in imitation of *ablaq*, a building style in which alternating layers of basalt and limestone were used in important buildings. Sounds of the city trickle into the courtyard from above, but the space feels enclosed due to the ivy that grows along cords latticed overhead. Strings of holiday lights and colorful metallic flag-streamers with Islamic calligraphy also hang down from the cords. The lights turn off and on randomly in sections, and in the more densely adorned *īwān* they criss-cross between and over the surface of framed Quranic verses, photographs of Mecca and Medina, and portraits of past sheikhs. The transparent layering of décor exudes an archaeological sort of festivity.

In the *īwān* sit about forty men on the floor and on benches lining the alcove's side and back walls. Facing the *īwān* are about fifteen rows of white plastic chairs, but this early on in the *dhikr* only a handful are occupied. The men chant in a semi-rhythmic monotone, some just mouthing the words. I recognize the text of the Quranic chapter *Yā Sīn*. Other men stand and talk quietly along the walls of the courtyard. As the recitation concludes the sheikh intones a series of supplications, and the men say *amīn* after each entreaty. Mnini slips off his shoes and ascends into the *īwān*, waving to the congregation quickly as verbal and gestural acknowledgments ripple back. He sits on the carpets next to the sheikh, a gaunt man in his forties in a white cloak and skull-cap, who puts his hand on Mnini's knee and leans over to whisper something to him while the group continues on its own.

The group sings a piece whose words and melody were composed by Sheikh Umar al-Aita, the grandfather of the current sheikh. I learn later that very few of the participants know the origin of the piece, though they sing it weekly. The refrain is a staccato delivery of the phrase *allāhu ya ḥanānu ya manānu, ya malja' al-muḍṭarri ya raḥmānu* ("O God, the Affectionate, the Benefactor, the Refuge of the coerced, the Merciful"). The refrain repeats after each short verse, but because its 5/4 pulse is less viscerally palpable than that of a common 4/4 or 3/4 time would be, the group relies heavily upon the voice of the sheikh to guide them. Soon the piece shifts into a 4/4 section with clear downbeats, and while the lyrical text remains unchanged the energy picks up as soon as the more user-friendly meter registers in the men's ears, voices, and

bodies. Even the least rhythmically inclined can now sing and clap loudly without fear of being off. The piece ends finally with another shift into a very slowly lilting 3/4 section.

As the *dhikr* progresses, the men in the *īwān* take turns singing verses of memorized poetry, embellishing melodies punctuated by less adorned choral sections. Bodies are pressed together, and when a singer performs a solo verse others reach out from time to time to rub his back or leg, and others shout his name in appreciation. The circulation of men, words, and gestures traverse the divide that I might expect between audience and performer, and contravene the familiar Western middle-class sense that religious musical performance demands quiet attention.¹ A man answers a cell-phone while the man right next to him sings, and later on uses its video camera to pan the event for a few moments. A man with an enormous tray crammed with small glasses of tea circulates, and a freshly-heated frame-drum is brought out and placed in front of the sheikh, who rests his hand on it in acknowledgment. Conversations, jokes, and other small interruptions abound, but the proliferation of movements, sounds, and exchanges does not detract from the authority of the sheikh. On the contrary it seems to bolster it, highlighting his ability to channel the continually bubbling energy into the *dhikr*'s flow.

After an hour and a half of sometimes intense singing, everyone stands and they clear the chairs away from courtyard. The call and response *inshād* (religious singing) continues, and a man moves to the center to direct the movements of the men who now line the periphery, holding hands. To stir their participation, he visualizes the rhythm, raising his hands face-up in front of him and dropping them quickly down on primary beats. The men bend forwards and rise back up, sometimes in unison and sometimes in discrepant sections. At other points they do a dance of alternating steps, lifting their arms in turn across their bodies as the foot steps back and to the side.² The frame drums and a pair of hand-cymbals embellish the rhythms created by the throaty vocalizations of the dancers. The men directly opposite the *īwān* are the most vigorous in their movements and voices, the ones on the sides less so. Some of the latter merely shuffle in place, a few with their eyes closed, a few mouthing the words as they survey the scene. Mnini, my host, stands with the sheikh and other authoritative figures and singers in the *īwān*. He catches my eye, and with a slight smile twists his open hand at me, a gesture that says, "Well, what do you think?" I feel he can read my joy, and his smile broadens.

As a Syrian approaching eighty, Mnini had spent a lifetime in *dhikr* ceremonies—singing, composing, teaching others to sing, having his body healed, and heeding and exerting authority. I had at that time only spent a few weeks in *dhikr*, and as an American approaching forty, my initial impressions of *dhikr* had been informed by the fact that most of my exposure to music-making practices were limited to commoditized, mediated forms. As a member of a contemporary Western society with limited experience of participational musical events, my background had primed me to romanticize the immediacy of musical practices not dominated by the commodity model and the performance conventions that attend it.³ To some degree, this dissertation is an

1 See Shannon 2003b for an account of a stage performance of Syrian *dhikr* music in New York City, an important moment of which was when a representative from a world-music organization announced, "Because this is sacred music, you should refrain from applauding during the performance." p. 267.

2 See Figure 1 for a photograph of this type of movement.

3 Much of my experience of musical events had been in the context of independent rock, which despite

exploration of some of the differences and commonalities in the norms and assumptions that may have shaped Mnini's and my engagements with *dhikr*—conceptions and practices of music, religion, Islam, artistic creativity, and authority. More centrally, it is an examination of how, in scenes like this one, men grapple with social change, and formulate ethical outlooks and dispositions for dealing with that change in a way that lays the ground for future Damascene Islamic communities to negotiate similar issues. Before addressing these issues further, however, I would like to briefly discuss the uprising that has occurred in the years after my fieldwork, and relate views of it to some of the methodological questions that are raised in looking at the practice of *dhikr*.

The uprising, *dhikr*, and schemes of evaluation

The Arab Spring was still a few years off when I conducted my fieldwork in Damascus in 2007 and 2008 researching *dhikr* and its practitioners.⁴ However unforeseen those later events were, in getting to know Syrians and the context of their lives one readily develops a sense of the social, economic, and political frustrations that might feed into them. In 2011, after demonstrations started to be held in various parts of the country, I was excited, shocked, and concerned, as were many Syrians, from the videos and images that were appearing on YouTube, Facebook, and in news outlets. Videos of demonstrations, whether living-room vigils, a handful of youths marching through an alley, or thousands filling a city square, repeatedly showed songs, chants, and dance as central vehicles of protest. Given the close associations in the West of music and dance with liberatory sensibilities, the presence of song in the demonstrations might have caused Western observers to celebrate the florescence of protest as an expression of the very desires for freedom which had been, at least on the surface of public discourses on the Middle East, an object of anticipation in the United States since the American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq ten years earlier.

Regardless of the accuracy of reading Western liberatory sentiments into the Syrian chants, songs, drumming, and *dabke* dances that anchored the protests, the question of how Western associations with music are deployed, and not deployed, within evaluations of events that feature music is an important one. In terms of the uprising, the question has much to do with the way Western perceptions of Arabs and Muslims also feature in and affect these evaluations. With *dhikr*, it implicates the broader issue of the pressures brought to bear by Western norms upon the directions in which non-Western traditions are able to change. Whatever sympathies that protest song and dance might generate for Arabs and Muslims are perhaps outweighed by fears attached to the Arab Muslim mass, and the threat of the emergence of Islamic social forms perceived as anti-democratic and anti-humanist. The following example illustrates something of this trend,

(and perhaps due to) its prominent stances against the musical commodity remains largely organized in relation to it.

4 For a time I also investigated other non-religious musics, but most of this material has not made it into my dissertation, except insofar as conversations with various sorts of musicians helped to shed light on perceptions of religious singing and *dhikr*. Those other types of musical practices, which I had thought to perhaps explore in future research, centered on conservatory-informed Arab-jazz fusion and classical European music, and heavy metal.

and shows that a shared genealogy ties issues in scholarly approaches to *dhikr* with the sociopolitical othering of Arabs and Muslims more generally.

I observed a demonstration of Syrian-Americans in San Francisco's Union Square on a Sunday in early 2012, at a time when demonstrations in Syria had not yet been totally displaced by military conflict. After more than an hour of speakers, songs, and *dabke* dances in support of the Syrian protests, and several dramatized scenes of arrest and torture, another group of about thirty people arrived on the square. The group consisted of men and women dressed in bridal gowns, some more elaborate than others, and one person carrying a sign announcing the event called "The Brides of March." The brides weaved in and out of the crowd of Syrian-Americans, dancing and merry-making. In an instant, the Syrian protest was made into a sort of prop for another message, and its participants faced an impossible choice: to the degree that they failed to welcome the interruption they would become positioned, within a kind of tableau, as representatives of a stodgy conservatism.

With a megaphone in hand, the self-appointed bride leader seemed to be challenging the Syrians, through his plugged-ear style of goading, to produce responses of a gender-traditionalist, heteronormative, or otherwise intolerant nature. The brides showed little interest in who the Syrian protesters were or what their issue was, aside from the few who took places among the crowd to take in the message of the protest with apparent leisure. The Syrians for their part appeared bemused. While one man and a few women were visibly angered, others stressed the need to resist confrontation. I heard a few men joke about the surprising new tactics adopted by the *shabītha*, the Syrian government thugs who were killing and torturing protestors. I said to one of the brides who stood near me, "You know, some of these people have had family members tortured and assassinated for taking part in protests in their country." "Yeah, I know," he said, and shrugged, seeming a bit embarrassed. For nearly twenty minutes the protest, already perhaps a source of amusement for visitors to the square, labored to produce a message that could at best be drowned in spectacle.

The brides disrupted the Syrians' protest solely because it was being held where they had intended to end their event with a group photo, at the base of the square's central monument. The results would perhaps have been the same had the Union Square protest consisted of different people voicing a different cause. However, that the Brides of March website cites the false promises of the "ideal marriage," and presumably of gender norms, as the original inspiration for the event raises questions about the political calculations, however improvised and opportunistic, that may have legitimized the disruption and provided the brides a way out of seeing it as act of hostility on their part.⁵ Any perception

5 See <http://www.bridesofmarch.org/Brides/BridesOfMarch.html>, for a description and photographs of the event, including an informal statement of the purpose which inspires it. The itinerary for the 2014 event, as elaborated on the webpage (accessed Feb 16, 2014), includes the following description: "By 3:30 PM we'll be suitably liquored up for a stroll around town, with stops at our favorite Formal Wear [sic] store, and diamond importer. From there, we'll continue on Grant and turn onto Maiden Lane, Stopping [sic] for a photo op at the gates of Maiden Lane. Then we'll race across the street to Union Square and gather around our edifice of desire, the monolith of John Dong Long." It was at the base of the "monolith" that the brides encountered the Syrian-American protest. Ironically, given the events of that day, the Brides of March website also mentions, in a spirit of liberatory criticism, the San Francisco city government's "attempt to render our public gathering spaces hostile to gatherings."

on the part of the brides of cultural conservatism on the part of the Arabs—indeed, among the Syrian crowd and the organizers, many of the women wore headscarves, and many of the men slacks—would have provided the brides with sufficient a license to forgo their own strong sense that challenging the Syrians’ use of public space would be an aggression. In this way, the Syrians were subject to an implicit critique, though not a willed or planned one, which amounts to saying that adherence to traditional gender roles, and complicity in their violence, negates the validity of any claim to speak as victims of political violence. The aura of zany “postmodern” fun deployed by the brides situated potential objectors to their actions as not only humorless, but oppressive.⁶

I offer this extended analysis not to malign the brides, who likely would not have willingly acted out these logics, but to highlight these logics and the susceptibility of Arabs and Muslims to their application. Indeed, on that afternoon something like a very compressed colonial history of the Middle East played out. An intervention was made on the essential premise that human flourishing is threatened by constraints and norms, which can only limit the freedom necessary for the realization of an inherent human capacity that, given the chance, anyone can recognize within themselves.⁷ Here the economy of liberal evaluations of tradition features prominently, just as it does when engagements with traditional forms are more explicitly assessed, whether by scholars, the general population, or by those who embrace those forms as their own. My point is that this is especially true of assessments of Islam and of various forms of Islamic piety, which, over the course of the long history of oppositional positions taken towards them in liberal thought, seem to have acquired an almost emblematic anti-liberal status and set of associations.

Focus of research

One of the key ways in which liberal assumptions about the relation between the subject and tradition have played out vis-à-vis Islam is through assertions of a distinction between mysticism and orthodoxy. Within evaluations of Islam that deploy these distinctions as self-evident, fears and concerns regarding a restrictive, Shariah-based orthodoxy are partnered with and offset by hopes that a mystically-oriented, humanist Islam might preserve the prospects of liberal tolerance vis-à-vis Muslims. The distinction between legalist orthodoxy and individually-oriented mysticism is one of several conflicting tropes that have historically structured Western understandings and representations of Islam. Sufism (often glossed as “mystical Islam”) was in the early modern era characterized as a religious form steeped in superstition and ignorance, one that held the Arabs back from the promises of modernity. More recently, it has come to represent a redeemable element within Islam, one that might save Muslims from what is often seen as the code-bound, literalist trajectory of orthodoxy. As a malleable repository

6 I use “postmodern” here in its colloquial sense, describing an aesthetic where elements of seemingly incongruous cultural origin or purpose are combined, often with humorous irreverence, in a way that suggests freedom from and a privilege of playfulness towards traditional forms.

7 This point and the one that follows is borrowed from Saba Mahmood’s work, but here has less to do with agency than with the conditional nature of the right to speak in the public space of a liberal society as a victim of oppression.

for the projection of humanist valuations of individual spirituality, inward reflection, and in this case musical expression, Sufism is often portrayed in the West as eschewing politics, as de-emphasizing the binding power of divine law upon society and individuals, and as offering more compatibility with modern conceptions of religious practice as properly limited to the private sphere.

One of the goals of my examination of *dhikr* is to show that the categories of Sufism and music are not sufficient to situate or explain the practices, despite their importance within them, and that understanding of *dhikr* requires rethinking some of these categories' entailments. A central point to be made regarding Sufism is the mutually reinforcing, often intractable relation between mysticism and orthodoxy. This relation tends to be downplayed when *dhikr* and Sufism are celebrated as mystical alternatives to a less flexible, legalist type of orthodoxy. *Dhikr* is an important window into the complex entwining of what, through a distinctly modern evaluative hierarchy, are abstracted and reified as mutually exclusive religious orientations—one geared towards the autonomous individual's private experience of meaning, and another towards a conservative maintenance of sacralized social codes and norms.⁸

Because *dhikr* incorporates singing, drumming, and affective expression, it has occasionally been assessed in the light of Western assumptions regarding music and art, categories in which personal and communal expression are valued in highly liberatory terms. Blanket application to non-Western practices of the categories of religion, music, and art, taken a priori as universals, brings to bear a host of notions concerning what are or should be the forms human life takes. In the context of asymmetrical power relations with the West, *dhikr*'s engagements with these categories have changed the set of available discourses through which the practices are understood by practitioners themselves, and have made the practices a site for reflection upon social change. For example, the question of to what degree the category of music encompasses the song, rhythm, and motions of *dhikr* is directly and indirectly addressed in contestations regarding the incorporation of elements of Western music practice. In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, I examine compositional methods, musical-analytical frameworks, and folklorically-oriented photography, all tools and techniques that have brought these and related questions to the fore.

Dhikr is a tradition whose transformation in the modern era has brought it to occupy a unique place in Syrian society, a place where ideas about ethics, bodily expression, rationality, and modernity are worked out. Within this space are evident the pressures of modernizing concepts, and debates regarding the role that modern and traditional features are to take within the practices and within society. As with any tradition, *dhikr* is not constrained to a course of linear change, or progress across stages towards an ever more modern ideal. Rather, in a tentative manner that admits of smooth transitions and abrupt discontinuities, the tradition comes to be situated anew within the lives of its practitioners, helping to orient them ethically just as they re-orient the practice itself vis-à-vis contemporary Syrian society and contemporary notions of Islamic life.

8 For a number of compelling discussions of related binaries in modern constructions of the category of religion, see Asad 2001, Bender 2010 (Chapter 2 “Becoming Mystics”), Orsi 2004 (Chapter 6 “Snakes Alive: Religious Studies Between Heaven and Earth”), and Sharf 1998.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXTS

Ridwan on *dhikr*

In considering the place occupied by *dhikr* in Syrian society, I have been helped by the input of non-participants, who even from the side of critique articulate views that fill out some of the issues germane to the practices, with which participants grapple. The following conversation happened as I left for the evening *dhikr* meeting described above, and it concisely touches upon several issues examined in these chapters. Emerging from by building's alley I was called over by acquaintances from the neighborhood, two brothers sitting in front of the adjacent stores they tended. They asked what I had been doing, and where I was going. I said I was off to a *dhikr* meeting, and asked if they wanted to come. They declined, and Ridwan said in a rather serious tone, "We don't like the atmosphere [*jaw*] of the Sufi sheikhs. It's not their teachings we're against, and I'd even say that what they teach is good. But the hand-kissing, the demand of allegiance [*bai 'ah*], and the dancing around [*tarāquṣ*] and swooning. I mean the *ṭarab* [musical ecstasy], it's excessive."

Ridwan articulates a fairly common criticism of the Sufi orders, which provide the social and authoritative context of the *dhikr* practices I was examining. His deeming excessive the group chanting, singing, and movement of *dhikr* is a sentiment I heard several times, especially from the men of my immediate neighborhood with whom I talked about my research but did not anticipate including in it.⁹ Criticism was just as frequently directed at what was perceived as gratuitous exertion of authority by Sufi sheikhs. Discussions of sheikhs, even among *dhikr* participants, regularly included reference to the figure of the "charlatan" (*musha 'wiz*), a rather open-ended notion that helps structure assessments of authoritative relations. When used by those partial to *dhikr* and to Sufism, the term was deployed as an negative evaluative standard opposite which authentic sheikhs could be distinguished. Used by opponents of *dhikr* like Ridwan, it was applicable to all Sufi sheikhs, power-hungry men who brainwashed their followers. Their followers in turn were deemed gullible, uneducated folk (*sha 'b*) in search of miracles and in need of an authority to which they could bind themselves, and they were so deemed with the same salt-of-the-earth ambivalence that the term *folk* often implies in English.

That Ridwan was less educated and of a lower class background than some of the participants at that evening's *dhikr*, and that neither the sheikh nor most of the participants fit the model he articulated, suggests how operative are the forms that authority relations take, or even are perceived to take, in how modern a given social arrangement or individual is deemed to be. Ridwan's distaste for excessive emotionality and authoritative deference in the context of *dhikr* evidences the pressures of modern sensibilities concerning forms of affective expression and submission to authority in religious life. In Ridwan's view, the mere potential for a certain kind of authoritative relation to obtain between *dhikr* participants and the sheikh was enough to cast the whole

9 During my fieldwork, completed over a year from 2007 to 2008, I stayed near my in-laws in an area of Damascus built up only forty years before. The neighborhood is populated mostly by lower middle-class families recently urbanized from various villages and rural areas of Syria. I had stayed there before on other visits, including for two years from 2000 to 2002, and so knew some of the neighborhood men fairly well when I started my fieldwork.

practice as atavistic and suspect. In Chapter 2, “Memory and Authority,” I examine in more detail the question of forms of authority, past and present, among *dhikr* participants, but here want only to point out that questions about the limits of emotional expression and authoritative relations are part of the larger question of how contemporary Islam is to be conceived and practiced. Not far behind, and sharing an important genealogy, is the concern with how Islam is perceived before the non-Muslim Western world.

Ridwan’s expression of admiration for Sufi teachings abstracts their discursive elements to statements detached from their forms of bodily inculcation and social-hierarchical contexts. More subtly, it transposes them within a type of embodied practice where discourse can be gleaned through quiet study, a mode of attention in which a reserved bodily comportment contains those expressions of affect which in Sufi practices regularly effervesce through shouts, cries, and jerks. These aspects of Ridwan’s view are not merely accidental or idiosyncratic features of a personal opinion on religion, but reflect a patterned form of assessing religiosity, also evident in conversations I had with other Syrians. Like these others, Ridwan tended to describe Islam as a personal-choice sort of ethical comportment and model of behavior, one that fit seamlessly into a lifestyle shaped by modern economic and domestic forms. Over and against his view of *dhikr* practitioners, he held that health care should be sought primarily from doctors and biomedical institutions, not sheikhs, that the nuclear family and working life were the most important sources of everyday joys and trials, and that supernatural phenomenon and mystical visions should be neither sought nor desired.

On one hand, such views can be said to reflect long-term issues in Islamic theological debates concerning authority, and the relation of sound, affect, and *dhikr* to Islamic practice. But while Ridwan criticizes the authoritative relations as he imagines them to be manifest in the Sufi orders, he fails to identify the modern forms of power (including, importantly, state power) that would secure that private realm where an Islamic practice based in family and work life could flourish. He casts the social and authoritative transformations effected by the modern state as *fait accompli*, and positions Sufism as focused on elements superfluous to life within that state.

Bad times, good times, bad times

To a considerable degree, the events that have plagued Syria since my fieldwork have expanded the scope of my analysis of authority and power. The current chaos shows how exceptional was the broad social stability that marked the roughly fifteen-year period which happened to encompass all my visits to the country. It has forced me to be more attentive to the significant role played by experiences of social order and disorder in the way that views on religion are expressed. Ridwan was born in Damascus, but his parents had moved from a village in the Northern central part of Syria (partly destroyed in 2012 and 2013). At the time of my fieldwork, the village had been for Ridwan a destination for yearly visits, where he spent time with relatives and was reminded of, and could introduce his small children to, a style of life more informed by the cycles of nature and agriculture. A great deal of the families who arrived in Damascus from the villages in the 1970s and 1980s did so in an attempt to escape rural conditions of scarcity, and it is likely

that Ridwan's parents had the same motivations for their move. While difficult conditions also visited the cities in this period, Ridwan and his brothers were nonetheless able to establish small businesses for themselves, and to eke out enough of a living to provide for their families. Their stories are similar to those of many Syrians who became urbanized.

Even up until the end of the 1990s, most Syrians had become accustomed to widespread food shortages and government clampdowns against displays of religious devotion. By the time of my first two years there (2000-2002), staple and food rationing had ceased, and as to religious freedoms, I was quite surprised when some of my friends—these from more educated families from slightly better-off parts of the city—told me of being monitored by plainclothes secret police (*mukhābarāt*) when they were undergraduates in the late 1980s and early 1990s. *Mukhābarāt* informers at the university would ask them where they were going, and note in writing their responses, whenever they happened to leave campus around the time of one of the prayers. During my field work in 2007 and 2008, memories like these had been made somewhat distant by an intervening increase in religious freedoms, economic well-being, and access to foreign media (e.g., satellite TV, internet).

However in 2011, with the repression of demonstrations, and on into full military conflict, economic and political hardships have returned with an unprecedented intensity. During my time in Syria, the city of Hama had stood in a singular manner as a symbol of Hafez al-Asad's willingness to engage in blanket campaigns of violence and intimidation against those who brought Islamic symbols into the public sphere, not to mention those who engaged in opposition activities. But the city's symbolic uniqueness has been displaced with the more widespread destruction, violence, and hunger that have come to visit the country. The current catastrophe, from which there does not seem to be any hope of escape, has made painfully clear to me how tenuous was the economic, social, and political—not to mention physiological—stability which formed my only experience of Syria.

To return finally to Ridwan, the stress he placed on domestic order when discussing religion had initially appeared to me as quaint. He expressed an affection for the image of a home where a loving wife raised the children and maintained a shelter to which a father could return after a day's work to eat with his family, play with his children, and help them with their schoolwork and budding life challenges. When Ridwan discussed these arrangements, I heard it as a kind of capitulation to the allure of modern domestic models which I had myself found in some ways objectionable, perhaps in a manner not unrelated to how the Brides of March had assessed those Syrian-Americans on Union Square. As a middle-class Westerner who only had known the more prosperous Syria, I did not connect Ridwan's sentiments with the previous periods of hardship that his family no doubt underwent, periods in which a stable home would have been an object of intense desire. I might thereby sympathize with Ridwan's conciliatory attitude towards the political order that provides a stability which at the least allowed smaller-scale (private or individual) religious commitments to be cultivated.

Conditions in Syria have reached a point where, to borrow a phrase from Stefania Pandolfo, the very "possibility of ethics" is degraded and destroyed. Pandolfo cites a

Moroccan imam's poignant description of the ethical entailments of poverty and oppression, conditions which for many Syrians today would perhaps be enviable:

[F]aith and the authenticity of ethical action are inaccessible in a community where the intimate proximity of Islamic ideals has been lost, where there is no equity and where the power of commodities and the lure of consumption make vanish the call for the values of reciprocal help and support, the sense of justice, and the remembrance of death in daily life as the foundation of ethical action.¹⁰

Indeed, death is too present in Syria to be remembered. The gap between life and death has become too narrow to require bridging. If, as the imam suggests, communal life within the oppressive modern state is inimical to authentic ethics, ethics outside the state is equally problematic. As Talal Asad notes:

[W]hereas ethics could at one time stand independently of a political organization (although not of collective obligations), in a secular state it presupposes *a specific political realm*—representative democracy, citizenship, law and order, civil liberties, and so on. For only where there is this public realm can *personal ethics* become constituted as sovereign and be closely linked to a personally chosen style of life—that is, to an aesthetic.¹¹

In short, Syrians are today caught between two variants of impossibility, in a sort of limbo where it is unclear what the settling patterns will be for the various types of ethical projects which previously contended to orient them—including secular-democratic ethics, Islamist ethics of different sorts, the ethics of *dhikr* and Sufism, and other frameworks. These projects are now in suspension, yet will undoubtedly take up new configurations in post-conflict Syria.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES

Power and relationality

In what follows I discuss the theoretical approaches that inform my research, some of which are evident in the above vignette and discussion. One of the main purposes of this dissertation is to place front and center the forms of power and authority that shape *dhikr* and its related practices. Though not directly cited in these chapters, the thinker deserving first mention here is Marx, and his great insights on the formative nature of power relations, which for him is a key aspect of the primacy of the material over the ideal. Marx's thinking has greatly influenced in various ways many of the thinkers I employ, including most importantly Michel Foucault. Foucault's seminal work on the relations between discourse and power provides much of the basis for how I examine the historically shifting structures of authority that frame and constitute *dhikr*. Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* was for me a text that provided a clear, practical notion of how to approach discourse—as a collection of statements along with the rules of their appearance, their conditions, exclusions, and their associated authority

10 Pandolfo 2010. See Chapter 3 of this dissertation, "Memory and Authority," for Syrian voices expressing similar sentiments.

11 Asad 2003, p. 255.

structures. My examination of *dhikr* does not attempt to adopt the schematism of Foucault's framework in that text, but takes up the assumption that examination of the discourses surrounding *dhikr* requires consideration of the processes of their social and institutional legitimization, as well as the development of a sense of the subject-producing stakes of those discourses.

At the same time, Foucault's work reminds us to avoid the totalizing and unifying effects of discourse, showing that discourse is not to be conceived as expression or articulation of preexistent content, but rather a constellation of contested subjectivity-positions whose stakes are prestige and the authority to define truth.¹² In my research I thereby seek to avoid reifying an Islamic or *dhikr* tradition in places where other considerations, such as those of contested, emerging forms, are more pertinent. Dovetailing with this more open aspect of discourse are performative approaches to language, which are discussed further below.

Foucault's middle-period texts, including *Discipline and Punish*, *Madness and Civilization*, and *The Birth of the Clinic*, provide more detailed, historically-situated examinations of the inseparable relation of institutional, embodied practices (incarceration, psychiatry, medicine) to the development of discourses, knowledges, and truth. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault provides novel conceptions of power that reveal the inadequacy of the notion of power as a force that is wielded and externally exerted. Foucault's conception of power as a dispersed force which works both from within and without is important to my work insofar as I position *dhikr* as a site where subjectivities are cultivated through authoritative relations to men, texts, and relevant concepts and principles, and as a authoritative field in which configurations of ethics, bodily expression, rationality, and affect are worked out and reflected upon. Foucault brings attention to the ways power works within the subject even in the everyday, seemingly mundane actions and features of a practice or institution. While he initially works out his conceptions of power in the modern contexts covered in the above works, the direction of his later writing suggests a less strict demarcation between premodern and modern forms of power.¹³

The dynamic relationality that Foucault's work stresses between discourse and practice, and between ideologies, concepts, the body, and power, is brought to the fore in his concept of the apparatus, or *dispositif*. Chapters 4 and 5 "Composition, Art, Creativity, Parts I and II" use the apparatus notion to examine the discourses and practices that help generate contemporary musical compositions used in the *dhikr*. More broadly, the apparatus concept informs my approach to *dhikr* as a particular node within a larger network of social and authoritative relations and practices. The reworkings of the

12 Foucault 1972, p. 55 and 50.

13 I have in mind here Foucault's texts on antiquity, including the volumes *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self* in the *History of Sexuality* series, and the related essay "On the Genealogy of Ethics," all of which treat power, subjectivity, and ethics in a way that escapes somewhat the historical distinctions made in previous works. Anthropology has been an important site for the expansion of Foucauldian thinking outside the contexts of modern Europe, though some of Foucault's main interpreters, notably Paul Rabinow, express skepticism towards uses of Foucault's thought that ignore what might be called its "intellectual specificity," or that employ it to show the workings of power within a given tradition, and thereby reify the category of "tradition."

apparatus concept by Giorgio Agamben and Gilles Deleuze have also been helpful in this regard, as both have sought to loosen some of Foucault's original constraints on the concept.¹⁴ Agamben links the apparatus concept to the early Christian notion of *oikonomia*, which he defines as having denoted “a set of practices, bodies of knowledge, measures, and institutions that aim to manage, govern, control, and orient—in a way that purports to be useful—the behaviors, gestures, and thoughts of human beings.”¹⁵

Deleuze for his part stresses the importance of dynamism and openness within the apparatus, through what he calls “lines of flight,” those trajectories of possibility that help generate an apparatus' capacity for change. Deleuze writes, “In every apparatus we must untangle the lines of the recent past from the lines of the near future: the archive from the current, the part of history and the part of becoming, *the part of analysis and the part of diagnosis*.”¹⁶ Deleuze's writing on the apparatus has helped me to conceive of how *dhikr* integrates both these types of relations—to the past through “lines of stratification or sedimentation,” and to the present through “lines of actualization or creativity.”¹⁷

Lastly in terms of power and relationality, Pierre Bourdieu and Martin Heidegger have each helped me conceive the ways that authority relations suffuse, act upon, and channel the specific techniques and tools of *dhikr*. Their thought provides a model for my examination of how modernizing pressures effect shifts in the function and significance of traditional techniques, and how preexistent discursive traditions and practices impact in significant ways the adoption of new tools, including for example the use of a synthesizer in *dhikr* composition (Chapters 4 and 5), and the use of cellphone cameras by *dhikr* participants (Chapter 3). In his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu writes “The world of urgencies and of goals already achieved, of uses to be made and paths to be taken, of objects endowed with a ‘permanent teleological character’, in Husserl's phrase, tools, instruments and institutions, the world of practicality, can grant only a conditional freedom.”¹⁸ Here Bourdieu stresses the limiting nature of constraints, likely to critique liberal notions of negative freedom, yet in the larger scheme of his structure-centric thought it can clearly also be approached as that which enables action.

The notion of an object's “teleological character,” which I take to be not as much “permanent” as it is lingering, is an operative link, via Husserl, between my particular applications of the ideas of Bourdieu and Heidegger. In Heidegger's reflections on tool use, a purposive teleology marks the configuration of actor, instrument, and action, and this notion has helped me ask the question of the degree to which certain discursively-articulated or practically-oriented ends may or may not be absorbed when objects and

14 In relation to Foucault's formulation of the concept, Agamben expands, perhaps excessively, the type of institutions and practices which might be identified as an apparatus to “the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and—why not—language itself.” Agamben 2009, p. 14. Deleuze expands the range of social and class positionings in which apparatuses might operate: “Couldn't we cite apparatuses where subjectivation no longer goes through aristocratic life or the aestheticized existence of free men but through the marginalized existence of the ‘excluded’?” Deleuze 2007, p. 341.

15 Agamben 2009, p. 12.

16 Deleuze 2007, p. 346.

17 Deleuze 2007, p. 347.

18 Bourdieu 1977, p. 76.

tools, including the camera, the synthesizer, and music theory, are incorporated in *dhikr*-related practices.

Colonialism and religion

The question of the specific pressures and associated transformations to which religious practices are subject in the postcolonial context is another important theme of this dissertation. Many of the thinkers who have helped generate my approach to this theme have themselves reworked Marxian and Foucauldian notions on power and applied them to the Middle East and Islam. The work of Talal Asad has been singularly important in steering my analysis of *dhikr* away from essentialized conceptions of religion, often rooted in spiritual, psychological, or functionalist notions of human need, and towards the specificity of the historical and authoritative contexts where those needs are generated, felt, expressed, and represented.

Asad writes of the transformative effects of modern forms of power:

Within the modern world that has come into being, changes have taken place as the effect of dominant political power by which new possibilities are constructed and old ones destroyed. The changes do not reflect a simple expansion of the range of individual choice, but the creation of conditions in which only new (i.e., modern) choices can be made. The reason for this is that the changes involve the reformation of subjectivities and the reorganization of social fields in which subjects act and are acted upon.¹⁹

In *dhikr*, the results of the pressures exerted by this power are many, and in these chapters I examine changes in the normative conceptions of authority within *dhikr*, as well as renewed concern with the form affective expressions and musical engagements are to take.

One of the central trajectories of modern notions of religion is that its most proper and essential domain inheres in inward individual spirituality and ethical reflection, a notion which regardless of its explanatory purchase vis-à-vis particular religious traditions plays a significant role in how all traditions have been evaluated. This evaluation has not only occurred with regard to particular traditions taken as a whole, but also has included the parsing out of various elements of a given tradition, their separate evaluation, and their being either cast aside or offered as redeeming forms upon which a religious practice consonant with modernity might be based.²⁰ Regarding interiority and Islam, Asad notes, “[S]ubjective interiority has always been recognized in Islamic tradition—in ritual worship (*ibadat*) as well as in mysticism (*tasawwuf*). What modernity does bring in is a new *kind* of subjectivity, one that is appropriate to ethical autonomy and aesthetic self-invention—a concept of ‘the subject’ that has a new grammar.”²¹ My examination of *dhikr*, a practice closely associated with Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), speaks to the interstices between the types of subjective “grammar” that Asad

19 Asad 1992, p. 337.

20 See Lopez 1998 and Orsi 2004 (Chapter 6 “Snakes Alive: Religious Studies Between Heaven and Earth”) for illustrations of the conceptual mechanisms by which specific instances of such transformations have operated.

21 Asad 2003, p. 225.

mentions, a space wrought with all the pressures that the modern state, economy, and forms of social organization have brought to bear upon collective and individual life. Chapter 2, “Memory and Authority,” addresses these issues by examining the work done by memory in creating representations of authoritative forms of the past, and in forming implicit critiques of the modern state’s failure to encompass and incorporate them.

Timothy Mitchell’s ethnography *Colonising Egypt* is another important influence on this dissertation insofar as it was the text that first introduced me to the breadth and depth of colonialism’s effects. As Mitchell writes, “Colonising refers not simply to the establishing of a European presence but also to the spread of a political order that inscribes in the social world a new conception of space, new forms of personhood, and a new means of manufacturing the experience of the real.”²² His book, which employs Foucauldian and other insights on power, is a detailed historical account of the initial effects of colonialism in Egypt, and shows the material practices of city planning, modes of labor and military organization, and education to be implicated in significant shifts in fundamental ways of seeing, thinking, feeling, and ordering. The following chapters similarly take the emergence in Syria of modern forms of economy, leisure, family, and musical education as junctures that have shifted the set of questions that are addressed in *dhikr* practices.

Dipesh Chakrabarty’s book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* is a significant influence on some of the methodological approaches taken in this dissertation. Much of Chakrabarty’s text deals with the problem of translation in the writing of history, specifically with the question of the accessibility, from within modern secular languages, of the events and voices of the past, especially when those voices speak in ways not recognized as truthful within secular languages.²³ Insofar as the past inhabits the present, this is also a question of the accessibility of current life-worlds, and of the temporal gaps with which they contend, to languages founded on universal reason. In this way Chakrabarty’s work has been germane to my examination of memory, and the ways that modes of relating the past, and relating to it, can serve as routes for both embracing and escaping it.²⁴ Despite their importance, I have applied Mitchell and Chakrabarty in this dissertation mostly latently, while other thinkers of postcoloniality and Islam, including Saba Mahmood, Stefania Pandolfo, Charles Hirschkind, Brinkley Messick, and Baber Johansen, have generated insights that I have applied (and cited) in a more specific manner.

Language, affect, ethics

A third theme that structures my approach to *dhikr* is the relation between language, affect, and ethics. The work of both Pandolfo and Hirschkind has been important for me in this regard, as has the input of each as I have formulated questions related to this theme. Pandolfo’s work demonstrates that the gaps generated by processes of translation are crucial sites where informant reflections lay the ground for

22 Mitchell 1988, p. ix.

23 See Chakrabarty 2000, pp. 75 and 103, for example.

24 Chakrabarty 2000, pp. 106 and 244.

anthropological analysis.²⁵ Approaching these gaps means approaching the limits of formative concepts and norms, and therefore the limits of subjectivity. Pandolfo shows these limits to be articulated in discourses on desire, madness, and death, discourses where the broken contours of postcolonial languages reveal the impossibility of translation between life-worlds. Her manner of bringing Arabic-language concepts into cautious conversation with Western philosophical concepts, and her sustained effort to show how that dialog is often rooted in the speech, bodies, and sufferings of postcolonial subjects, has been a model for my efforts to listen to the voices of the men I got to know in Damascene *dhikr* circles.

A central assumption in my analysis of *dhikr* is that language acts to intervene in the social world, rather than merely describe it. Gleaned from the work of J. L. Austin, Judith Butler, and Jacques Derrida, and from anthropologists who employ their insights, the notion of performativity I adopt derives from my study of these thinkers in seminars with Hirschkind and with Alexei Yurchak. This has meant approaching *dhikr* as a site in which certain questions and issues are worked out, rather than as one that expresses a pre-established traditional or cultural form, or a ready-made set of religious meanings. It has also meant integrating into the notion of performativity the insights of Foucault on power, and of Asad on the place of authority and discipline in religion, and thereby seeking to identify in the practices those points of openness where contestations concerning present social life are being made. In his examination of sermon-cassette listening in Egypt, Hirschkind shows that focused listening practices, in their iteration, help to shape affective and ethically-oriented dispositions (such as, for example, a cultivated stance of fear towards the prospect of being questioned about one's faith after death), and that these dispositions bear upon social and political life because they concern "that space of communal reflexivity and action understood as necessary for perfecting and sustaining the totality of practices upon which an Islamic society depends."²⁶ In a like manner, I have sought to ascertain the ways that *dhikr* practices impinge upon present and future social forms.

Hirschkind's work focuses on practices that engage the senses and affect, constructing what he calls a "moral physiology" that itself construes an ethics, a "Quranically tuned body and soul" that serves as the trained ground for words, actions, thoughts, and feelings.²⁷ In Egypt, as in Syria, such embodied moral capacities are engaged within life-worlds often marked by difficult, distinctly modern political and economic conditions, and show both the dynamism of Islamic theological categories and their adaptability within contexts marked, as Pandolfo notes, "by social exclusion, injustice, and by a form of death-in-life."²⁸

My analysis of *dhikr* questions normative secular conceptions of the primacy and independence of reason vis-à-vis affect and the body, attending to modernity as a set of power relations that tends to align religion in accordance with this hierarchy in particular

25 The sense of these gaps as centrally instructive elements not to be paved over by the process of translation was observed by Walter Benjamin (citing Pannwitz), in Benjamin 1968, p. 81. Pandolfo's work elaborates Benjamin's insights as anthropological method, in both directions of translation.

26 Hirschkind 2006, p. 8.

27 Hirschkind 2006, pp. 74-104.

28 Pandolfo 2010.

ways. Modernity in this sense distances itself from, and makes into zones of alterity, practices which contravene this hierarchy, and which thereby might otherwise speak to something of Heidegger's assertion that "man dwells poetically."²⁹

Indeed, the ordering of types of human activity, their distribution into the domains characteristic of modernity—including, for example, the domains of politics, economy, religion, love, and art, to name a few—assigns the poetic and aesthetic dimensions of language a place subordinate to that of objective referentiality and deliberative reason. In this normative linguistic economy, a heritage of the Enlightenment and, for Heidegger, of Greek thought, circumscriptions of the poetic are meant to prevent the disruption, by affect and aesthetic passion, of the operation of reason, and to channel these language modes towards specific ends that, in their social and economic contexts, ultimately validate reason's distinctiveness and primacy. These secondary dimensions are also valued, especially in Romantic-era formulations, in a way that makes of them, in Heidegger's critical assessment, an "adornment of a thinking that rescues itself from science by means of poetry."³⁰

SUFISM AND AUTHORITY

Neo-Sufism and colonialism

Understanding *dhikr* is impossible without also examining Sufism, a term which itself has been the subject of much recent debate. Scholarly understandings and use of the term *Sufism* have been documented by the team of R.S. O'Fahey and Bernd Radtke, who have attacked what they see as its indiscriminate use:

By scholars of classical and medieval Islam Sufism is studied as mystical philosophy, in modern Islamic historiography Sufism is used *de facto* either as a synonym for popular Islam or for its organizational manifestations in the brotherhoods. The assumption seems to be that post-classical Sufism can be dealt with simply as a set of symbols, litanies, prayers, miracles, tomb visitations and the like, the paraphernalia of maraboutic credulity.³¹

O'Fahey and Radtke argue for greater incorporation of Sufi intellectual texts into ethnographic accounts of the latter, but also seem to neglect potentially complex interrelations between discourse, institutions, and practice. In their account insufficient attention is paid, for example, to the case of a practitioner for whom Sufi texts are present only as elements absorbed into his sheikh's authoritative teachings, or even more generally into the aura of his authority. Further, left unaddressed is the question of just what the everyday realities and contexts of medieval Sufi practice may have been, and how their consideration might challenge current, received notions of the categories of religion and mysticism. It may be helpful to understand the "indiscriminate" nature of

29 Heidegger rejects the sense of the poetic as "merely an ornament and bonus." He writes, "Poetry does not fly above and surmount the earth in order to escape it and hover over it. Poetry is what first brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it, and thus brings him into dwelling." Heidegger 1971, p. 215.

30 Heidegger 1993, p. 260.

31 O'Fahey & Radtke 2009, p. 54.

approaches to Sufism as resulting from a gap between textual approaches to medieval Sufism and practice-based approaches to modern Sufism. This gap can only be remedied through careful consideration of the formative and often intractable relations between discourse, practice, and power. O’Fahey and Radtke express a degree of skepticism towards anthropological perspectives, but anthropology nonetheless offers important methodological tools for bridging this gap. While it is possible this scholarly pair would not consider the types of *dhikr* groups I studied to be Sufi groups—the reasons for which may be gleaned below—any exclusion of these practices from that domain begs the question of the neglect of bodily practice and worldly authority as the necessary conditions through which any texts acquire meaning.

Another of O’Fahey and Radtke’s concerns is the term *neo-Sufism*, which has been adopted in recent decades by a minority of scholars as a more appropriate appellation for modern-era inheritors of Sufi tradition. Many of the characteristics said to differentiate neo-Sufism from traditional Sufism relate directly to colonial history, and indeed these elements were often reflected in the ways the men I knew in Damascus framed *dhikr*. Neo-Sufism, as agreed by scholars on both sides of the question of the term’s usefulness, refers to the rejection of many popular Sufi practices, including saint worship and excessive trance, and to a distancing from asceticism and the rigid dyadic hierarchy of the shiikh-*murid* (disciple) relationship. It stresses conventional societal roles instead of monastic withdrawal, and emphasizes Sharia and the *sunna* (the collected corpus of the Prophet’s example) as the moral bases of a more socially-integrated life. Neo-Sufism is also said to be marked by larger-scale organizations requiring more complex hierarchies, and an increased willingness to participate in political and military actions.³² O’Fahey and Radtke argue convincingly that these tendencies are not particular to the modern era, but even if they were particularly modern, it is not clear how such a term would in fact be any more helpful for understanding contemporary Sufism than, for example, *neo-Islam* would be for understanding contemporary Islam, or for that matter *neo-Arabic* for examining changes in the realm of language over the modern era.

At the same time, evidence of historical continuity should not divert attention from the relation of changes in Sufi practices to broader social and political changes leading up to and following colonial intervention, and from how these changes might be distinct from those marking previous histories. Certainly Sufi practices have become a site for new types of negotiations in postcolonial contexts where bureaucratic rationality, bourgeois norms of affect, and the social and political institutions of the modern state have come to frame and inform and dominate so many aspects of life. Sufi orders and practices have for the last few centuries been implicated in different ways in the pressures which expanding European power have brought to bear upon the conception and practice of Islam, and several of these ways are attested by the men with whom I spoke and spent time in the context of *dhikr*. These include, for example, concerns articulated by sheikhs about the ways that authority relations in *dhikr* might fit into broader, more recently-emerged patterns of religious and secular authority relations in society. Michael Frishkopf, a scholar of Egyptian Sufism, describes how Sufism was positioned and

32 Frishkopf 2001a, p. 15, and O’Fahey and Radtke 2009, p. 57. This description of neo-Sufism is put together from lists provided by these authors, who argue mostly against the term.

characterized in the early modern era, revealing a genealogy to some of the informant views I have already cited, and showing the types of assessments to which contemporary Sufism responds:

The late 18th and 19th [century] witnessed proliferation of Islamic reform movements, responding to a perception of internal weakness in Islamic societies (and later to European encroachments), attributed to an insufficient application of Islamic principles. Traditional Sufi orders were accused of fostering disunity and heterodoxy in the Umma [Islamic community], contradicting the unity of early Islam, and the unity of God. Medieval Sufism was also attacked for promoting social withdrawal (asceticism and spiritual madness), leading to social weakness.³³

Transformations of Sharia and patterns of authority

Sufi practices, including *dhikr*, remain a site where social and political continuities and discontinuities are negotiated and constructed. *Dhikr*'s incorporation of music, dance, prayer, and religious lessons provides a chance for participants to generate, reflect on, and come to grips with new patterns of engagement with central Islamic social institutions, including most importantly that of Sharia. One of the most important events in the history of Islamic law was the codification of Sharia in the late nineteenth century, with the Ottoman *tanzimat* reforms. Baber Johansen, a scholar of changes in conceptions of Sharia, argues that codification "reduced Islamic law to personal statute law, [while] the state's written law abandoned the purely ethical norms of that [Islamic legal] tradition and with them the concept of the individual's own [interior] forum (*batin*)."³⁴ These reforms changed the functional assumptions undergirding Sharia, and its manner of social instantiation or practice. As Johansen notes, "The *fiqh* notion that a legal system should contain nonenforceable ethical norms was abandoned in the process of codification."³⁵ This process, an act of modern state power, significantly limited the domain of religious law to the private and personal, and thereby marked that domain as religious in the normative modern sense. At the same time, it evacuated from much of the practice of that law the primacy of the personal and the interior in favor of universal, case-independent code.

An important effect of codification was the displacement of authorities like the *mufti*, the local religious scholar sought by Muslims for non-binding opinions on a matter, and their replacement by anonymous state authorities more beholden to enforceable codes of law. Brinkley Messick, an anthropologist who has documented Sharia transformations in Yemen, comments on the institution of the *mufti*: "It was ... the channel through which mundane, earth-hugging realities, including new factual

33 Frishkopf 2001a, p. 13. For a comprehensive treatment of colonial attacks on Sufi practice, ideology, and authority, and the responses of the Sufi orders, see Sirriyeh 1999, especially "The Challenge of European Anti-Sufism," pp. 27-53, and "Traditional Sufism or a Religion of Progress?" pp. 54-85. Other accounts of Sufi-order decline during the twentieth century are provided in Weismann 2005, p. 39 and Weismann 2004, pp. 304-308.

34 Johansen 2003, p. 688.

35 Johansen 2003, p. 696.

developments, were formally noticed by and reflected upon by qualified scholarly minds, leading to analogical extensions of the body of legal knowledge.... Muftis were the creative mediators of the ideal and the real of the shari‘a.”³⁶ In light of this adaptive function, codification and state bureaucratization of Islamic law would seem to have disabled a key mechanism by which Islamic legal tradition was able to adjust to changing circumstances, and this just as radical changes were being imposed by colonial powers across the widest possible array of social, political, economic, and cultural domains.

In Damascus, as elsewhere in Syria and the Arab world, the Sufi orders were an important part of this type of locally-interpreted, non-binding modality of Sharia practice. The authority of neighborhood Sufi sheikhs was sought often, even by those not affiliated with Sufi orders or with the *dhikr* meetings they convened.³⁷ The authority of sheikhs and imams associated with the urban Sufi orders was still significant enough in the early to middle parts of the twentieth century that its memory persists among the oldest Syrians, as addressed in Chapter 2, “Memory and Authority.” Moreover, that authority is selectively represented within advertisements, books, and popular television dramas, media overseen by the state wherein those previous forms of authority become the object of considerable nostalgia, and a powerful symbol of Damascene Arab authenticity.

In the context of the Arab nationalist histories promoted by the Bath party, these state-sanctioned media representations evoke the independence of small-scale urban communities, their capacity to manage their own affairs. Typically, these dramatizations highlight the muffling of that spirit first by Turkish Ottoman and then French interventions. Regardless of whether Ottoman rule was actually experienced by Syrian Arabs as an occupation, which it seems not to have been, the nostalgia that the state cultivates in these historical narratives is strongly ambivalent, positioning the state as the champion of the very forms of authority that it displaced. On one hand, such narratives deflect the notion that the modern state, and Bathist rule in particular, shares responsibility for suppressing those former institutions of community self-direction. On the other hand, the nostalgia intersects with living memory of those same bygone social-authoritative arrangements, which while impossible to recover nonetheless point up the fact that forms of political authority other than the modern state, with its seemingly deleterious effect on Syrian life, are possible.

History of state relations to Sufism

In Damascus as in Syria as a whole, Sunni Muslim religiosity and institutions have a long history of influence from Sufi orders, themselves diverse and variable. Since the orders first took hierarchical form under Seljuk Turk rule a thousand years ago, they have had sometimes amicable, sometimes contentious relations with ruling powers, and

36 Messick 1993, p. 151.

37 Certainly this practice persists, not only with Sufi sheikhs, but with mosque imams as well. I have chanced to observe imams in advisory meetings on a few occasions, when interviews were interrupted by counsel-seekers. Paulo Pinto provides three ethnographic examples of mediation by Sufi sheikhs, all in rural contemporary (pre-conflict) Syria, where sheikhs perhaps retain more authority. In his examples, the sheikhs’ knowledge of personalities and local histories strongly inform his decisions. See Pinto 2007, p. 116-121.

both trends are indeed evident within the rule of Hafez al-Asad.³⁸ Similarly, the complicated interplay between what are sometimes deemed mystical (inwardly and metaphorically focused) and orthodox (outwardly and juridically focused) forms of Islam is evident throughout the history of Damascene Sufism. This history speaks to the difficulty of upholding distinctions between these forms as independent trends. The idea of such a split, regardless, is an influential element in scholarly, journalistic, and everyday discussions of Islam, and as a kind of reified ideal type exerts significant influence on discourses concerning Islam.

For example, historian of Islam Marshall Hodgson makes the following observation, which evokes both models and arranges them in a sort of evolutionary hierarchy:

From the beginning, other Muslims were attracted to a more individualistic piety, concerning themselves with more personal problems, which a pious man met when he tried to deepen and purify his inward worship. As this sort of piety matured, it became frankly mystical: it was inspired, above all, by subjective inward awarenesses emerging as the selfhood matured, and the historical, the political role of the Muslim Ummah came to play a minimal role in it.³⁹

Here, the distinction Hodgson draws between the proto-mystical “other Muslims” and those concerned with politics and society (and the spread of Islam) is bolstered by the parallel assertion of a naturally inverse relation between the domain of “subjective inward awarenesses” and that of politics and history. Though the notion of such a foundational split within Islam is common enough in the West, as is the idea that inward spiritual awareness is more mature than a religiosity concerned with outward forms, reading this passage with a careful eye leaves us with little but an a priori assertion eloquently read into early Islamic history.

The notion of the above-mentioned distinction may be a factor in the gap between scholarship that has attended to Sufism as a domain of mystical experience, practice, and meaning, and work that has framed Sufism as a node of political and social-authoritative relations and movements. However, discussion of Sufism’s relation to ruling powers should not incline us to view it as itself encompassed, entirely or even mostly, by the hierarchical orders proper. Indeed, Sufistic practices, interpretations, and sensibilities (including, significantly, particular ways of relating to Sharia) are elements long absorbed into Islamic practice. In Syria, an example of this influence would be the group *adhān* (prayer-calling) in the Damascus and Aleppo Umayyad Mosques, where instead of being performed by one individual, the *adhān* is called by one lead voice backed by a chorus of about five to ten men, the latter taking the repeated lines within the *adhān*’s text. Another example is the vocalized group *dhikr* chants that follow mosque prayers throughout the

38 Trimingham 1971, pp. 7-9. Seljuk Turk domination and control of previously Fatimid Shiite territories was an important event in the history of state relations to Sunni religiosity, as the Seljuks undertook efforts to establish a relatively centralized Sunni orthodoxy over and against the Shiite practices and ideas that had spread under Fatimid rule.

39 Hodgson 1974, p. 393. Hodgson’s work is a rich and detailed resource, and I cite the above passage merely to make a point about the widespread nature of the assumption that an opposition inheres between mystical and orthodox religiosities, Islamic or otherwise.

country.⁴⁰ In these chants, more common in the morning, evening and night prayers which are themselves performed aloud, a series of formulations, including *allāhu akbar*, *subhānallāh*, *alḥamdulillāh*, and others are intoned in chorus.⁴¹ Sufi texts, modern and traditional, are read by many who have never had contact with Sufi orders, and provide an array of ways by which Muslims might renew their relation to daily practice, be it prayer, fasting, or economic and social life.⁴²

It is during Ottoman rule in the late eighteenth century that the Sufi orders begin to be brought into the fold of the bureaucratic modern state, at that time already emulating European modes of state organization.⁴³ From then until the mid-twentieth century the various orders in Syria fared differently in their relation with governing powers and their ability to adjust to the rapidly changing sociopolitical landscape. The Rifa'iyya and Mawlawi orders, for example, the former primarily lower-class rural and the latter urban and elite, both suffered significant decline in the twentieth century. Government repression included land and property seizures, closure of lodges, and assassination of the leadership.⁴⁴ During Hafez al-Asad's rule, men associated with the orders, including Sufi sheikhs, joined the Islamic opposition of the 70's and 80's, and like the Muslim Brothers with whom they often overlapped suffered as "targets of State repression."⁴⁵

Hafez al-Asad nonetheless continued the effort, begun before his rule, of constructing and maintaining a normative vision of Islamic practice. This effort was largely centered on empowering a local subgroup of the transnational Naqshbandiyya Sufi order as the means of disseminating that vision, which scholar of Syrian Sufism Paulo Pinto has called "a politically quietist, spiritualized, and intellectually modernist form of Muslim religiosity."⁴⁶ The seat of that power is the Abu Nur Foundation, where a Sharia-based and often implicitly Sufistic orientation towards Islam has been articulated in lessons and degree programs for Syrians and foreigners. Itzhak Weismann, an Israeli

40 Such group *dhikr* after prayers is nearly completely absent in mosques in the U.S., largely due to the significant influence of Salafi and Wahhabi interpretations in which such group practice is deemed a *bid'a*, or "innovation" not sanctioned by the Prophet. In lieu of local traditions, and due to the diversity of national origins within mosque congregations, the stripped-down interpretations from the Gulf tend to dominate in U.S. mosques as a sort of least common denominator. This effect is actively maintained by Salafi and Wahhabi Muslims who take it upon themselves to correct anything they might see as aberrant in mosques they visit. In post-conflict Syria, the diversity of mosque practices from region to region and mosque to mosque will perhaps be greater than it was before the conflict, when all mosques were under control of the state, which ensured fairly consistent models for prayer observance and modes of interpreting the Qur'an and the Sunna.

41 These common phrases, often grouped together, mean "God is Great," "Glory be to God," and "All praise is God's," respectively. In this context following prayers, the *dhikr* is often accompanied by a religious lesson or another, more extended group recitation of longer phrases. None of these practices are required elements of the prayer proper, and men can stay as little or as long as they like through their performance.

42 The man I knew during my fieldwork who did the most reading of Sufi texts for his own edification had no contact with any of the Sufi orders or *dhikr* groups, and had little interest in developing any.

43 Pinto 2007, p. 107.

44 Weismann 2004, p. 306.

45 Pinto 2007, p. 109.

46 Pinto 2007, pp. 109-110.

historian of Syrian Sufism, describes what has become known as the Kuftariyya order, under leadership of the Kuftaro family:

This is the only Sufi organization in the country to be allowed freedom of action by the regime, with whom it is closely associated. Despite claims to early beginnings, the Kuftariyya seems to have emerged following the Ba‘th takeover in 1963 and the election of Kuftaro a year later to the highest religious position in Syria, that of the Grand Mufti. In 1971, after the rise to power of Hafiz al-Asad, who sought to appease the Sunni population, Kuftaro’s mosque in north Damascus was made the basis of the Abu al-Nur Islamic Foundation.⁴⁷

Even after his violent repression of the intervening Islamic opposition movements of the 80’s, the Asad regime’s efforts were up until the current uprising largely successful. I found that while most Syrians knew of the Abu Nur Foundation’s connection with the Kuftaro family and with the government, few represented Abu Nur as anything other than an institution where a solid footing in Sharia might be gained, either by occasional lesson attendance or full-time enrollment. Though all religious authorities are potentially considered by Syrians as extensions of the state, and even of its security apparatus, Abu Nur was not deemed any more complicit in this regard. The Foundation was not seen as having anything but the most general Sufi orientation, except by those with a marked interest in studying religion, and by elite Damascenes. People from educated and influential classes of Damascenes proper, people who self-identify as originally from Damascus and who are now a minority of the city’s population, were much more likely to have a sense of the Abu Nur Foundation as a political project, perhaps due to their more extensive, personal memories of local political histories.

The recent conflict has drastically altered this pattern, however, and it is very unlikely that Syrians any longer see Abu Nur and its associated figures as representing a general Sunni authority. Early in the conflict, when the Syrian government began violent campaigns against demonstrators, influential figures associated with Abu Nur came out in support of the government, and against the protestors. The Kurdish religious scholar Said Ramadan Bouti, then Syria’s best known religious scholar, lost much of his public credibility when he formally declared the irreligiosity of those demonstrating.⁴⁸ Interventions like these led to the widespread perception of these figures as partisans, and to their being pilloried on Facebook and other online venues. Bouti, who I happened to see several times in the vicinity of Abu Nur during my fieldwork, was assassinated on March 21 of 2013. The government claimed a suicide bomber killed him and fifty others while he gave a lesson in a mosque, yet video footage of the assassination clearly belies this, leading some opposition members to claim the regime killed him to prevent his imminent defection.⁴⁹

47 Weismann 2004, p. 311. See to p. 315 for more on the relations between Kuftaro, the Naqshbandiyya, and the regime. The Abu-Nur Foundation is one of the largest religious training institutions in Syria, and at the time of my fieldwork had a large number of full-time Syrian and foreign students, as well as many regular older attendees of public lessons.

48 No author, “Sheikh al-Bouti, the Syrian Sunni cleric who stood by Assad,” english.alarabiyya.net, (March 22, 2013), <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/2013/03/22/-Sheikh-al-Bouti-the-Syrian-Sunni-cleric-who-stood-by-Assad.html>, (accessed Oct 12, 2013).

49 No author, “Video shows Syrian Sunni cleric’s exact moment of death,” english.alarabiyya.net, (April

Regardless of how Abu Nur fares in coming years, the institution is testament both to state involvement in organizing and regulating Islamic practice, and to the unproblematic coexistence of Sufism and Sharia-based orthodoxy. Without question, state power is the single most important factor behind the rise of the Kuftariyya branch of the Naqshbandiyya Sufi order, and behind the order's success in establishing a consistent if not normative mode of Islamic practice in Syria. Yet state power plays much less of a role in the tenability of a Sufi oriented, Shariah-based orthodoxy itself. It is not the strong arm of the state which has held these elements together and made their admixture viable. The notion that Islamic practices are oriented along a spectrum of relative and presumably inverse degrees of mystical and orthodox essences stands up neither to the fact of Sufi commitments to the observance and interpretation of Sharia principles and codes, nor to the significant attention paid within orthodox approaches to matters of affect, experience, and interiority, whether in the form of personal emotions and struggles, or dreams and visions and reflections upon them.

It is not only to the more characteristic institutions of Sufism that we must look in order to gauge how Sufism fares at any given moment, but also to the modes of valuation, the sensibilities that Sufism has generated, and to their manner of transformation and adaptation within contemporary life-worlds. It is nonetheless possible that, given the efficacy of modern forms of power and its attendant norms and concepts, the characterization of Sufism as a form of Islam concerned with a more Western-styled cultivation of inward states and reflection, and not with law and social forms and structures, may act to some degree as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Western constructions of Sufism as a redeemable form of Islam more focused on individual spirituality, and thus more amenable to modernity, are closely tied to the notion that religion's proper domain is the private and personal, not the social or political. This notion is at the same time implicated in the modernizing pressures and forms of power which have been changing Syrian society, and therefore the double role played by this notion—in transforming Islamic practices and motivating perceptions of them—makes it especially important to consider when assessing those practices.

In his discussion of the development of Sufism Marshall Hodgson makes several assertions suggesting he is not entirely convinced of the inherent opposition between inward reflection and the structures of law and society. After claiming with some skepticism that Freud's notion of "oceanic consciousness" may perhaps be of some value in assessing Sufism, he notes that "for purposes of understanding the role of mysticism in developing a civilization, one must see the more ecstatic mystical moments as part of a moral process which occurs almost universally."⁵⁰ What Hodgson means by "universally" is not altogether clear, but he likely refers to the social or political expanse implicated in the practices of individuals. Despite giving primacy to the individual, Hodgson's ambivalence concerning this conceptual divide evokes, or in its incompleteness prefigures, the sense of politics identified by Hirschkind as that which "gives direction to

9, 2013), <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2013/04/09/A-video-proves-Bouti-was-assassinated-by-gunfire-not-explosion-.html>, (accessed Oct 12, 2013) and Jim Muir, "Syria 'death video' of Sheikh al-Bouti poses questions," [bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22086230), (April 9, 2013), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22086230>, (accessed Oct 12, 2013).

50 Hodgson 1974, p. 397.

a normative ethical project centered upon questions of social responsibility, pious comportment, and devotional practice.”⁵¹ In Syria as elsewhere in the Arab Islamic world, it is precisely this connection between group and individual commitments to ethical-religious frameworks that demands new understandings.

Situating Contemporary Sufism

As seems to be the case with many who have studied *dhikr*, I found that only a few of my informants used cognates of the word *Sufism* (*taṣawwuf*) or made reference to Sufis (*ṣūfī*, or *mutaṣawwif*) when talking about their practices. The exceptions to this rule tended to be the sheikhs in charge of the *dhikr* groups and meetings, who might use the terms in a religious lesson, or in an interview where they discussed the origin of their practices. At least three factors contribute to the dearth of the term’s use within *dhikr* groups. First, the significant decrease in the prominence of the Sufi orders over the last two hundred years has left them in many cases without the social mandate and clarity of function they once had, as historically variable as the latter may have been. Second, Sufi discourse and practice has become partially charged with colonially-defined associations with backwardness, and so a given concept or practice will perhaps fare better in its circulation if it can be deemed Islamic rather than Sufi per se. Lastly, Sufism articulates rather lofty ideals, often expressed through hagiographic descriptions of the spiritual elite, and this, combined with Sufism’s stress on humility, mitigates against the profession of Sufi identity, much in the way that the English terms *saint* or *mystic* might.

Much scholarly work on Sufism tends to focus either on rarefied mystical-philosophical discourses or on exceptional social and political mobilizations by Sufi groups, and thereby ignores Sufism’s more mundane and constitutive histories. Hodgson makes a somewhat related observation, targeted at the first of these areas of focus: “Most mystical writers have spent far more time speaking of the everyday virtues of patience, courage, and unselfishness, as they appear in the mystical perspective, than of ecstasies or even of the cosmic unity these ecstasies seem to bear witness to.”⁵² As I have suggested, a significant gap exists between the rich variety of work that treats exceptional discourses and histories, and the paucity of work treating the everyday. Regarding the question of whether or not current *dhikr* participants are Sufis, the men with whom I worked would reply in the negative, and yet they continue to regularly seek out group practices of unquestionably Sufi origin. What emerged in our informal conversations supports Hodgson’s observation: talk of everyday virtues and trials far outweighs that of insights, visions, or ecstasies.

In line with this primacy of the everyday, I take contemporary Sufism to be a combination of two things. First, some kind of authoritative relation with a sheikh, even if it consists only in complying with his authority in the limited time and space of the *dhikr* meeting; and second, an ethical orientation to the practices, even that only means a sense of the practices conferring an ethical benefit or renewing one’s commitment to Sharia. I use the term *sheikh* to refer to the male authority figure who convenes and directs the

51 Hirschkind 2006, p. 5.

52 Hodgson 1974, p. 396.

dhikr, most often having both a family connection to Sufi authority and formal training in Sharia, but also having another, non-religious career. My examination of authority relations of different sorts, from the more typically-cited relation between sheikh and *murīd* (disciple) to the more informal conventions of advice-seeking and friendship, shows that organizational forms of hierarchy encompass only part of how Sufi authority acts and is produced within the lives of Muslims.

Ethnographic support for approaching Sufism as a continuum of relations that includes advice-seeking and informal instruction is rife in my own fieldwork and that of others. Paulo Pinto's work in Aleppo, for example, provides the basis of the following description of a *dhikr* sheikh, which I take here from a citation by Weismann: "Shaykh al-Hilali, a physician, follows his ancestors' tradition in stressing the primacy of the shari'a and in combining the religious and secular sciences. Subscribing to the decision of his grandfather to discontinue the path rather than compromise its ideals, he avoids guiding disciples and is content with conducting the *dhikr* and with providing spiritual advice for the community."⁵³ The sheikh's education in and stress of "secular sciences," his focus on Sharia, and the limitation of his activities to advice-giving and the direction of *dhikr*, are all elements that I encountered with Sufi sheikhs with whom I worked. Importantly, the choice to "discontinue the path" implicates only authority relations exceeding a certain threshold of rigor, likely the more formalized relation of sheikh and disciple, while the continuance of *dhikr* and advice-giving shows the "path" to be continued in a different guise, one where a formalized hierarchy cannot be said to be its essence.

To give advice-seeking and giving their due as constituting a form of authority relation that is not simply incidental within Sufism effects a slight shift in what we study as such. The historical pattern of state dismantling of Sufi order hierarchies and displacement of their authority, which while taking different forms in different national contexts is a feature that is more properly framed as particular to modern state power itself, brings more informal authority relations to the fore and makes their share of influence greater than it might have been in past eras. This is necessarily a speculative point, as the fact that scholars have taken the more formalized authority relations as constitutive of past histories, leaving informal relations and harder-to-qualify modes of belonging undocumented, makes historical comparisons difficult.

Similarly, most Sufi and *dhikr* groups in Damascus are much more open than they once were, without any rituals to effect the more binding modes of membership which were, it is said, characteristic of the past. There are few barriers between different groups, and any particular meeting is likely to be attended by men affiliated with another group, and not affiliated with any. Affiliations themselves are more often than not simply the result of repeated attendance. The Sufi context of *dhikr* is not without an influencing trajectory, however, and for the *dhikr* participants I got to know, Sufism meant that they live in accord with the principles of Sharia and cultivate love for the Prophet as the most perfect ideal of pious, God-centered life. *Dhikr* practices were for them an important part of this, and to some degree were what made up the difference between men like them, who might be considered to be the heirs of Sufism, and others who practiced similarly-conceived notions of Islam and yet had no clear engagement with Sufism per se. That is,

53 Weismann 2004, p. 305, based on Pinto 2001.

while a certain slippage remains evident between the categories of Sufism and *dhikr*, in some ways it is simply participation in the latter that implies engagement with the former.

In describing their practices, participants made little mention of elements particular to specific Sufi orders, and past differences in the various orders' conceptions of the relation between God and the Muslim were almost entirely downplayed. Like the modern de-emphasis of differences between the four main schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*madhāhib*), such understandings of Sufism eschew theological controversies in favor of a practically-oriented, socially-integrated piety that conflicts neither with the dictates of contemporary Syrian life nor the religious practice of the broader Sunni Muslim population of the country. The de-emphasis of difference provides another reason for approaching Sufism as not completely distinct from the different strands of Sunni, Sharia-based tradition, especially as many Syrian perceive the internecine conflicts of Muslims to be not only beneficial to Western powers, but sometimes deliberately exacerbated by them. Indeed, the observation that the origins of Salafism and of the Muslim Brotherhood both intersect with the Sufi orders has become a rightful commonplace in recent scholarship, even as assertions of a clear separation between Sufism and orthodox Islam continues more generally.

THINKING *DHIKR*

A *dhikr* rubric, and related terms

In this section I describe how I use the term *dhikr* in this dissertation, and address some related English-language terms whose use warrants clarification. I employ the term *dhikr* in its conventional sense to refer to the set of Sunni Muslim practices which includes coordinated chanting, singing, and movement. The Arabic word *dhikr* means mention, remembering, or recalling, and in the context of these practices has been the subject of extensive theological reflection elaborating the Muslim's recollection of God. Anthropologist Jonathan Shannon's work on Aleppine *dhikr* has highlighted the way the practices situate the body as a site where Islamic moral subjects are produced. Shannon writes:

From an aesthetic standpoint, *dhikr* can be understood as a practice that conditions or fashions moral discipline in participants. *Dhikr* also disciplines a specific musical self. The moral and musical self is accomplished through a repertoire of aesthetic practices that constitute the experiential heart of *dhikr*: music and rhythm, dance and motion, olfaction and tactility.⁵⁴

I will return to the question of music and dance below, but like Shannon I am concerned with *dhikr* as a practice where particular bodily and often affective engagements provide a space in which an ethics is developed. In contemporary *dhikr*, this ethics grapples with modern social transformations of the societies in which participants live, including the dislocation of the modes of social authority that *dhikr* and Sufi groups once held. The authoritative dimensions of the practice, and the relation of the authoritative networks of

54 Shannon 2004, p. 383.

dhikr to broader social networks of authority, is a concern that I infuse into these questions about the body, affect, and the production of ethical subjects.

Insofar as the category of aesthetics is deemed analytically relevant to *dhikr*—certainly bodily, vocal, affective, and musical stylistics are important elements of the practices—the question of that category’s traditional place within differentiated spheres of human activity demands attention. As understood in the Western tradition since the Enlightenment, and since Romantic-era reactions to its interventions, aesthetics has often been conceived as a domain in productive opposition to deliberative reason and the perceived constraints of rationalized social structures. Yet *dhikr*, through its simultaneous cultivation of musical pleasure, camaraderie, and affective ties to Sharia-based ethics, resists any analysis that would make hard and fast distinctions between aesthetics on one hand, and authority, hierarchy, ethics, and law on the other.

The terms *music* and *dance* are used throughout this dissertation, despite the fact that some of their connotations are either not applicable or are contested within *dhikr* practices. Neither *dhikr* participants nor Sufi literature tends to use the Arabic equivalents of these terms, and my use of them is intended only as a way to avoid the unwieldiness of other perhaps more precise terminology (e.g. “loosely coordinated sets of conventional movements”), and not as a claim to their applicability. As I spent time with men who played active roles in *dhikr* meetings, including singers, percussionists, dancers, sheikhs, and a composer, I became interested in the intersection of music discourses with the practice’s sonic forms (the “music of *dhikr*”) and in the historically recent influences of music ideologies upon the way those forms are thought. This interest was partly a result of Jonathan Shannon having introduced me to Zuheir Mnini, the composer of *dhikr* music with whom I attended many events, and who in turn introduced me to other men who like him expressed more explicitly musical approaches to *dhikr*. Chapters 4 and 5 together treat some of the ways that Western music and art discourses and ideologies, increasingly prevalent in the Arab world since the mid nineteenth century, have come to play a role in marking the boundaries of *dhikr* and in articulating its specific engagement of affect and pleasure.

Samir on *dhikr*

Before concluding, I offer the following discussion, which happened one night after I returned from a *dhikr* meeting. The speaker is Samir, who is in his early thirties and works in a government ministry office. Though he prays regularly, he does not identify as particularly religious. He is aware of my research topic, and I have had the feeling he does not deem *dhikr* a subject worthy of study. While we drink tea I show him a clip I filmed that night on my Nokia phone, and ask what he thinks. I put my audio recorder next to the teapot, and he watches the scene. He speaks slowly, thoughtfully:

Not just any person has the right to say things about such matters, but if you consider me as someone who doesn’t have any kind of specialized understanding of religion [*la afkah fī al-dīn*], I’ll say that I’m not with these practices. In the video, they’re dancing. This principle, where did they get it from? It’s an innovation [*bid’a*], it’s not something sanctioned by the Prophet or the early

followers of Islam.⁵⁵ They're worldly things, dancing around and singing, with no relation to things of the afterlife. You're not striving after God's pleasure when you do this, you're only trying to please yourself. If you brought someone from outside, from your country, who didn't belong to any other religion, and if you showed him prayer, the doctrinal system, the points of faith, and so on, he'll like it. He'll like it because of the organization of prayers, the praying five times. He'll see that people leave their sleep for the morning prayer, and their work for the afternoon prayer, for example, and he'll see that there's something beautiful that people leave these things for. He'll see that people love each other, give of their money to help each other, visit each other. The worldly affairs of Islam, the duties, the moral leanings and behavior. It's true that not everyone follows or applies these things, but they are beautiful things. However, if a person first saw this part of things [*dhikr*], he'll see it as kind of musical emotionality [*tarab*], and a kind of getting attached to the passions, a religion far from reality. He'll think Islam was not with the times. Like with the primitives in Africa, they dance around a fire and worship it. If you hadn't heard of Islam and saw these things, you wouldn't understand them. You'd say it's a bunch of empty nonsense [*khuzā' balā'*].

Samir, like Ridwan, places high value on moderation, orderliness, and social bonds as elements at once modern and traditionally Islamic. His critique correctly if implicitly identifies Islam as one of a set of traditions gathered by Western colonial perception into a blanket category of non-Western backwardness and incomprehensibility. He seeks to demonstrate that Islam shares more with the modern than it does with the primitive, and his words are laden with embarrassment or disapproval at the prospects of the clip's circulation, echoing the trajectory of what scholar of Sufism Paul Heck has called the "modernizing currents" that followed colonialism:

These currents, both rationalist and fundamentalist in orientation, not only viewed many of the practices of Sufism as atavistic and bizarre, but also held its entire worldview in a certain degree of suspicion as essentially non-rational and non-Islamic, the two being increasingly equated by reformists seeking to show the compatibility of Islam with modern, i.e., European, civilization.⁵⁶

These evaluative elements largely define the constraints against which contemporary *dhikr* practices adapt in order to continue to inform men's lives. It is not simply a matter of *dhikr* sufficiently fitting the mold of modern conceptions of affect, reason, and authority, but of employing those constraints, and at times critiquing them, as practitioners find ways to generate what they see as Islamic responses to the circumstances of contemporary Syrian life.

For Samir, reason and social order are not opposed to the passions in and of themselves, but as will be seen, to given types of bodily animation by musical feeling in

55 *Bid'a*, "innovation," is a term that generally carries censure, and is commonly leveled upon local and Sufi variations of Islamic practice by Muslims who have adopted certain types of Salafi or Wahhabi views. Salafis and Wahhabis are criticized by many Muslims for being too eager to use the term, and in other discussions with Samir he critiqued Salafis along these lines, rejecting their views as well.

56 Heck 2007, p. 12.

the context of worship. His use of the term *ṭarab* (musical emotionality) does not imply any categorical disapproval of music; he himself listens to contemporary Arab pop and classic *ṭarab* singers, in addition to religious songs. On one hand, he implicates *ṭarab* in a way that reads like an apologetic reframing of Islamic praxis banishing outward affective expression from the domain of proper religious comportment, yet his stress on representational politics completely obscures whether he might view *dhikr* favorably were it not for those politics. The distinction between passions and certain types of passionate expression further underscores this potential slippage. This ambivalence points again to the ongoing negotiations concerning the forms Islamic piety are to take, and to the place of the question of affect within them. Samir continues:

I won't say [*dhikr*] is backwards, but things need to change with the time in 2007. Even the *fatwas* from back then are not applicable in all cases now. If I had to vote I'd say no to *dhikr*, at least as it is in the video, with the dancing. But not as a strong position: if it's a group of people just getting together to remember God, without the movements, then fine. Like if you feel affected by the reading of the Qur'an during prayer, you might feel your body swaying a bit from left to right. Very slightly, to such a small degree that even the person next to you might not notice. This is an *unintentional* movement, and it's a good thing. When you feel that you are doing it, you should let your body come to rest slowly. Such movements aren't really part of the way the prayer is done. But these movements are intentional, and unacceptable. They're moving left, right, down, up, everywhere. There's no attempt to control the body, as if they're making a mockery. The emotions *should* be part of religion. These states are good, but it's not the way to express it. It's *their* point of view, and I won't tell them it's wrong, but I'm not with it. If, instead of singing, these people had read the Qur'an, or visited their families or sick neighbors, their reward would be greater. If they poured a glass of water on a tree, in order to become close to God, it would be better. There are other ways to get close to God. Not their way.

A certain expression had hung over Samir's face as he watched the clip, a reticence or sourness that stuck with me for days. I realized that in the course of graciously articulating his views, Samir was perhaps speaking around the resentment he felt for my choice of fieldwork inquiry. Months later, I made a passing complaint to him that Syrian Muslims did not engage in explicit enough criticism of those religious ideologies from the Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia, that had made inroads against their own traditions, even though such sentiments were expressed in private often enough.⁵⁷ He said: "If a person is sitting on a chair, and there's only three legs left, because say one has been knocked off or destroyed, for example, you can't ask him to start chiseling away at one of the remaining legs." Indeed, Samir had in fact been willing to offer criticisms that could be seen as divisive, as a sort of chiseling, and at an invitation offered by me, a

⁵⁷ A Syrian government campaign of which many people expressed approval was the seizure, from Syrian pilgrims returning from the hajj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia, of proselytizing materials distributed to them there. These materials, I was told, articulated Wahhabi criticisms of certain Islamic practices traditionally widespread in Syria, including veneration of the Prophet and Sufi *dhikr*. I was never able to acquire these materials or to confirm that such an official seizure campaign existed, but it was inevitably familiar to any Syrian Muslims with whom the issue came up in conversation.

Westerner who might not recognize the fragility he so poignantly attributed to the circumstances of Muslims as they reinterpret and reformulate Islamic tradition.

Conclusion

The Syrians I came to know in my fieldwork, whether in their teens or their late seventies, held careful hopes that the relative improvement in their socioeconomic lives and political freedoms over the previous ten years would eventually herald a transition to an even more dignified social and political order, one where they could pursue the Islamic lives they desired. However, these hopes cohabited with a bleakness and cynicism that had taken root for much longer, and whose causes never really disappeared from their daily experience. The worsening conflict has shattered these hopes. Though most all the people I know in Damascus happen by chance to live in areas minimally affected by the violence, the situation has nonetheless exceeded the bleakest of their visions.

The problems that Syrians now face differ greatly, in degree and type, across the country and across different parts of Damascus. Some neighborhoods of the city are destroyed or otherwise uninhabitable, while many other neighborhoods seem largely unaffected. Many of the more elite have been able to leave for Europe, Canada, or America, while others are forced to make due in meager situations either within the country or in neighboring nations. All of the people with whom I am still in touch, including in-laws, friends, neighbors, and some of the *dhikr* participants featured in this research, deal on a regular basis with the sounds of bombs and guns in adjacent neighborhoods. They are lucky because they are at least still living, and can reassure children that the sounds are simply fireworks. Most of them have lost more distant family members in other cities, including several cases where entire nuclear families (of four, of eight, of ten) have simply disappeared and remain unheard from. Others have taken in relatives fleeing violence in other areas of the city and the country. The conflict, beyond its grosser impacts for Syrians, has reactivated long-term sufferings and anxieties that were at no time more dormant than during my fieldwork and my earlier stays in the country.

The corrective metaphor Samir provided has served me a reminder to remain sensitive to Syrians' often hidden pains and fears, as well as to the way a lifetime of Western middle-class stability might obscure them from view. I hope that the research presented here is attentive to what Stefania Pandolfo has called "the dissonant, often idiosyncratic voices" that articulate "the fractures, wounds, and contradictions" of life in postcolonial contexts.⁵⁸ Colonial and postcolonial transformations, current-day economic and political pressures, and the displacement of traditional configurations of authority are not merely contextual backdrops for the ways Muslims understand and engage Islamic tradition, but are formative conditions that determine them. The legacy of global European interventions cannot be encompassed merely with notions of struggles of

58 Pandolfo 1997, p. 6. I am grateful to Stefania Pandolfo for pushing me to integrate my thoughts and feelings on the current conflict into this Introduction in a more substantive way than I had in a previous version.

transition, or processes of cultural adaptation, resignification, and resistance. This examination of *dhikr* is an attempt to draw out the ways avenues are being created for the negotiation, now and in the future, of the social changes those interventions have effected.

*A sign that has been withdrawn from the pressures of the social struggle—which, so to speak, crosses beyond the pale of the class struggle—inevitably loses force, degenerating into allegory and becoming the object not of live social intelligibility but of philological comprehension.*¹

V. N. Volosinov

DECLINE AND THE MEMORY OF AUTHORITY

Introduction

This chapter's point of departure is the tendency of *dhikr* practitioners to represent the past as a time when their traditions and practices were more authentic, against the memory of which current *dhikr* exhibits a multifaceted decline. The unfavorable comparison of the present with the past can, on one hand, be said to reflect a well-established mode of critique in Islamic societies that manifests in both informal assessments of the moral shortcomings of current social and political regimes, and in reformist movements that call for re-engagements with social principles modeled on the past. On the other hand, the marked dissolution, within the lived memory of older Syrians, of various forms of authority, and of the configurations by which authority was distributed across society, indicate that claims of a degradation of particular social forms, and of the social fabric as a whole, cannot be wholly explained by reference to conventional modes of remarking upon the past.

To frame the present as a site of loss is to make possible a set of lines of reasoning that are sufficiently diverse and contradictory as to show the framing itself to lack any specificity. Consequently, the implication of any one of those lines must be demonstrated in compelling terms rather than assumed to flow from that framing. As a site of loss, the present might be deemed evanescent and unstable, a locus of incomplete grasping bereft of the confidence and surety of the past. Loss is often bound with nostalgia, especially in regards to social forms, and in the Arab world the relation to that loss might be said to be somewhat analogous to the classical poetic convention of *al-wuqūf 'alā al-aṭlāl* (“standing on the campsite ruins”), in which the poet begins with the perusal of debris left in the sand by a disbanded encampment, and mourns a love which has departed and will not return.

The marking of the present as a site of loss is sometimes passed off as a result of a human tendency to be drawn to golden ages, thereby casting as superfluous any examination of the specificity of those acts of marking. In a more historical vein, the imagination and representation of golden ages might be said to be a particular effect of capitalist modernity, as Raymond Williams has suggested.² Lastly, characterizations of

1 Volosinov 1986, p. 23.

2 Williams 1975, p. 289.

the present as loss, in the postcolonial context especially, may reflect first-person observations of the significant disruption, transformation, and extinguishing of social forms and ways of life by the pressures of postcolonial capitalist modernity. In the latter case, acts of lived memory are not only attempts to reconcile such losses, but in addition to mythic articulations provide something of a record of concrete historical changes overlooked by progressive secular histories.³

In this chapter I explore some of these lines of reasoning, parsing out the elements said to constitute *dhikr*'s decline and reading them in light of changes in Syrian society over the later modern era. Beyond developing an understanding of the ways that memory works in regards to *dhikr*, my analysis situates configurations of authority in *dhikr* as one node within a wider network of social-authoritative domains. From this perspective, understanding changes in *dhikr* requires examining concurrent changes in other domains and practices with which *dhikr* has historically shared a relation. The other areas examined here include patterns of small-scale (neighborhood) social organization, modes of leisure and economic life, ways of interpreting and practicing Sharia, healing practices, and *dhikr* intersections with state politics.

My analysis is simultaneously meant to serve as a corrective to what I see as a frequent neglect of the dimension of power and authority in scholarship on *dhikr* and Sufism more generally. I do not intend to flatten mysticism, or mystical experience within an analytics of power, but to situate my work alongside other scholarship that foregrounds historically specific considerations of authority and to counter work that presents *dhikr* as a kind of locally-situated, if singularly brilliant, mode of access to universal mystical truth and experience. I elaborate some key ways that authority has played into mystical practice, and not primarily as a conduit for experience, while exploring the ways such authority figures in the memory of *dhikr* participants.

Along these lines, my approach to the stories my informants shared is partly inspired by Michel Foucault's notion of a history of the present, a Nietzschean genealogy wherein past discourses and practices of an often mundane sort are examined with a view toward illuminating the origins of the structures and concerns that shape the present. I read memories, observations, and ethnographic episodes here for what they reveal about changes in the nature of authority in twentieth-century Syria. Understanding of the past, according to Foucault interpreter Michael Roth, is enabled and conditioned by one's "position within the changes in the way persons interact with the world around them" and by one's "position vis-à-vis the structures of experience."⁴ By examining understandings of the past among men involved in *dhikr*, I work toward a sketch of those social modes and experiential structures, and show that historical shifts in the nature, distribution, and practices of authority are key determinants of *dhikr* memory.

The chapter is divided into explorations of different aspects of memory in which the issue of authority is traced, including social configurations, healing, and relations with the State. Each of these domains forms part of the set of transformations which have attended European colonial projects in the region, projects which, as noted by Saba

3 See Chakrabarty 2000 and Hirschkind 2001 on the asymmetries of the relation between secular notions of history and other ways of conceiving the past.

4 Roth 1981, p. 33.

Mahmood, “have enveloped the entire social fabric of the Middle East, impacting everything from pedagogical techniques to conceptions of moral and bodily health to patterns of familial and extra-familial relations.”⁵ These sections are interspersed with narratives of my involvement with a Sufi sheikh who proved to be unique in the way he represented the past, and in the type of authority he cultivated within his group. In tacking between these two types of sections, I ask how representations of authority in memory are to be reconciled with the nondiscursive manner in which authority and power act upon the bodily and affective schemata of subjects.

From the authority of transcendence to a history of authority

Scholarship on Sufism over the last few decades has often made selective use of Sufi theological concepts to frame Sufi practices, including *dhikr*, as concerned above all else with a personal, transcendent experience of or encounter with the divine. Historical changes in the ideologies, practices, and organization of Sufis are important inquiries in Sufi scholarship, but have too frequently been incorporated as mere circumstantial shifts in a set of practices whose essence remains self-evident. Early patterns of this approach were established by twentieth-century scholars of religion such as Mircea Eliade, Huston Smith, and Fritjof Schuon, who stressed the notion of sacred transcendence of the mundane as the essence of mysticism, and mysticism as the essence of religion. Transcendental approaches to mysticism, however, ignore the materiality of mystical practices, or consign it to mere context, making of it an implicitly arbitrary content whose primary role is to instantiate the category of the particular, which is to be transcended and effaced in the course of mystical union or ecstasy.⁶

My analysis in this chapter extends the skepticism expressed by scholar of Syrian music Jonathan Shannon,⁷ in his work on *dhikr* and on *ṭarab* music. In an early article, Shannon outlines, but maintains distance from, the terms typically used in analyses of Sufism, citing a series of scholars from the 1970’s, 1980’s, and 1990’s: “According to some commentaries on Sufism, the ultimate goal of the *dhikr* is oblivion (*fanā*) of the individual or ‘lower’ self with the simultaneous reminder (*baqā*) of the divine or ‘higher’ self, and its union (*tawḥīd*) with divine reality (*al-ḥaqq*).”⁸ In his later book-length treatment of Syrian *ṭarab* music, Shannon’s skepticism is more prominent: “Yet, this abstract reading of Sufism and the functions of the *dhikr* notwithstanding, it is important to note that performing *dhikr* does not necessarily have mystical or even spiritual meaning for all participants.”⁹ Shannon finds, as I did later in my fieldwork, that in interviews *dhikr* participants neither used Sufi terminology, spoke of union with God,

5 Mahmood 2005, p. 191.

6 A representative example of this method is to be found in the work of Earle Waugh, which relies heavily upon transcendentially-oriented Sufi concepts, such as *fanā* (“annihilation in God”), to guide an experientially-oriented and consciousness-based interpretation of *dhikr* practices and their motivations. See Waugh 1989 and Waugh 2005.

7 It was due to Jonathan Shannon’s introduction that I developed my fieldwork relationship with Zuheir Mnini, discussed later in this chapter.

8 Shannon 2004, p. 384.

9 Shannon 2006, p. 123.

nor considered themselves “Sufis,” or for that matter even especially mystically inclined. As he notes, “Rather, they participate in *dhikr* as a form of spiritual practice inherent to the *sunna* or orthodox obligations of Islam.”¹⁰

For *dhikr* practitioners, the distinction between Sufism and orthodoxy is neither tenable nor particularly important. Yet in Western discourse Muslim engagements with Sharia, which in fact are central to Islamic life-worlds and societies, are often sidelined in the interest of attending to those aspects of Islamic thought and practice which hold the promise of revealing a more transcendent, universal, and abstract essence. This is not surprising, given that Eliade’s assertions of universal religious motivations are accompanied by descriptions of modernity that center upon a purported lack of transcendence. In this way Eliade articulates another notion of the present as a site of loss, writing in his classic work *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*:

But it is only in the modern societies of the West that nonreligious man has developed fully. Modern nonreligious man assumes a new existential situation; he regards himself solely as the subject and agent of history, and he refuses all appeal to transcendence. In other words, he accepts no model for humanity outside the human condition as it can be seen in the various historical situations. Man *makes himself*, and he only makes himself completely in proportion as he desacralizes himself and the world.¹¹

Alongside its relevance to the question of the formative relation between the categories of religion and secularity, mysticism as conceptual category indeed offers a site where liberal prioritizations of the inward dimensions of human life come to be imagined and articulated, at the same time as that dimension is posited across traditions as their essential motivation.¹² Clearly, scholars of religion in earlier decades did not have the benefit of some of the non-reductive theorizations of the relation between power and meaning that are now available, and perhaps projects like Eliade’s were partly motivated by the desire to come to terms with the disenchantment hypothesis in a way that gave value to non-Western religiosities as models to be emulated.

Still, it remains the case that very little work on Sufism in the Arab World takes into serious account the rethinkings of power, knowledge, and the subject that have been influential since the 1980s. Talal Asad’s work provides an illustrative example of the application of Foucault-inspired analyses of power to the study of the Islamic world. His thought, and much of the work inspired by it, is at once an inquiry into Islamic practices and discourses, and into the practices and discourses of Western scholarship that obscure their understanding. I find it necessary therefore to situate this chapter as something of a corrective to the approaches that formed my own introduction to the study of religion as an undergraduate. Largely indebted to nineteenth-century Perennialism, these approaches tend to neglect the practice and material dimensions of religious life in favor of notions of

10 Shannon 2006, p. 107.

11 Eliade 1987, p. 203.

12 See Sharf 1998 for a demonstration of the way nineteenth-century European notions of experience came to figure prominently into the way Buddhism was represented in scholarship, and even in the work of Buddhist writers such as D.T. Suzuki.

universal essence, and it was this tendency that led me initially towards an interest in anthropology.¹³

The tension I am describing is in many ways reminiscent of the opposition between meaning-based and power-based modes of anthropological analysis. This opposition was most clearly articulated in debates on Geertz' symbolic anthropology, especially as developed in different ways by Talal Asad and Paul Shankman.¹⁴ In some cases, the difference in approach boils down to a tension between Hegelian idealism and Marxist materialism. Ernest Gellner calls Geertz' approach "semiotic" and "hermeneutic mysticism," and makes a call for the retention of "the fine sense of concrete social structure that was the hallmark of classical anthropology."¹⁵ Similarly, Shankman writes that "Geertz deemphasizes the comparison of *forms* of political behavior, preferring to stress the symbolic *content* of Balinese politics that can only be understood intraculturally."¹⁶ At least in the beginning, these debates seem to have persisted partly due to a misunderstanding of the notion of *politics* with which scholars such as Asad were working, developed largely out of reflections on Michel Foucault.

In studies on Sufism, the political dimensions of the tradition and its practices have been paid increasing attention, but the conception of politics therein has generally retained its traditional focus on questions of the state, political parties, and opposition to them. In the introduction to a recent edited volume entitled *Sufism and Politics*, Paul Heck writes:

Its singularly religious outlook notwithstanding, Sufism has been involved in all that we think of as politics: conceptions of authority and power, legitimacy and contestation of rule, formation of the socio-moral order of a community or nation, competition for patronage, prestige, and control of a society's wealth, the mobilization of people and resources in support of or against the status quo, and so on.¹⁷

While approaches that take into account work such as Foucault's or Asad's would seem to fall under this description, the general concern of the volume is with state-oriented politics, and not with notions of power and authority, or of modes of social-moral order, that lie ostensibly outside it. Indeed, a conception of politics which focuses generally on the state and parties, etc., may be predisposed to view political orientations as primarily semiotic and ideological, neglecting their practical and embodied dimensions except as expressions of, and means of generating, the former.

13 Besides Eliade and the other foundational thinkers I have mentioned in this approach within religious studies generally, another group of similarly-oriented scholars, many with ties to the first group, has focused on Islamic topics more specifically, and these include Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Henry Corbin, and William Chittick. Certainly, these scholars have provided valuable contributions to the understanding of Islamic mystics and their texts, most notably Ibn al-Arabi, even while framing those texts and their import in a specific neo-Platonic, Perennialist interpretation.

14 See Schilbrack 2005 for a treatment of Asad's critique of Geertz, which, although helpful, seems to mis-state some of Asad's arguments. Also, Saliba 1976 identifies early on, at the height of Geertz' influence, the Marxist anthropologist Marvin Harris as the author of "[t]he major, and sole, critique of Geertz' position" Saliba 1976, p. 185.

15 Gellner 1988, p. 30.

16 Shankman 1984, p. 268.

17 Heck 2007, p. 1-2.

Understanding of Sufism's political role will need to incorporate the elements Heck mentions, but will also demand attention to the mechanisms by which projects of ethical self-making outside state-level politics impinge on communal form and authority. With the results of such efforts at hand, better use can be made of the more numerous accounts of historical changes in Islamic and Sufi authority as they relate, for example, to contestations of and alliances with State power. J. Spencer Trimingham, in the preface to his classic reference on Sufism, writes that "a misleading impression of Islamic mysticism is conveyed if it is based exclusively upon the writings of its poets and theologians, for mysticism is essentially a practical discipline based upon the insights of these illuminated seekers."¹⁸ Similarly, if the politics of Sufism is conceived only in its capacity to orient men vis-à-vis state power, then its lived practice becomes a consideration secondary to its capacity to form one bloc among the many blocs contesting for power on the presumably level playing field of the state.

Neglect of historically specific modalities of power and authority within analyses of religious, and especially mystical, practice may stem from a sense that doing so equates to the surrender of the emotional and semiotic richness secured by meaning-based analyses of individual experience. A certain mutual exclusivity is assumed, wherein consideration of power threatens the vulgar reduction of meaning. As Geertz said of Asad in a 2000 interview: "I suspect Asad is a Marxist who cannot be material-reductionist anymore, so instead he is a power-reductionist."¹⁹ Geertz' statement, itself reductive, functions in much the same way as a statement by another scholar in a recent work on Moroccan *dhikr*, where informant views are enlisted to help discount socially-based analyses of their practice. As the *dhikr* practitioners interviewed saw it, "sociological theory" generated explanations "prompted by atheism," and therefore were invalid, both to them and apparently to the scholar.²⁰ These examples, though clearly not the best-articulated criticisms of work that foregrounds the social or power, nonetheless reveal a worry about the precarious position left for meaning in the face of analyses which take seriously the ways that meaning is inevitably and formatively rooted in historically changeable authority relations and practices.

Asad's heavy stress on discourse, on modes of reasoning, may have been another factor that played a role in some scholars' negative response to his work. Speaking about such responses in an interview with David Scott, Asad acknowledges "leaving something *out* of this entire process, namely, how people engage with language and with their emotions too."²¹ Combining Asad's insights with those of scholars who have been more attentive to emotion, and to less strictly discursive practices and domains of life, provides for an approach to religion and mysticism that extends Asad's thought while at the same time addressing some of the concerns of his critics. Such a combined approach would also offer an alternative to sort of interpretation which marks those studies of Sufism that have doubled as vehicles for assertions of a metaphysical, dehistoricized nature. Indeed,

18 Trimingham 1971, p. v.

19 Micheelsen 2002, p. 9.

20 Waugh 2005, p. 27, and p. 26 and its notes, where Waugh criticizes the social modes of analyses provided by Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Evans-Pritchard, and Mary Douglas as foregrounding the social and the collective at the expense of individual religious experience.

21 Scott and Hirschkind 2006, p. 267.

Islamic theological concepts must be approached in ethnographically and theoretically specific ways that neither freeze them in their classical formulations nor flatten them to their deployment in present-day contexts of power and authority. A question that must remain open is one proffered by Stefania Pandolfo in reference to the relation that anthropological analysis of religious practice is to take to traditional theological and contemporary theoretical frameworks, when she asks “Whether to restore intelligibility [it] is necessary to postulate coherence.”²²

Decline and the ‘elsewheres’ of authenticity

Among *dhikr* practitioners in Damascus, assessments of the authenticity of current practice are articulated through personal memory, observations on differences between past and present, and theorizing on the relation between them. Distinctions drawn in comparisons of *dhikr* over the since the early twentieth century are great, and are made up in no small part by specific recollections of the manner in which *dhikr* practices are situated vis-à-vis regnant configurations of authority, both within *dhikr* circles themselves and across numerous other domains of Syrian society.

My initial conversations with *dhikr* practitioners commonly included warnings or disclaimers of some type, suggestions that I would either be let down with *dhikr* in its current state, or would find that its low degree of authenticity made it a poor avenue for gaining any picture of what *dhikr* was about. Only after repeated visits with someone would these types of summations cease, perhaps because my intentions had by then been deemed good, or my purposes sufficiently serious. Similarly, I usually found myself having to deflect and wait out redirections towards figures deemed experts on the history of *dhikr* practices, since many men felt both that their own experience and reflection did not constitute a reliable source, and that extensive knowledge of the presumably more authentic *dhikr* of the past was the most important criteria for anyone to help me understand what *dhikr* was about.

The theme of decline emerged and lingered in conversations. Older men talked about the strength of past meetings, and the superior character of the sheikhs and disciples of just a few generations ago. The young offered similar assessments, perhaps having heard the same stories. Men with whom I spoke often gave a numerical value to the degree to which current practices reflected those of the past, usually ten or twenty percent. Of course, assertions of the superiority of past tradition obviously need not imply a decline. As Charles Hirschkind has concisely argued, the production of historical knowledge, always situated within a discursive tradition, can often construct powerful lines of continuity between past and present.²³

In contexts where valuations of the present are not so linked, as they tend to be in the U.S., to ideologies of self-making and freedom from the strictures of the past, assertions of the present’s vitality, even if based on claims of continuity with the past, can risk being interpreted as displacements of the past’s unique authority. Carl Ernst, the scholar of Islamic mysticism, has explained that, “lamenting [Sufism’s] decline has been

22 Pandolfo 2007, p. 331.

23 Hirschkind 2001.

part of the definition of Sufism from the beginning, as an illustration of the tension between the ideals of mysticism and the realities of social practice."²⁴ While I think there is some truth to Ernst's assertion that such laments can serve this function, and therefore cannot simply be taken at face value, their hasty dismissal risks obscuring how they articulate specific criticisms of the historical present.

The ubiquity of decline discourses in the context of music has been observed by Jonathan Shannon as well, in his book on Syrian musical modernities. He, however, situates them within Syrians' attempts to come to terms with the social and cultural transformations that have been undertaken in the name of modernization. "Decay," he writes, "if not decadence, tends to be a prominent theme in discussions of Syrian culture, and music has come to occupy a prominent position in current debates about the present course of Arab society and its future prospects."²⁵ I suggest, likewise, that decline narratives among *dhikr* practitioners amount to reflections on the profound changes in the local workings of power during this historical period.

For understanding the entailments of memory among men involved with *dhikr*, it bears noting that claims of decline are accompanied, at least for the older participants, by personal observations of drastic contrasts in the modes of social life that have contextualized the practices over the last fifty or sixty years. These contrasts have been generated by the accelerated pace of social change that has held sway in Syria over the twentieth century. In the context of Morocco, Stefania Pandolfo has described a postcolonial suffering that is situated between, and outside of, two different possible modes of articulation. Of her work in a psychiatric hospital, she writes, "It exposes the conundrum of an attachment impossible to dissolve and of an ambivalence impossible to reduce to an unproblematic belonging: a conundrum that dispossesses the subject of the capacity to invoke the authority of the reference from which it draws its identity, all the while being seized in its matrix and its passion."²⁶ A similar impossibility for certain types of authoritative recourse are evidenced in many of the memories discussed below.

While many of the men I got to know assumed that knowing the past was an essentially unproblematic venture, even if it were only the experts among them who were capable of doing so, it was the casting, by one such expert, of the past as inaccessible which provided for me the most compelling contextualization of memory in the current day. Zuheir Mnini, a composer of *dhikr* songs born in 1929, six years after the start of the French Mandate of Syria, clarified the term "heritage" [*turāth*] in its relation to *dhikr* musical compositions and practices: "There's no *turāth* except for in the past two hundred years. Nothing before the last two hundred years. Of course they had things, beautiful things, but we don't know what they were. We have no idea. There was no notation, no recording, so we don't know the music. Even a song they say is really old now, from the very old times, we don't know if it's the same as we have now."

At first glance, Mnini's words would seem to neatly reflect part of a definition of nostalgia provided by Svetlana Boym, as "a home that no longer exists or has never existed," to which one relates via "a sentiment of loss and displacement."²⁷ However,

24 Ernst 1997, pp. 24-25.

25 Shannon 2006, p. xviii.

26 Pandolfo 2008, p. 331.

27 Boym 2007, p. 7.

while for Boym the presumably nostalgic works of heritage make the past “no longer unknown or unknowable,” Mnini’s sixty years of work as a self-described “defender of traditional *dhikr* singing [*inshād*]” are not oriented towards this end.²⁸ His “battle against new *inshād*,” as he says, paradoxically does not claim to grant the distant past any clarity of form. Mnini’s conception of *turāth* casts as tentative the epistemological ground upon which cultural memory operates. It also effectively increases the stakes of the work of memory, and of traditional composition, in a situation where the forms of the past are deemed largely inaccessible.

Musical *turāth* was not passed down due to a lack of adequate media for its transmission, generating for Mnini a qualitative gap between his traditional compositions and those of earlier eras. He is skeptical about the prospects for the past to inhabit the present as an object of knowledge, yet there are other ways the past inhabits the present, and the labor of memory does not only concern representations. The representations within memory often point to social configurations whose import lies not in their articulation as things to be known, or even as concepts to be grasped, but in the fields of authority that they trace, fields that acted upon subjects and desires. The differences between the subject-producing capacities of these fields and those of current Syrian social institutions, are a significant underlying factor in the emergence of specific memories of the past, and show that, in a way not unlike the problem of music-notation, the work of memory regarding authoritative forms faces the increasingly narrow possibility for their representing in the present.

Sheikh Yasin interlude #1: Ride to the first meeting

Within the first month of my fieldwork I was introduced to a Sufi sheikh who prove exceptional in many ways when compared to the other religious figures I got to know. He plays an important role in the analysis of authority and memory that is developed in the remainder of this chapter, and the following anecdote describes the ride to that first meeting, showing the preparation for authoritative encounter that it constituted. I was in a small grocer’s on the main road of my in-laws neighborhood, discussing my research purposes with the owner of the store, Riyadh, and his neighbor Wael, both of whom I had gotten to know on earlier stays in the neighborhood. I described my research as being focused on *dhikr* music, but both Riyadh and Wael were more eager to discuss ideas for studying Sufism more generally. Wael thought I should begin by talking to Sheikh Jihad, a neighborhood imam in his thirties who, he said, had correct views on Islam, devoid of excessive leanings in any direction. Riyadh disagreed with the middle-of-the-road approach, and said I should go right to the heart of the matter: I needed to study *asrār al-shīsh*, the secrets of the *shīsh* [skewer or small sword]. The *shīsh* was a reference to the Rifa‘iyya Sufi order’s practice of piercing the entranced believer’s side with a skewer, an act which in the context of the ceremony was said to produce neither blood nor a wound.²⁹

28 Boym 2007, p. 13.

29 See Pinto 2001, p. 11 for an account of this practice of the Rifa‘iyya.

The difference in opinion concerning where I should begin reflected somewhat the two men's views of Islam. Wael, a man given to depression and health worries, often expressed admiration for a picture of religious life marked by moderation and a moral order centered on the trials and pleasures of marriage and children.³⁰ Riyad, while not disagreeing on the importance of family life, was also an avid reader of books on Sufi saints and their miracles. His enthusiastic retellings of extraordinary events which he had read about were often met with noncommittal assent or shrugs from other neighbors who visited his store, often a site of religious discussion and debate. In some ways, the variations between their views on what constitutes the authority of a religious expert reflect debates, both within Sufism and in polemics between Sufi and anti-Sufi scholars, that first emerged in the ninth century, soon after communities of the mystically pious were first founded.³¹ I felt that either one of Riyad's or Wael's suggestions would be fruitful, and so a brief series of phone calls were made. Sheikh Jihad was not home, but Riyad was able to reach the sheikh of a small Rifa'iyya Sufi group, whose telephone number he had saved months ago in the hopes of one day meeting him.

The following day, Riyad closed his store mid-morning, and I met him and Abu Wasim, a retired schoolteacher, to catch a taxi to Sheikh Yasin's house. Talk in the taxi turned to Sufi sheikhs and miracles. The driver, either sympathetic or flattering his fares, told of a man from his neighborhood, Mahmoud, who had been spotted praying in Mecca by another neighbor. The neighbor was puzzled, being sure that in fact Mahmoud was in the midst of a complicated set of affairs in Damascus. Confronting him weeks later back at home, he learned under promise of secrecy that Mahmoud's travel to Mecca had been achieved through a miraculous flight that occurred during a late night prayer-vigil.

Riyad then elaborated the healing powers of the sheikh we were on our way to meet. He told of a man whose incurable cancer had been cleared from his body, and related another story centered on the side-piercing act of faith:

A Wahhabi Muslim from Saudi Arabia was in Damascus, and wanted to see Sheikh Yasin. He came to talk to him because he didn't like the *shīsh*. When he saw him he accused him of *bid'a* [religious innovation not founded in *sunna* tradition]. The Sheikh listened to the man, and didn't argue with him. When the man finished, the Sheikh took a *shīsh* and placed it in the man's hand, with the point straight against his own belly. He had opened his *jalabiyya*, so it was right on his skin. He ordered the man to plunge the *shīsh* in, but the man didn't want to. He kept ordering him, and told him to act on his words. So the man tried, but couldn't get the *shīsh* to penetrate the skin. The Sheikh ordered him to push harder, and harder, and the *shīsh* began to bend way up, and the Wahhabi gave up. Then Sheikh Yasin reversed the *shīsh*, and ordered the man to open his own *jalabiyya*. The Wahhabi was terrified, and he turned around and ran away: *Lā ilāha illā allāh! Muḥammad rasūl allāh! Lā ilāha illā allāh! Muḥammad rasūl allāh!*

30 Wael is the brother of Ridwan, whose similarly articulated views are discussed early in Chapter 1.

31 See Trimmingham 1971, pp. 1-5, on the early emergence of perceptions of an opposition between ecstatic and sober mystical approaches, as represented by the Junaidi and Bistami "schools," and Hodgson 1974, pp. 392-409, for a discussion of Sufism's appearance in the context of other early Islamic approaches to interpretation and practice.

I had heard or read a variant of this story somewhere before, but Riyad's telling had us all laughing with his rendition of the terrified facial expression of the fleeing Wahhabi, his quivering voice repeating the Islamic declaration of faith.

The talk in the taxi never strayed from the topic of miracles, and served to prepare us for meeting the Sheikh by establishing, even actively constructing, the mode of authority he embodied. The talk let me know that I was heading into a field of authority of a certain type, and perhaps that I might be called upon to recognize it. We approached the Sheikh's house, just outside the city on a road lined with mechanics' garages, small cement stalls that could encompass one car and a minimal assortment of tools. Most of the garages were empty, so the mechanics sat and talked on tires stacked by the roadside. As we pulled into the Sheikh's alley, Riyad was enumerating the benefits of Islamically-sanctioned herbal cures, and of other healing treatments derived from the *sunna*, topics which to him were of great interest.

Had we managed to take Wael's suggestion to meet Sheikh Jihad, the imam from our neighborhood whose views he said were free of excess, the configuration of Islamic authority constructed in any prefatory talk would have been different. Instead of acts of healing, our talk may have focused on matters of scholarship, things like degree qualifications, the imam's particular areas of study and interest, or the Islamic theological and legal texts he had mastered.³² A visit with yet another neighborhood imam, who had a splendid, mellifluous voice, may have induced talk of the moral benefits of Quranic recitation, or of the importance of kindness and fairness in men of religious authority. Aside from these topical differences, however, there is another way in which the taxi ride described above seems to me distinct. There was, after all in the midst of the talk of miraculous healings, a particular excitement that was not entirely free of a sense of transgression. Aside from the ebullience that Riyad clearly felt at finally having the chance (and excuse) to introduce himself to the Sheikh, there seemed something slightly transgressive about our destination. While miracles and mystical ecstasies, however they may be approached, are necessarily marked off from common experience, I suggest that what generated the sense of induction here, the sense of transgressive pleasure, was the disconnect between the normative modes and distributions of authority prevalent in Syrian society, and the particular mode of authority which we were both constructing and approaching. It is the relation between those authoritative modes that is explored in the next set of sections.

NETWORKS AND NODES OF AUTHORITY

An entry into social change: Hashim & Hadi in the repair shop

In many cases, personal memories of drastic transformations in social life form the backdrop against which Syrians give the present representation, often, as has been noted, with the help of constructions of a more authentic past. Those transformations, so

32 I found that people often had an idea of what the specialties of the imams in their neighborhood mosques were, and for those imams who had completed advanced degrees in Sharia programs, the topic of their dissertation was often widely known.

broad and far-reaching as to resist summary characterization, are outlined in scattered and partial form within the representations of memory. Memory, as shown in several places in the rest of this chapter, often must work against the shrinking capacity of contemporary language to provide concepts adequate for representing past forms, and therefore for negotiating the gaps between those forms and those of the present.

The following episode, also from early in my fieldwork, details a common assessment of social change among older, urban Syrians. I am sitting on a stool in front of an electronics repair stall, discussing *dhikr* gatherings with Hashim, a man in his sixties with a lifetime of attendance, and his long-time friend, Sheikh Hadi. Sheikh Hadi is not really a sheikh, and assumes no leadership in *dhikr* meetings, but comes from a family of religious scholars and has considerable knowledge of religious texts, so the honorific is used by everyone who knows him. Both men were taken to *dhikr* meetings as boys, and introduced them in turn to their own sons, now married with children of their own.

It is cramped in Hashim's shop, nestled under a stairwell in what looks to be a former newsstand. As usual when I visit him, he continues to work while we talk, only occasionally looking up. He solders connections, rummages through parts he has collected, and sometimes curses the items he is fixing. Sheikh Hadi, to get the blood moving in his legs, rearranges the equipment hanging from the ceiling.

"What do you want to know?" asks Hashim. I begin talking about what might be called the statistics of decline, the tendency I have noticed for men to express differences between past and present *dhikr* in percentile terms. It pleases me that Hashim is amused by my having remarked upon that particular statistical mode of talk. After telling him that I had more or less heard it everywhere I spoke with *dhikr* practitioners, I ask, "What constitutes the eighty percent, or however much that people say is gone?"

Hashim leans back in his chair, "The eighty percent, there was respect and esteem [*i'tizāz*] for *dhikr*, respect for religious singing [*inshād*], respect for religious knowledge [*al-'ilm*]. And now, it's respect for money, respect for television, respect for..." He stops mid-sentence, his hands raised in the air at whatever else is respected nowadays, and laughs. "This is the difference! Now, we sit in our apartments and watch television."

Sheikh Hadi, in a more measured tone, fills out what he sees to make up that respect and esteem:

This is the main aspect, to which I would add that things then were held together more [*kān dabṭ lil-umūr akthar*]. There was more firm belief [*i'tiqād*] on the part of the adherents [*murīdīn*], more devotion [*iltizām*] on the part of the sheikhs, and more interest [*iqbāl*] on the part of people in general. The aspects I'm talking to you about, the sheikhs were more closely involved and concerned with things, and gave things their due. The sheikh lived by the Sharia, he was a knowledgeable in Sharia, and had a good understanding of things, which allowed him to serve people. He was truthful [*ṣādiq*], and material things didn't mean anything to him. All these things produce good results, and if you reverse them, then you see that the opposite is true. It was different then, the relations between the sheikh and the adherent were different, and between the sheikh and the people in general were different.

Sheikh Hadi's explanation, an analysis of the causes of Hashim's disconsolation at the de facto guidance-role fulfilled by mass-entertainment for the smaller network of the nuclear family within the home, focuses on the other side of the relation of *i'tizāz*, and on communal forms as instantiations of the authority of Sharia. His observations on the past, while no doubt colored by those inherited from his father and grandfather, point to a network of authoritative relations partially dissolved, and partially transformed within the space of his lifetime. I asked about the notion of a decline in *dhikr* in a rather open-ended way, and yet in his response he focuses almost entirely on the authoritative networks that supported and were generated by it, rather than anything we might see as specific to *dhikr* itself.

The network presented by Sheikh Hadi, articulated by way of the figure of religious authority, stands opposite the situation that Hashim describes, articulated by way of those who would, but no longer do, recognize that authority. If Hashim points to an increasing isolation within the bounds of the domestic sphere, within the living rooms where televisions are watched, Sheikh Hadi points to the way the sheikh and *dhikr* were only recently situated within a broader network of religious and social authority. There is, in other words, a kind of parallel between the processes by which *dhikr* practitioners, along with other Syrians, have come to live in ways increasingly determined by bourgeois norms, and those processes by which *dhikr* becomes a tradition that in its practice and its analysis can be approached as a singular object or phenomenon, isolated from other types of practices.

The *ḥāra*: entertaining and educating

For many Syrian men aged forty or older at the time of my fieldwork, personal memories describe the significant changes in lifestyle brought about by the incorporation of various technologies into daily life. The degree of these differences speak to the pace by which bourgeois lifestyles have come to be adopted in the latter part of the twentieth century in Syria. It is quite common, among both lower and middle classes, for men of this age, and even in their thirties, to have experienced first-hand the emergence of leisure-time entertainments such as television, and of other transformative technologies such as electric refrigeration and telephony. One man I met, who like me was born in the early 1970's, recalled coming home one day after his university classes, in the early 1990's, to find that his family had that morning acquired a telephone and a television, neither of which he had ever used before, aside from seeing televisions in restaurants.

The effects of technology on patterns of sociability, on the basic texture of communities, are indicated in the following comment, which evokes a sense of isolation and displacement not unlike that which Hashim expressed in the electronics repair shop. A man in his sixties, a manager in a Damascus airport office who I met outside a *dhikr* in the old city center of Damascus, had this to say about *dhikr* in his childhood, "There was no TV, no radio. It was one day at one person's house, another day at another's, and so on. People would go out in the evening [to the *dhikr*], sometimes every day, they would sing and *yata'annathu* [take pleasure in each others' company]. But now, since TV,

radio, stereos, less people leave their homes. The older people who died, they died, and the young men, their way is different.”

The notions of entertainment and leisure, with all their bourgeois and consumer-capitalist trappings, do little to illuminate the substitution of the practice of *dhikr* with that of television-watching, and even less to explain the fact that many regular *dhikr* participants themselves see their practice as a form of religious entertainment (*tislāya dīniyya*). The notion of leisure activity, while obviously deeply informed by bourgeois sensibilities, entails here an ethical dimension not typically deemed an operative part of bourgeois modes of leisure. Charles Hirschkind, in his study on the circulation and audition of Islamic sermons on cassette, uses the term “pious relaxation” to describe some listeners’ engagements with the taped sermons, engagements that do not recall the frivolity typically associated with pastimes, hobbies, or indeed *tislāya*.³³

Using a notion of politics inspired by Hannah Arendt, Hirschkind demonstrates that for those who pursue it, this pious relaxation is a practice with profoundly ethical and political dimensions: “As conceived by its participants, this arena [of cassette circulation] constitutes that space of communal reflexivity and action understood as necessary for perfecting and sustaining the totality of practices upon which an Islamic society depends.”³⁴ The problem for *dhikr* participants might be articulated in the following way: if such expanded notions of entertainment and politics can be used to examine *dhikr* practices as they stood in the early and middle parts of the twentieth century, then how would these notions again need to be modified if applied to the practices today, when, as the memory of participants attests, during that interval those practices have been largely decoupled from the various smaller-scale institutions of authority whose association gave them so much of their social, ethical, and mystical power?

The site of longing generated by the loss of authority of these institutions, and of their attendant social networks, both of which were occluded by the rise of bureaucratic state in Syria, is nowhere better articulated than in the figure of the *ḥāra*, or neighborhood alley. Representations of the *ḥāra*, at once an architectural and social configuration, tend to encompass not only the immediate residences, shops, and mosque, but also one or more figures of religious authority, whether mosque imams, Sufi sheikhs, or religious healers. The *ḥāra* evokes nostalgic sentiments for the superior ethical upstanding and self-sufficiency of past communities. Representations of the *ḥāra* are intimately tied to notions of Damascene cultural authenticity, as evident in advertising, historical television dramas, and literature.³⁵

Media portrayals that suggest the greater capacity of past communities to manage their own affairs and conflicts, portrayals that often coincide with idealized representations of co-operation among neighbors, are appropriated by the State through storylines that associate these local authoritative networks with, for instance, Arab resistance to the Ottoman Turks or the French, or with the Bath party, all of which figure largely in the Syrian government’s historical self-representation. In this way, the State obscures the modern nation-state’s pivotal role in the dissolution of these local networks

33 Hirschkind 2006, p. 68.

34 Hirschkind 2006, p. 8.

35 Two of the most popular television series in the period of my stays in Syria were *al-khawāli* and *bāb al-ḥāra*, both of which nostalgically portrayed community life in the *ḥāra*.

of co-operation and authority. When I asked a Sufi sheikh, who unlike his father and grandfather had a non-religious career, that of civil engineer, what the most important aspects were of *dhikr* in his father's generation, he said:

There were religious roles played by *dhikr*, of course, or spiritual roles, but also social ones. People met several nights a week, so they knew each other, and helped each other. There were also educational ones. They were teaching the Qur'an, its interpretation, the understanding of history. There were different kinds of lessons. Not on the same night, but one night *dhikr*, one night a religious lesson, one teaching Qur'an and recitation.

Naming authority

Another memory recalls something of the authoritative relations that obtained in the *ḥāra*.³⁶ The composer of *dhikr* vocal music, Zuheir Mnini, recounted to me a handful of times the story he had been told of his own naming in 1929. At that time, as now, there were strong relations between his family and the al-Aita family, both of whom had produced sheikhs of two related Sufi orders. Upon Mnini's birth, the blind Sheikh Umar al-Aita came to his family's home to name him, just as he had done for all his siblings. He walked in tapping a slow triple-rhythm with a mortar and pestle held in his hand. Each time Mnini told me the story, he would tap one hand against the other and intone slowly, "*sammaytuka ahmadu zuheir* [I have named you Ahmad Zuheir]." The sleepy vocal melody started half a step above the root, to which it descended on the second syllable, then settled up on the minor third for all but the last, protracted syllable, which fell again upon the root before trailing off.

Brinkley Messick, in his study detailing the modern state's unstitching of Sharia legal procedures from the fabric of local, traditional authority structures, writes: "From birth rituals to Quranic school formation, textual embodiment was a process intended to install the general templates of *shari'a* society."³⁷ In Mnini's memory, which continued to captivate me in its repetition, the figure of that embodiment, the Sheikh, seeds the life that is to follow his naming squarely within those structures, in their early-to-mid twentieth century form. In recalling the story, Mnini was proud at having been named in such a manner, and humbled by what seemed a sort of lingering amazement at the figure of the blind Sheikh Umar. Because the Sheikh was also a poet and composer of *dhikr* music, among other things (a healer, an arbitrator of disputes, and a general figure of leadership in the *ḥāra*), his naming of Mnini also served as a sort of founding document for Mnini's own career as a composer of *dhikr* music. However, while Sheikh Umar's authority clearly extended into the management of the affairs of the community, Mnini's

36 Zuheir Mnini's childhood home, where he was born, was not in an alley *per se*, but rather faced a small square where, two years before his birth, there had occurred a celebration for the construction of a trolley line completed by the French. Mnini often used the word *ḥāra*, though, as many in Syria still do, to refer to his immediate neighborhood. This extension of the term speaks to the importance of the sense of "home" that it conveys for Syrians.

37 Messick 1993, p. 251.

authority, aside from the domain of musical composition, was mostly limited to the ceremonious respect paid him as a composer.³⁸

The above vignettes show that the social-authoritative dimension of *dhikr* is an indispensable consideration in its own right, beyond merely framing the pursuit of contemplative truths and ecstatic experiences. Since Trimingham's *The Mystical Orders in Islam* in 1971, other scholars have continued to draw the study of Sufism into more historically attentive approaches. Clearly, it is not merely a matter of the absence or irrelevance of the sheikh-disciple bond the loss of which Sheikh Hadi lamented, and which Sheikh Yasin still cultivates, but of the supplanting of complex networks of formal and informal power relations through which communities, larger than extended families and bound more intimately than current-day neighborhoods, structured their lives and managed their affairs under previous regimes of governance. *Dhikr* and Sufism were not whole domains of religious practice in and of themselves, but operated as nodal points within a network that encompassed other elements with which *dhikr* had formative, or at least non-incidental ties. The construction of the authority of the sheikh extended well beyond the isolated moment of Sufi gatherings and *dhikr* ceremonies, and included a range of practices such as the naming described by Mnini.

Chasing but not keeping up

If part of the work done by memory regarding *dhikr* authority is to deal with occluded social forms not completely representable in contemporary languages, it is also a way of coming to terms with and critiquing social forms in the present that are seen to be sources of suffering. At the time of my fieldwork, and during earlier stays in the country, there circulated among Syrians of all classes references to and expressions of a deep dissatisfaction and feeling of powerlessness, as evidenced by everything from jokes and TV comedies to the way cigarettes are drawn or glances cast aside when the State emerges as a highly likely object of comment in a conversation that has reached a discursive impasse.³⁹ The circumstances that Syrians suffer, typically attributed to a combination of crippling economic circumstances, official corruption, and the repressive actions of the apparatuses of State security, are magnified by sense of incapacity that has resulted from the transfer of authority to the anonymous institutions of the State.

One hears in Syria variations of the phrase that people “are running, but not keeping up [*‘am yarkuḍu, u ma ‘am ylāḥiqu*],” an expression which conveys that despite their efforts people are never able to move beyond the threshold of basic material sustenance. There is also often a sense that these conditions are, if not deliberately imposed, then actively maintained by the State. The phrases implicate something broader than economic and political circumstances, however, namely an incommensurable gap before a receding horizon of social change. Economic and political hardships nonetheless play a key role in that they are a site of necessity that keeps people unable to address the gap of change.

38 The issue of Zuheir Mnini's social status as a composer of *dhikr* music is covered in detail in Chapter 4, “Composition, Art, Creativity, Part I.”

39 See Wedeen 1999 for a good analysis of the informal ways Syrians comment upon state power.

As one man said of the past, “Their minds were free for these things [*dhikr* and *inshād*, religious singing], but not now. People have too many problems.” Another man, a singer of *inshād*, said in a group interview with a small group of older men, “People were free [*fādī*] then. Now no one’s free. Things were cheap and available. Now things are tight [*yaḍīq*] here.” At this another man, a singer and violinist, said, “You will only get to an abbreviated idea of *dhikr* through what’s left now [*yelli ba’yān halla’*], whereas stronger things from the past would demand more attention and effort to understand. But these things have gone extinct, and people’s lives now don’t allow them to engage in them anymore.”

As suggested in the observations of these men, there were few expressions of desire for a return, or a sense that elements from the past should be reconstructed, despite the loss expressed in their stories and memories. Sheikh Hadi, for example, while clearly placing high value on the *sheikh-murīd* relation of the past, warned me not to get involved with Sufi sheikhs in this capacity. When I first told him about Sheikh Yasin and my observations of his *dhikr* meetings, his first response was to identify him as a probable charlatan (*musha’widh*), without knowing him and without my having made any deliberately negative comments. Sheikh Hadi drew this conclusion on the basis of the type of authority I described him as wielding, advising me to be wary.

There was little concern or effort to regulate membership in the *dhikr* groups I encountered, again with the exception of Sheikh Yasin’s. No attempts were made to know the people who attended, much less to engage them in any practice other than their presence at a given *dhikr* meeting. This openness coincided with those groups whose sheikhs and other authoritative figures generally commented upon the significant degrees of historical change in *dhikr* practice, in Syrian society, and in Islamic societies more generally. The sole group that did regulate membership, as will be seen in the next few sections, was also the only group whose authority did not acknowledge these changes. While it is entirely possible that this pattern is simply coincidence, it is also suggestive of connections between ways of engaging with the past, modes of authority in the present, and types of engagement with current social institutions outside of *dhikr*. It is to these connections I now turn, beginning with a continuation of the narrative of my first visit with Sheikh Yasin.

ISOLATED AUTHORITY

Sheikh Yasin interlude #2: Sufi concepts and Sufi authority

Off the first-floor hallway of the Sheikh’s house is his *zāwiyah*, a medium-sized room he has designated for receiving visitors, and for group prayer and *dhikr*. Pictures of Sufi religious sites and graves or *maqāms*, and past sheikhs cover the walls, in addition to Quranic passages in calligraphy, and large pictures of Mecca and Medina. A heavy banner about two meters long hangs on one wall, gold letters thickly embroidered upon a green silken background. The lines trace the lineage or *nasab* of the twelfth-century Sufi Ahmad al-Rifa’i, going back to the Prophet’s family. A small assortment of swords and *shīshs* hang on a wooden rack in a corner, and large frame drums line the wall just below

the ceiling. Below the drums is a photo portrait of Bashar al-Asad. The room has no chairs, and is what is called an “Arab sitting,” with thin mattress-cushions lining the floor along the walls. Several layers of rugs cover the floor, and single, low table bears a box of tissues, a bowl of hard candies, and a pitcher of water with a few glasses.

When we enter, the Sheikh offers his hand to Riyad, who bows and kisses it, and presses it to his forehead. Abu Wasim and I do the same. He pours us each a glass of water, and gestures us to sit. The Sheikh is in his early forties, a bit younger than both Riyad and Abu Wasim. He is easy-going and soft-spoken. He listens as Riyad describes the chain of people through which he came to learn about him and acquire his number. Riyad introduces me as an American Muslim he knows from his neighborhood, married to one of the Muslims sisters there, and associated with an American university. He says I have come to research the secrets of the *shīsh* and Rifa’i Sufism, and I resist the urge to correct him, feeling that it would be somehow rude. Abu Wasim asks the sheikh about his neighborhood, which he knows because he thinks he may have distant relatives there.

The Sheikh’s eyes scan my clothes, my small bag, but other than that he does not pay me much attention. When he talks, he mostly addresses Riyad and Abu Wasim. As we sit,, Riyad explains that I would like to interview him, and I take the chance to describe my research as focused on *dhikr* devotional music. I am sure to note that it is a secular, university study, and that I would like to attend his *dhikr* sessions to hear the music and singing. I describe my discipline as the study of religious practices, based in the social sciences. I had learned, within a couple weeks of fieldwork, that the Arabic translations of “anthropology” were of little use among the people with whom I worked. The term tended only to add to the confusion of why I was in Syria, until someone perhaps clarified that my field was ‘*ulūm insāniyya* (“human sciences”), a term more general but at least comprehensible. The Sheikh nods, asks to see my recorder, and motions me to place it on the floor between us. He situates himself, asks if I am ready, and tells me to turn it on.

“The view of the West,” he begins slowly, “is materialist, and Sufism presents an emotional approach to things, which means that the heart, purified and enlightened, causes the mind also in such a way to become enlightened. The mind, always and forever, is submerged in [*yaghūṣ fi*] the sea of the heart, and...” The sheikh puts his hand on his thigh. A muffled cell-phone sounds. He pulls it from the pocket of his white *jalabiyya*, and in the ring-tone a children’s chorus sings, “*ḥabībanā, ḥabībanā,*” a term of adoration for the Prophet. He answers and I reach to turn off my recorder. He waves me away. “Yes,” he says three or four times, then “*inshallāh,*” and places the phone back in his pocket. He continues:

The manifestations [*tajalliyāt*] of Truth come to the heart, which is the vessel of emotion [*wi‘ā’ al-wijdān*]. The heart is that which distributes this light to this body. If the mind is enlightened, it comes to look upon things with a sound rational view, a correct view not corrupted by materialism, selfishness, self-interest, etc. Rather, the person looks to the state of people around, and how to deliver to them the Good [*al-khair*], how to build a society built on correct, sound foundations. When the heart is enlightened, the light of the heart dominates over [*yaṭghā ‘alā*] the light of the mind, the light of the body, the light of seeing, the

light of listening, and everything. Man requires purification of the self [*al-nafs*], of course, from the illnesses of the self, from its whims, for this light to shine.

Sheikh Yasin's description of Sufism, part of the continuation of which resumes below, is a concise statement of some of Sufism's general principles, and displays typical use of the tropes (*manifestations, heart, light*) foregrounded in much Western literature on Sufism. The Sheikh's focus on the link between personal ethics, social relations, and the foundations of society, however, despite being just as typical within Arabic-language Sufi discourse, is an element that in Western literature is quite commonly neglected, and fails to guide many presentations of Sufism that otherwise make use of Arabic-language terms.

Later in the afternoon, after Riyadh and Abu Wasim return to the neighborhood, I remain in the Sheikh's *zāwiyah* to meet the man will bring me to next *dhikr* meeting of the Sheikh's group. In the interval, which extends two hours, a few men drop by to visit the Sheikh. Mahmoud is from just outside the city, and his family, like so many others in Damascus, had moved there from a rural village when he was a boy, to find better work opportunities. I ask how long he has known the Sheikh. With candor he says he used to live a life of drinking and chasing women, ignoring the teachings of his religious father during a time he calls his "black past." He has known the Sheikh for about four years, but has been a full disciple, a *murīd*, for about half that time.

Hasan, the man I am awaiting, finally arrives. He is in his mid thirties, about my age. He is very thin, and beams with adoration for the Sheikh. When he comes into the room, he does so half-bowed. As I get to know him in the following weeks, I see that he never fails to enter a room in this way when the Sheikh is present, and that he exits walking backwards, similarly inclined towards him. He tells me he has been a *murīd* of the Sheikh for only four months, having been "transferred" from another sheikh to whom he was devoted for ten years. At this point the Sheikh, who had stepped out, returns to the room. Hasan springs to his feet to kiss the Sheikh's hand, offered with an erect nonchalance. I get up as well, and the Sheikh offers me his hand. I take it and kiss it. The Sheikh announces that he has some business he must attend to, and that Hasan will take me back home. Hasan bows, "*Na 'm yā sīdī, tikram yā sīdī* [Yes, Master. It's my pleasure]!"

By the time I get back to my room I am exhausted and fall quickly to sleep. In a dream the Sheikh appears before me and I awake, disturbed. It dawns on me how uncomfortable I had been in his house, how I had felt at a loss within the atmosphere of deference and adoration. But in the dream that atmosphere had suffused my body and feelings, and I had felt drawn to the Sheikh by a sort of love, one perhaps conjured by the intense field of authority in which I had spent the last few hours, from the taxi ride to the trip home. Certainly, the authority that had been constructed from the moment Riyadh, Abu Wasim and I set out to meet the Sheikh held sway, without break, until I was dropped off at home, and even then seemingly lingered.

The following morning I visited Riyadh in his grocery store as I often did, and he related what he called a "strange" dream he had the night before. He was with me and we were going somewhere together to eat *harīsa* (a dense cake laden with syrup). But after setting out I had left him in order to accompany a bunch of Americans to another place

where they sold chicken. The dream ended there, he said. I did not want to tell him about my dream of the Sheikh the afternoon before, because I feared he would see it as confirmation that I was to become his *murīd* (disciple).

In retrospect, it is clear to me that both dreams are related, and that even Riyad's deals with the authoritative encounter of the day before. My discomfiting, love-suffused vision of the Sheikh alerted me to the sense that I had been subject to something powerful which I had not entirely recognized, though I did not at the time know much more than that. As will become clear in this chapter's later discussions of my relation with the Sheikh, the central issue that took shape in this relation was precisely that of authority, and I think Riyad's dream addresses this.

Harīsa is one of the most popular baked sweets in Damascus, and many stores that sell it offer nothing else, aside perhaps from another version with cheese called *Nābilsīyya*. Both these desserts are cheap and very popular, and have a degree of folk association, a popular iconicity as far as sweets go, which the more expensive baked desserts, like the many variants of baklava-styled items cannot achieve. At the time of my fieldwork, a Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise had recently opened, one of the first foreign chain-restaurants to do so in the country. The KFC was located on a main avenue in one of Damascus' most expensive neighborhoods, right by a good number of embassies (including the American one), consulates, and international institutes. At that time in Damascus many were talking about the new restaurant, *kintākī*, with its red-and-white design and prominent image of the American Colonel, and so Riyad's dream might be seen to be linked to this despite the fact that Syrians ate plenty of fried chicken before the KFC arrived. Riyad's dream, I think, reflects some perception on his part that I might not have the cultural training or perhaps personal temperament to engage skillfully in the type of authoritative field which the Sheikh and his followers cultivated.

That authority did in fact make me uneasy, perhaps for some reason having to do with being American or Western, but also perhaps because I was encountering something new, which I had not seen in several years of earlier time spent in the country. In beginning his interview—the course of which, clearly, he dictated, including the handling of the recorder—with the issue of the West, the Sheikh may have been challenging me. More precisely, he may have been laying down a characterization of any future choice I might make to decline the authoritative terms which everyone with whom he had dealings evidently agreed. I do not mean to say that this was a calculated tactic, but rather it seems an effective way to characterize a move made by an expert player in the game of moral authority, preemptively casting the road of refusal, in terms that might specifically apply to me, as morally suspect. In any case, the Sheikh would not likely begin an interview (itself already an exceptional situation to be sure) with another Syrian or Arab by discussing the moral bankruptcy of the West, and as I discuss in the next section, there are other reasons besides my being Western for the Sheikh's particular mode of authority to appear different from that of many Damascene sheikhs.

Margins of comment: kissing and emulation

In earlier stays in Damascus, my study of Arabic and Islam included learning basic Quranic recitation, reading Islamic texts in group and private lessons in mosques, and attending other Sunni gatherings of various sorts.⁴⁰ In this period, which lasted just over two years, I encountered a good number of sheikhs and imams, and witnessed others' interactions with them many times. A frequent element of these interactions was the act of hand-kissing, a once ubiquitous gesture of respect in Damascus. As I observed, religious figures would usually accept a kiss on the hand from a boy or adolescent, but would almost always withdraw their hand when a man tried to offer his respect in this way. For his part, the man would sometimes try to prevent the sheikh from taking his hand away, and this series of actions would be repeated again and again, with varying degrees of intensity, if a sheikh was greeting many men in turn.

Every now and then, the attempted hand-kiss would escalate into a sort of mock struggle as the sheikh sought to prevent a determined kisser from landing one. The sheikh might give the man a playful slap on the side of the head with his other hand, and not uncommonly the struggle would continue until the sheikh pushed the man off-balance. This sort of denouement would inevitably generate smiles and laughter from those present, and it often seemed that no mass-greeting of a Sufi sheikh or mosque imam was complete without one of these exaggerated hand-kissing battles breaking out.

These comical bouts, when performed felicitously, reinforce the asymmetrical nature of the men's power relation while at the same time situating it as the product of roles fulfilled by men who ostensibly share affection for one another. This ambivalence anchors the power relation on both formal and informal registers, and in this sense strengthens it. It also demonstrates quite clearly that power relations with certain religious figure admit of a familiarity and flexible humor that power relations with the State, shot through as they are with paranoia, cannot be said to possess. These conventional yet spontaneous acts provide for the demonstration of the humility of both the sheikh and the prospective hand-kisser, and cast the relation as one free of overt exploitation.

However, if the man's attempts to wrestle the sheikh's hand to his mouth appear too serious, or, as sometime happens, desperate, then he will likely be seen as either simple-minded, socially awkward, or as too eager in his belief in the charisma of sheikhs. The drama allows the group to simultaneously demonstrate and regulate the delicate balance between the gravity of a sheikh's authority, which sometimes has a charismatic dimension, and the susceptibility of that authority to devolve into exploitation and charlatanism, two important tropes in the criticisms that have been directed against Sufi sheikhs by their opponents throughout Islamic history.⁴¹ By the time I met Sheikh Yasin,

40 These included mostly sitting in on group lessons held in mosques, which touch on a wide range of topics and play a key role in the circulation of religious knowledge, but also attendance of *mawlid*s (celebrations of the Prophet with a singing chorus, usually on the Prophet's birthday), and participation in a few *dhikr* gatherings of the sort I studied in my later fieldwork.

41 If my observations on the greetings of sheikhs is compelling, it might be offset by my apparent early failure to grasp their significance. In 2000, a friend insisted I meet Sheikh Nazim al-Haqqani, the reknown leader of the Naqshbandiyya Sufi order, on his visit to Damascus from Cyprus, where he was

I had witnessed and been part of enough of these situations to have at least a minimal feel for their conventions, and yet the encounter with him was new and disconcerting.

In the final part of the interview with Sheikh Yasin discussed above, he elaborated on the principles of Sufism as they relate to the authority of the sheikh and the relation with his followers. He likened the *murīd* to a student who progresses from grade to grade, advancing only under the guidance of a teacher, and described this process of guidance as the gradual drawing of a purifying veil of light (*hijāban nūrāniyyan*) between the student and his own passions and self-interest. He continued, discussing the spiritual aspirant:

He requires *dhikr*, and dedication [*iltizām*] to a curriculum [*manhaj*] with a virtuous sheikh, in order to acquire sciences and knowledges from him. In this way, the person's soul becomes able to be modeled after the soul of the sheikh who is bringing him up [*sheikhuhu al-murabbī*]. This is spiritual harmony [*al-insijām al-rūhī*] and real, true love. Because if there is true love for the Prophet, then the person becomes a copy of the Prophet, becomes his inheritor.

Perhaps it was these words that seeded the dream I was to have of him only a few hours later. In any case, at the end of the interview, the Sheikh recited a well-known passage of poetry from the tenth-century Syrian poet Abu Firas al-Hamdani: “*Wa laita alladhī baini wa bainaka ‘āmirun, wa baini wa baina al-‘ālamīna khurabu. Idhā ṣahḥa minka al-widdu fa kullu hayyinu, wa kullu alladhi fawqa al-turābi turabu.* [Oh, that what is between you and me may be built up, and between me and everyone else in ruin. If the love from you is true, then all is ease, and all that lies above the dust is truly dust.]”⁴² Coming at the end of the above discourse on the spiritual seeker, I understood these lines as referring to the relation of power between sheikh and *murīd*, and had a nagging sense that I was somehow implicated in them. Clearly, there may be something of a disjuncture between the stress that Sheikh Yasin put on the notion of a good society in the beginning of his interview, and the discussion of the all-obliterating relation of authority, love, and spiritual emulation with which he ended it. Moving on to Sheikh Yasin's views on the past, and on the question of decline in *dhikr*, we begin to see a link between the intensity of that relation and the claims made on behalf of a continuity marking the relation of past and present.

No comment and no decline

With Sheikh Yasin, the offering of signs of respect and adoration never played out as they did in other groups, typified by the agonistic hand-kissing. The Sheikh always presented his hand to members of his group, and to visitors in his *zawiya*, and if he were busy talking with someone, he would do so with hardly a look in the direction of the man seeking to greet him. Sheikh Yasin proved exceptional in his views on decline, as well, but before exploring them I would like to briefly clarify some of the positions I am developing here, and in the opposition I am establishing between Sheikh Yasin and other sheikhs and figures with whom my fieldwork brought me into contact.

born in 1922. Sheikh Nazim took my hand and asked, “How much will a car cost me in America?” When I answered, “It depends on what kind of car you want,” he hit me on the head with a rolled-up newspaper and exclaimed, “You know nothing!” The room erupted in friendly laughter.

42 Translation mine.

First, I do not wish to be complicit in framing *dhikr* of the past as more genuine, but I do think that the *dhikr* recalled in memory was closer to many of the historical forms of Sufi-inflected Islamic piety, if only because those memories include aspects of those local networks of authority that had yet to be dissolved by the state. This network, typified in the urban setting by the *hāra*, constituted a layer of mediation between the state and the population, and Sufi authorities and practices played key roles within it. The memories I deal with here are all from after the beginning of the French Mandate in 1923, when Damascene society and religious life had already been significantly transformed by modernizing forces.⁴³ At that time, and since the late Ottoman Empire, people had already come to call and rely upon representatives of state bureaucracy with increasing frequency, but the family, trade, and religious networks of the *hāra* remained important resources. Ottoman bureaucratic centralization played a large role in the increasing salience of state authority in daily life, as did Ottoman support for orthodox uniformity among Muslims to combat the influence of European missionary efforts⁴⁴.

Second, I do not mean to imply that Sheikh Yasin's authority is an atavistic representative of that which sheikhs held in the memories of *dhikr* participants in other groups. The contrast between him and the others is intended to highlight the relation between modes of recollecting the past, and modes of engaging and performing authority in the present. As will become more apparent, the way Sheikh Yasin situates himself and his group is to a large degree a response to modern state interventions on his particular order, and the configurations that result from his efforts bear little resemblance to those occluded networks of mutual support.

Indeed, the sole objection I heard regarding the notion of decline in *dhikr* practices came from Sheikh Yasin. Clearly, he was a powerful figure among his devoted group of adherents, and part of his charisma may have been due to his confident ties to tradition, asserted and secured partly through the rejection of historical discontinuity within *dhikr*. Simply put, he ascribed perceptions of decline to the lack of serious piety on the part of those who fell under their sway. The vitality of *dhikr* practices, he maintained, could be gauged neither in the spectacle (*manzar*) of their outward appearance, nor in the manner of the practices' relation to the social life of the community of practitioners. Men who saw past *dhikr* as more authentic had, in his view, been distracted by perspectives foreign and inimical to *dhikr* ethical practice. The Sheikh's notions here are in a way not that different from the idea that modernity is itself constituted by the construction of "tradition," and the work of making it at once a site of longing, nostalgia, pride, dissatisfaction, and embarrassment.

For Sheikh Yasin, *dhikr* and Sufi practice entailed the construction and maintenance of personal and societal character based on Sharia, including regimens of prayer and reflection, virtuous conduct in daily affairs, and obedience to the Sheikh. It was only in that work, which could not be undertaken apart from following a sheikh,

43 See, for example, Pinto 2007, p. 107, on the Ottoman incorporation of some Sufi orders into the state structure, and into centralized control, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and Trimmingham 1971, pp. 247-255, for significant ways in which anti-Sufi campaigns of the late 19th and earlier 20th centuries differed, both in orientation and effect, from the many such campaigns in pre-modern Islamic history.

44 See Deringil 1993 for an account of these efforts in the late 19th century, and their somewhat contradictory relation to the *Tanzimat* reforms of the same era.

where the idea of the condition of *dhikr* practice had any meaning. Acceptance of the charge with which God had entrusted men was the sole responsibility of the individual in question, regardless of whatever social circumstances might give the person an excuse for not doing so. Unlike Zuheir Mnini, who denied the epistemological grounds of a perspective from which the past can be apperceived, Sheikh Yasin denied the possibility of ethically sound grounds for such comparative historical perspectives.

While contexts and circumstances change, the more fundamental choice of whether to accept God's charge does not, and that choice is prior to the historical perspective. To pursue *dhikr* and a guiding relation with a sheikh, and to conduct one's life according to Sharia principles, are manners of assenting to and accepting that charge, and the very possibility of Islamic piety and ethics, a possibility which for Sheikh Yasin has no temporality. Indeed, the Sheikh's certainty on this point was compelling, and for me as a Muslim convert doing anthropological fieldwork, somewhat dislocating, because my questions on such matters were, in his eyes, missing the mark of what should be my object of attention. Sheikh Yasin seemed to feel, however, that as long as I studied with him, my interests would eventually take a more desired shape.

HEALING HIDDEN

An overlooked aspect of *dhikr*

I have argued that *dhikr* practices and the modes of authority that suffuse them must be understood as a node within a broader social-authoritative network, thus implicating both *dhikr*'s relation to other nodes external to it, and the diversity of the set of practices that might properly be associated with Sufism. I have argued that examining *dhikr* in this way presents a challenge to some of the conceptions of mysticism which have typically structured interpretations of *dhikr* and Sufism, most notably conceptions that center mysticism around the pursuit of spiritual experience, insight, or ritual transcendence. In some ways, healing is simply another practice speaking to the above arguments, another site where the authority of Sufi sheikhs has traditionally been constructed and recognized, even if by all accounts it only played a minor role in earlier *dhikr*. Yet healing warrants examination for another reason, namely that with the rise of modern biomedical discourses and practices its memory occupies an acute disjuncture, one that brings to the fore the question of which aspects of Sufi authority can be integrated into contemporary Syrian society, and if the normatively individual spirituality of modern forms of religion can be its only purview.

A fundamental assumption and effect of biomedical practice, according to Arthur Kleinman, is that in treatment of the ill body "increasing technical control has been accompanied by the separation of efficacy from meaning."⁴⁵ Kleinman's early focus on individual and social meaning in the experience of illness, like similarly oriented approaches to religion, ignores the question of power, and situates the provision of meaning to be of the domain of the traditional. The focus of Kleinman's later work, however, shifts from illness experience to the workings of power, first through a concern

45 Kleinman 1970, p. 88.

with “how symptoms and their dynamics fit in a larger order of agency, power, and value,” and then to analyses of social suffering, that suffering which “results from what political, economic, and institutional power does to people and, reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems.”⁴⁶

It is among the latter series of issues that I situate my examination of healing in the context of *dhikr*, though without calling upon the notion of social suffering *per se*. As with other aspects in Syrian society, healing practices have dramatically changed within the lives of older men and women, both in terms of treatment techniques and their institutional and authoritative contexts. These transformations, over the span of time from the middle of the century until now, have been inscribed in moments of illness treatment on these Syrians’ bodies, and are traced in memories whose articulation increasingly presents a problem of translatability. Stefania Pandolfo, working on psychiatric institutions in Morocco, observes that patient suffering articulates the “complex effect of the repression of indigenous medical practices and of the understanding of illness and the body steeped in the unconscious archives of the subject under colonial and postcolonial rule.”⁴⁷ The notion of a repression speaks to the link between state campaigns to eradicate traditional healing practices and the question of their articulability within contemporary language.

The role of healing in *dhikr* gatherings and *ad hoc* consultations with neighborhood sheikhs is difficult to discern for a host of reasons. As I have noted, interpretations of Sufi piety often foreground its more abstract, universal, and metaphorical aspects, while downplaying the more culturally or socially specific connotations and meanings generated therein. Further, *dhikr* practitioners face a decreasing possibility that the discursive representation of such healing practices will be received as anything but somewhat embarrassing examples of the illegitimate extension of religious authority into a more properly secular or scientific domain, that of medicine. Lastly, the profoundly physiological and medical valences of many Sufi terms and symbols, apart from their purely metaphorical reading in much contemporary literature on Sufism, complicates the idea that healing can be isolated and separated out of Sufism as a merely incidental practice of the past. That is, it is difficult to see how doing so would not depend first upon the adoption of a largely metaphorical, and distinctly modern, approach to religion and mysticism. In the following few sections I describe these complicating elements, and discuss and analyze several memories of healing in the context of *dhikr*.

Sufi physiology

The language of Sufism can be said to have as its primary object the articulation of an ethical physiology.⁴⁸ It will be recalled that my first interview with Sheikh Yasin began with an explication of the relation between the heart, body, and mind, and the

46 Hanh and Kleinman 1983, p. 16, and Kleinman et al 1997, p. ix.

47 Pandolfo 2008, p. 331.

48 This term is adopted from Hirschkind’s description of the “moral physiology,” and the “Quranically tuned body and soul,” in Hirschkind 2006, pp. 74-104. Also, see Hermansen 1988, for a description of Indian Sufi notions of relations between bodily and spiritual capacities, from a semiotic perspective.

linking of the ethics of their negotiation to social ethics and the ethics of society. The stress on the human body as a model system is further evident in the way the project of Sufism is commonly represented, as a healing project. Sheikh Sadiq al-Aita described Sufism to me as “the treatment of inner illnesses [*amrāḍ bāṭiniyya*].” The embodied nature of Sufi practices, including *dhikr* with its singing and chanting, its sweating and breathing, and its balance-challenging movements, serves to anchor ethical concepts that are themselves articulated through physiological notions. At the highest points of emotional (and physical) intensity of the *dhikr* gathering, when the lights had been put down and everyone was jumping, gasping, and sweating profusely, Sheikh Yasin was fond of yelling, “There is blessing in our sweat, Brothers, blessing in our sweat!”

Acts of healing in *dhikr*, which address bodily, nervous, and social complaints, are undertaken within a linguistic domain saturated with physiological concepts that exceed the domain of the body narrowly conceived. Another general definition of Sufism I often encountered among sheikhs and *dhikr* practitioners was that it springs from Sharia, and consists of the arduous process of *takhliya* (“emptying out”) and *tahliya* (“beautification”), that is the emptying-out of base qualities and beautification with good ones.⁴⁹ Similarly, Sheikh Hadi noted that the illness treated by the practice of Sufism was “that which stops your connection to God’s presence: arrogance, self-love, envy, love of the world, of women, of money.”

The orientation of the body towards purification and perfection is inseparable from, and forms the basis of, the construction of a sound social body. The semantic relations articulated by the notions of metaphor and analogy do not sufficiently encompass the links between the physical body and the ethical-spiritual body, individually and collectively. As noted by Scheper-Hughes and Lock, distinctions between these bodies are today made along more stringent lines established by the categories of post-Enlightenment scientific, religious, and political thought, and obscure more complex, overlapping configurations of bodies that are at once physical, semiotic, and political.⁵⁰ It is precisely these configurations which appear, to the extent that their representation is possible, within healing memories.

Approach to healing memories

Religious authorities, especially Sufi sheikhs, were an important health resource for nervous conditions and anxieties, and for chronic and undiagnosed conditions. Degree training in various Sharia programs in Damascus, the general method by which men now seek to become mosque imams, includes study of Prophetic medicine (medicine sanctioned by the *sunna*), and the use of Quranic verses and other Islamic phrases to rid the body of illness.⁵¹ Use of Quranic phrases is still widespread, but their role is now more often limited to milder conditions, or to orienting patient experience of biomedicine

49 I heard this from Sheikh Sadiq al-Aita, Sheikh Yasin, Sheikh Hadi, and others.

50 Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987 provide an analytical framework for healing that might be used to parse the manner of the body’s implication in other practices as well.

51 Though such treatments still constitute part of the training at Damascus’ Abu Nur Institute, and in the Sharia program at Damascus University, students and imams hold widely varying views as to what role they should play in illness treatment.

in the case of more severe ones. Quranic verses generally frame medical treatments, but do not constitute them. Most religious authorities, both in the neighborhoods and in the media, defer to doctors and pharmacists, and encourage people to seek them out for treatment, while at the same time guiding them towards interpretations of treatment that posit God as its ultimate agent.

The practice of employing Quranic verses to heal, called *ruqya*, contains detailed regimens of treatment for a wide variety of purposes beyond healing the body, including warding off misfortune, and restoring or protecting property and social relations. The catalog of *ruqya* encompasses treatments for bodily and mental sufferings, for troubles caused by adverse economic, legal, and social circumstances, and for sufferings induced by envy or magic. Today, the resources for addressing these concerns (with the obvious exception of the last) have become circumscribed within domains of authority managed by state institutions, and not the Sheikh of the *hāra*, who could prescribe *ruqya* treatments, provide arbitration, or employ another course of action. Moreover, the notion of a single category that would provide for the treatment of ill bodies and of ill social relations and circumstances becomes less tenable as the individual becomes the normative object of healing in modern medicine.

The ties between the trajectory of social individualization and that of changes in healing practices are evident in assertions of how *dhikr* and healing intersect today. Healing was not a topic that arose spontaneously when *dhikr*'s past was discussed. I started to ask about it only after hearing it mentioned as an incidental element of another story, and after seeing Sheikh Yasin occasionally perform healings after his group's *dhikr* meetings. Responses to my inquiries varied, but the general reluctance to discuss it was typified by the words of one sheikh, who helped direct meetings of the Nuriyya group in Old Damascus: "Yes, in the past it is possible that something of that sort may have happened in the context of *dhikr*." Another less reticent man from the Nuriyya group said, "*Ruqya* did occur in past meetings, but not now. Now it depends on the strength of the person's belief. The person goes to the *dhikr* with the intention of being healed, but on an individual level only, and he doesn't tell anyone usually that's why he's there." As the scope of healing practices is narrowed to the individual, and its integration in *dhikr* closed off within the space of private intention and belief, its potential for discursive elaboration is seemingly lost.

One neighborhood imam, to whom I had been referred as very knowledgeable on *ruqya*, insisted repeatedly during our interview that such practices had been introduced by Moroccan and Algerian religious authorities who had settled in Damascus, and had little to do with Islam of the *sunna*. I was unable to resolve the evident contradiction between what others had said about his expertise in the topic and the views he offered me. However, the distancing ascription to North Africans of practices that have clearly and steadily been part of the purview of Damascene religious authorities evidences the unease that such practices evoke in memory.

Two *dhikr* healings, and a shrinking frame of interpretation

Two of the first stories I heard of healing came from the composer of *dhikr* vocal music, Zuheir Mnini, who recounted a memory of healing in a conversation with me and Sheikh Sadiq al-Aita. Zuheir, born in the late 1920's, was a contemporary of the Sheikh's father, and, as mentioned, the ties between the families extend back at least one more generation. The first story, from Mnini's childhood in the 1930's, concerned his witnessing the treatment of his mother at a *dhikr* meeting:

I went into the *dhikr* and saw my mother. She was on the floor, wrapped in many wool blankets. It was a shock—frightening! Sheikh Umar al-Aita, your grandfather [gestures to Sheikh Sadiq], was reciting Quranic passages over her body, along with some others from the *dhikr* group. I went in there and sat by her side. I don't know what she had been suffering from, but she had been ill for a while.

In the second story, Mnini detailed his own healing at the hands of Sheikh Sadiq's father, Hashim al-Aita. In that memory, whose telling is recounted in full in Chapter 4, "Composition, Art, Creativity, Part I," he tells of being led by the hand to a *dhikr* meeting by a man working at his home. He had suffered another epileptic seizure, and the worker, finding him on the ground, had taken him to a *dhikr* meeting being held in the neighborhood. In the memory, what emerges from the fog of his disorientation are the words and, importantly for him as a musician, the rhythmical meter used to heal him: "*wa ṣallī yā rabbī 'alā al-mussarī* [Oh Lord, bless the Facilitator, i.e. the Prophet]." Mnini, who had been very disoriented, reported feeling "as if [he] had just woken up right then," and noted that his attacks stopped for a period of "at least three more days after the *dhikr*."

In each of these memories, Mnini's affect and body are sites upon which a particular authoritative configuration impresses itself, once as a boy when he witnesses his mother being treated, and once as a young man when he himself is. In both cases, speech acts employing formulas of which God and the Prophet are the original agents—*ruqya* treatments—exert performative force on a number of levels. The authoritative configuration brought to bear in these cases, which situates illness as at once a physical, ethical, and social problem, simply could not be called upon today were the same conditions to emerge, if only because no single authority spans these domains. Mnini's voice, in recounting these memories, went through several stops and starts as he strained to put together details. His accounts evoke a different normative order, where healings were made possible by certain types of authoritative configurations, where certain types of knowledges are presupposed which are difficult to translate across the disjuncture with the present of his narrations, and which may not be entirely coherent within that present.

The displacement of that authority, and of the patterns of social relations in which it held sway and which it helped to cohere, is directly related to the ascendance of individual spirituality as a more primary focus of *dhikr* practices. Michel de Certeau, in his study of sixteenth and seventeenth century Catholic mystics, analyzes transformations in these mystics' practice in a way that can help shed historical light on *dhikr* and Sufism as well. De Certeau provides a compelling precedent for situating mystical practices historically and materially, and takes other scholars of religion and mysticism to task for

their failure to do so, for essentially providing analyses reflective of the same universal, divine ontologies with which the mystics themselves seek relation.⁵² For de Certeau, it is no accident that the “manner of speaking” which characterized mystic discourse in the context developed among mystics from social classes and regions that had experienced a loss of power and status. “That impoverishment,” he writes, “developed the memory of a lost past; it clung to models deprived of efficacy and available for an ‘other world.’”⁵³

Though the memories of the men I spent time with touch upon significant social and authoritative transformations, and the loss of a mode of community, the parallel I wish to draw with de Certeau inheres more in the movement he traces from social authority to individual, inward spirituality, than in the sense of mourning and loss that pervades his work. That sense, while present to some degree in the memories shared with me, was not accompanied by the nostalgia that saturates de Certeau’s work. The responses of Syrian Sunni Muslims, even those whose former authority and status were displaced with the state’s delegitimization of Sufi orders, may well prove to be of a different character. What is helpful in de Certeau’s study is his characterization of the nature of the changes that occurred in mystical praxis and language as a move from social authority to individual will. The “manner of speaking” that de Certeau identifies has as its primary component the *volò*, or will. A cohesion between social authority and meaning gave way, he asserts, to linguistic practices that cultivate a “pure will” outside the domain of the social. This transformation is similar to the course traversed by *dhikr* between the forms it takes in memories and its more recent focus on individual spirituality as perhaps the only viable route of development.

Deep wounds, talk, and reputation

The only *dhikr* group in which I personally witnessed healing practices was that of Sheikh Yasin, who would sometimes address health complaints of his followers following the weekly *dhikr* meetings. As his other *murīds* talked, greeted one another, and perhaps waited to request a photograph with him, he would stand on a *murīd*’s back, or place his hands on his body, and recite Quranic verses. Similar healings were performed when the Sheikh visited various members of his group at their homes, healings which sometimes involved, at the direction of the Sheikh, touch and recitation by all who happened to be present, including me. There was no question in these cases that it was the particular, charismatic authority of the Sheikh, his miraculous ability to heal, whose intervention was being sought.

Talk of Sheikh Yasin’s healing powers, such as that which constituted my preparation in the first taxi ride to his home, was indeed one of the primary ways his authority was constructed. At a brief stop before one of the group’s weekly meetings, Hasan, the taxi-driver, told another man and me a story concerning the Sheikh’s healing powers. He said a man had cut himself in the presence of the Sheikh, in an over-enthusiastic and unsanctioned act of devotion. “His belly had been opened all the way

52 See de Certeau 1992, p. 21, where he refers to the “ahistorical slumber” of studies of mysticism, and note 40 on the same page for a slight elaboration of his criticisms.

53 de Certeau 1992, p. 22.

across, but the Sheikh sealed the wound with his saliva, and the man was fully recovered. No wound, no blood.” The other man was very interested in the story, and pressed, “And *you* saw it, with *your own eyes*?” Hasan offered apologetically that no, the Sheikh himself had told him this story. “*Subhānallāh* [God is Glorious],” said the man, which Hasan repeated, and the two continued to smoke.

Whether they were left in that moment in awe of the Sheikh’s powers, or left facing the question of doubt, these men had as much devotion to the Sheikh as anyone. As I later learned, each had each in their own way spent considerable time, effort, and money in pursuit of miraculous cures for conditions that caused them a good deal of social and bodily suffering. Hasan’s persistence in particular, over twelve years of childlessness, seemed to me partially fueled by the insistence that any solution come through miraculous means, and not through others which, if efficacious, might reinforce other authorities. Their mutual response in the above exchange, at each end of a transaction that had held the promise of a first-hand account of the miraculous, was difficult to read, but is perhaps tied to the question of the type of authority which a given recourse will serve to construct, and the position, vis-à-vis that authority, that the person seeking recourse will hence occupy. In the last group of sections of this chapter, I explore the broader authoritative contexts with which *dhikr* social fields interface, and address the limits of that configuration in the contemporary moment.

AUTHORITY

From social isolation to spiritual power

The members of Sheikh Yasin’s *dhikr* group were of a much more homogenous social background than the other groups whose meetings I attended. All were lower-class residents of the ramshackle cement housing that spread up the hills rising out of the northern outskirts of the city, and most of their families originated in villages not far from Aleppo in the northern part of the country. Only the youngest of them, those in their early twenties and late teens, had been born in Damascus. Recently urbanized, they shared few social connections either with Damascenes of similar class, or with the more recently emerged of the educated classes who, though not of the traditional elite and often of lower-class family backgrounds, had carved out a degree of economic power in various trades and professions.⁵⁴

From the margins of both traditional and recent loci of influence in Damascus, the religious practices of Sheikh Yasin’s group was deeply rooted in the relation of authority between disciples and sheikh. Unlike other *dhikr* groups in Damascus, who tend to share numerous cross-connections with other groups, sheikhs and religious authorities, Sheikh Yasin’s group did not much extend into greater networks of religious authority, except to some groups outside of Aleppo with whom they had occasional contact.⁵⁵

54 It may seem that I am assuming a middle classes norm here, and perhaps the notion of *class* is too broad to apply, but it is important to note that Damascus has seen a relatively equitable distribution of access to higher education and other professional opportunities, even if that access takes many years of residence in the city to develop.

55 The historical background for these connections are touched upon in the next section.

The Sheikh's denial of historical discontinuities within *dhikr*, his discounting of the pertinence of the question of social change, while heightening the sense of urgency of personal piety, is partially facilitated by the relative isolation of his group. His take on past-present relations combines with this isolation to provide an arena where his authority operates more or less apart from the influences of the broader social-authoritative networks that form the contexts of his followers' lives outside of *dhikr*. Sheikh Yasin has successfully maintained or reconstituted *sheikh-murīd* relations that recall the intensity and intimacy of that which Sheikh Hadi had claimed to be operative in the vitality of past *dhikr*, but the discrete nature of his authority generates a mode of piety that is private, or at least socially dis-embedded, insofar as it fails to engage with those other broader networks. A key factor in this separation is the authoritative style which Sheikh Yasin cultivates, and which informs his sense of distinction vis-à-vis other groups. It is to that style I now turn.

Sheikh Yasin interlude #3: The challenges of observing authority

The modes of authority adopted in Sheikh Yasin's group were at a significant disjuncture with the conventions of authority as framed by other social configurations. The following anecdote illustrates some points at which conventions were contravened in the interest of asserting those authoritative modes, including basic protocols of Islamic prayer. It will be recalled that the concept of the *musha'widh* ("charlatan") is an important evaluative standard used by both *dhikr* practitioners and opponents of *dhikr* to assess Sufi authority. The term's use frequently takes the form of a cavalier dismissal ("Ah, a charlatan!") which implicitly appeals to common-sense, and in this way raises the question of the degree to which any contemporary *sheikh-murīd* relation might be considered charlatanry, given that the forms of authority and expertise cultivated therein have been delegitimized within the normative contemporary order. Sheikh Yasin was labeled a *musha'widh* to me by several people, including other Sufi sheikhs, some *dhikr* practitioners, and some non-practitioners, none of whom had met him or heard of him before I described his group to them. In what follows I share some of the events whose retelling led to those charges, and explore some of the intersubjective challenges with which his authority presented me.

In retrospect it is clear that I was not prepared to deal with the sort of relation in which the Sheikh's particular authority situated me, and my attempts to remain an objective observer may have only exacerbated the situation, to the degree that I felt my only option was an abrupt disengagement. One challenge in my fieldwork with Sheikh Yasin's group was that the men were reluctant to be interviewed by me or meet with me unless they obtained his assent. When I asked Hasan, the taxi-driver, if we might sit and talk some time, he said he must first ask his father, and gestured towards the photo of the Sheikh on his dashboard. Another man I had approached to interview declined because he had just been advised by the Sheikh to limit relations with his brother (who was opposed to his involvement with the group), and therefore did not wish to approach the Sheikh so soon with another request. When Sheikh Yasin's advice was sought on matters, it often was in the form of a request for permission, whether having to do with family or business

affairs. The Sheikh's followers only married with his permission, which he freely granted except in cases of requests to take a second wife.

On one occasion at the Sheikh's *zāwiyah*, he joked with me while Hasan, directly at our side, made up the afternoon prayer he had missed while driving. "I want to marry Hasan off to an American girl, so he can get citizenship!" the Sheikh said with a grin, looking up at Hasan, whose arms were folded and head bowed as he prayed. Hasan shook his head, in an unsuccessful attempt to suppress both the disruption and the smile that it produced. The Sheikh laughed, satisfied by the evidence that the joke had met its mark. I was slightly taken aback by what I saw as an intrusion into the psychic space of Hasan's prayer, a space protected within Sharia by a whole series of protocols that have become common etiquette in Syria as elsewhere.

In Syria as in other Muslim countries, prayers are often fit into the fabric of daily life, and a whole series of formal and informal conventions govern the way people carry on in a home or place of business in the presence of someone praying, sometimes just a few inches away. My understanding of the Sheikh's joke, based partly on my experience of these conventions, and having seen children and unwitting adults corrected for potentially disrupting a person praying in close proximity, was that it demonstrated the complicity of others in his authority, its co-construction. My judgment of it was sharpened by a paranoia I had begun to feel about the relation that was developing between us, and about whether he was indeed capable of engaging in any relation other than that of sheikh to a follower.

Sheikh Yasin made a similar demonstration during another of my visits to the *zāwiyah*, when Hasan and I had been waiting for him to come down from his residence. The Sheikh entered the room, and I stood with Hasan, who said, "*as-salāmu 'alaikum yā sayyidnā*."⁵⁶ The sheikh responded jovially and with grand bearing, "*faḍḍī jaibak!* [Empty your pockets!]" Hasan pulled his pants pockets inside out, and joyfully held some keys and change out to him. The Sheikh's joke consisted of a play on the second line of a lighthearted Syrian greeting, *as-salāmu 'alaikum wa raḥmatullāhi wa barakātuhu, kull shī fi jaibak hātuh* ("The peace of Allah and his mercy and blessings be upon you, hand over everything in your pockets!"). The Sheikh had omitted the first part, a fuller and more formal version of the Islamic greeting, and had cut down the second part, a colloquial-language imperative, to a blunter order. The creative and elliptical reformulation of the phrase transformed a conventional joke into a sort of pun, within an exchange that dramatized the *sheikh-murīd* relation which for both of them inhered in obedience.

Itzhak Weismann, an expert on the history of Sufism in Syria, has written about another Sufi order, also very widespread in Syria:

In its practical instruction, the Naqshbandiyya urges the novices to be faithful to a single guide, to fully obey him, and to execute his orders without reservation or delay. In relation to his master a disciple should be, according to a famous sufi saying, like a corpse in the hands of its washer. Annihilation (*fanā'*) in the words,

56 The term *sayyidnā* ["our master"] differs widely in its use across the Arab world. In Damascus, among Sunni Muslims, it is generally frowned upon except if applied to the Prophet, but Hasan used it often with the Sheikh.

deeds, quality, and substance of the master is a precondition to annihilation in God.⁵⁷

The issue is not whether Sheikh Yasin's authority was a genuine reflection of these principles, or whether he was in fact a *musha'widh*. Rather there may be few remaining applicable framings for this mode authority given the lack of social integration and connection between the various domains—medical, spiritual, legal, political, and social—that formed the lived background against which notions such as the one cited by Weismann were formed. I suggest that charlatanry, like the concept of superstition in the European Enlightenment, is a category that here plays a specific regulating role as an evaluative that is applied in specific ways to certain practices and ideologies whose material and social foundations are broken apart by the social and political developments of the modern state.

The Sheikh seemed genuinely incapable of engaging as anything other than the ascendant node in the sheikh-*murīd* dyad, and for my part I could do nothing but reject it. When he introduced me, either to visitors at his *zāwiyah* or to his group at his *dhikr* meeting, the Sheikh insisted on saying I was an American Muslim studying Sufism in order to open a *tekkīyya*, a large Sufi center, in the U.S. He occasionally asked me to recite *al-fātiḥa*, the opening chapter of the Qur'an, which I did in an unsteady, nervous voice, and once asked that I improvise some supplications, or *du'ā*, for the group. My discomfort must have been apparent, but he opined to all that my supplications, as a convert to Islam, would be efficacious (*mustajāb*). After some stammering, I settled upon repeating the phrases he uttered for me. After the meeting, several of the men approached me to say hello and ask that I make *du'ā* for them, with an urgency that exceeded anything in the commonly-heard expression of parting, "Make *du'ā* for us! [*id'ihnā!*]"

After a few months, Sheikh Yasin began to send Hasan to pick me up at home without notification. The first time it happened, I left with him, despite my wariness, so that I could attend the *dhikr* meeting, and hopefully interview him or other members of the group. After the second of these impromptu calls, the Sheikh told me he did not want me to study with anyone else but him. During the coming month of Ramadan, he said, I should come to his *zāwiyah* every morning after the dawn prayer for ten hours of intensive study. His attempt to regulate my activities did not come as a surprise, but confirmed suspicions that had arisen in the above-mentioned episodes. At *dhikr* meetings, I had noticed how he sometimes peered at my notebook whenever I wrote anything, and watched interactions I had with members of his group. I communicated to the Sheikh my discomfort with these demands and, the inaccuracy of his representations of my study as having something to do with spreading the Rifa'iyya Sufi order in America. His response was that I could come and go as I please without a problem.

The next time Hasan showed up unannounced on a day when I had been quite sick. My patience had worn thin, and I wanted nothing more to do with the group. After getting dressed, I went downstairs to meet Hasan and tell him. Perhaps Hasan had been tasked with producing me, and did not want to disappoint the Sheikh, but an argument escalated between us, and he implored me to come along, guaranteeing that the Sheikh would heal me. When I repeated my refusal, and said I would not continue my research

57 Weismann 2001, pp. 33-34.

with the group, he appeared stunned and hurt, and he left. My refusal, after Hasan had framed the discussion in this way, was perhaps tantamount to a rejection of the Sheikh's authority, a refusal to acknowledge illness as a purview in which the Sheikh's authority could be exercised and secured.

I stopped answering calls from Hasan, but a few evenings later he called from an unfamiliar number. I told him I had not changed my mind about the group, and he asked if he could come and see me, so the Sheikh could understand the situation. He arrived with three other of the Sheikh's followers, and announced that they had come to show their love and request another audience with the Sheikh. Again I refused, knowing that I would not be able to assert myself in that dense field of authority. The others that accompanied him looked as if they were not entirely sure what they were doing there. Anger flooded Hasan's face, and they drove off, only to return again a minute later. I was in the midst of an intense, protracted battle of wills—mine, and by proxy, the Sheikh's. Hasan stopped six feet from me and loudly demanded what the problem was, in a tone that again suggested I had done him a great injustice. I said forcefully, hoping to cover all possible responses, that I did not have the sufficient belief to continue with the group, and besides that did not want to continue with them.

I never saw Hasan again, but heard him, weeks later, on the sidewalk under the window of my room. I recognized his voice as he responded to my mother-in-law, who was telling him that I was not there. My mother-in-law, though she has little contact with them, tends to have strong faith in religious authorities, and in the miracles performed by sheikhs. But she also has little patient for cheaters, swindlers, and charlatans. Soon I heard her yelling at Hasan: "Leave him alone! He doesn't want to talk to you! You're group's a bunch of crazies! Tell the Sheikh to leave him alone! You, and all your crazy friends! Get out of here!"

Favret-Saada, in her work on witchcraft in the French countryside, has written poignantly about the impossibility of the position of the fieldwork researcher who observes from outside the the social system of the practices she studies. For her, the study of witchcraft could only be facilitated by her capitulation, in a sense, to the principles that held sway in the social field of the people she was studying. This meant agreeing to be the subject that her informants constructed her to be, in her case a potential witch. She writes of the positionality of those from whom she sought interviews: "'Informing' an ethnographer, that is, someone who claims to have no intention of using the information, but naively wants to know for the sake of knowing, is literally unthinkable."⁵⁸ Similarly, because in her field-site "words wage[d] war" in a potentially constant power struggle, there was "no room for uninvolved observers."⁵⁹

It became clear to me working with Sheikh Yasin's group that the sheikh-*murīd* relation obviated, in their eyes, any other interests I might have. My interest in *dhikr* music, for example, simply never registered with the Sheikh nor with Hasan, though I made many attempts to assert it. This power relation between sheikh and disciple is difficult, even impossible, to read from the outside. Part of the reason I was so uneasy witnessing the Sheikh's assertions of authority upon others was that I felt implicated in

58 Favret-Saada 1980, p. 9.

59 Favret-Saada 1980, p. 10.

those acts, because there simply was no other apparent mode through which the Sheikh engaged others. The possibility for a more or less neutral ground was a figment of my imagination, unsupported by the social context. The Sheikh's authority did not allow that possibility, in a way related to his denial of the validity and the ethical ground of assertions made by *dhikr* practitioners regarding discontinuities with past forms of their practice. From this perspective the piety of Sheikh Yasin's group relies not only upon a marked isolation from other *dhikr* groups and from other networks of authority, but also upon the erasure of the memory of those more extensive connections of past *dhikr* groups.

THE STATE

Relations to the state

The final of my considerations of the intersection of memory and authority deals with the relation between the State and the forms of social organization that have been, and in some cases continue to be, associated with the community of *dhikr* practitioners. As Trimingham took pains to point out, the conception of Sufism as a primarily mystical, inward practice has been hard to uphold ever since the formalization of the orders after the ninth century. He notes that "tomb-centres" of Sufi saints were to be found in each village and district, and each tribe and urban craft-guild was associated with one. These were loci of authority "which influenced not merely the lives of affiliated and initiated members, but all who belonged to that particular community or locality."⁶⁰ According to the framework Trimingham develops, Sufism has existed for the vast majority of its history in its third and last stage, marked by the abandonment of asceticism and monasticism and the fusion of their organizational structures with that of trade-guilds.⁶¹

Trimingham's observations on the types of authority that came to be focused in the orders work towards a complication of the distinction between the religious and secular, though at the same time upholding categories which more contemporary problematizations of these domains do not. "In traditional life," he writes, "religion was the synthesis of human activity, all society was religious society. The orders, binding together individuals under a supernatural bond, were themselves a social power."⁶² Trimingham's observations do not suggest that he sees the overlap of the religious and secular as a sort of pre-modern error, or an example of the over-reach of the domain of religion. Rather, he is trying to come to terms with a configuration different from that assumed by the modern nation-state on which the domains of the religious and the secular depend: "The orders and their *walis* [saints, or 'friends of God'], we might say, consecrated 'secular' institutions."⁶³ Trimingham's thinking, in this regard, resembles an inverted prefiguring of Talal Asad's argument that codification of Sharia in the modern

60 Trimingham 1971, p. 234.

61 Trimingham 1971, p. 237.

62 Trimingham 1971, p. 233.

63 Trimingham 1971, p. 234. See also, the consecration of "forms of co-operation," on p. 237.

state “is precisely a secular formula for privatizing ‘religion’ and preparing the ground for the self-governing subject.”⁶⁴

The work of scholars who have demonstrated the transformation of Sharia from its pre-modern articulations and modes of practice brings us a better understanding of what the forms of authority were whose dismantling and displacement were achieved by the emergence of the modern state. It is often noted that Sufism constituted the dominant mode of religious practice in the Arab world in the nineteenth century, and formed the background against which both European imperialism and Muslim reformers conceived their designs for a reworked Islamic religiosity.⁶⁵ However, much less attention has been paid to Sufism and its local authority, than to the institution of *muftis* (Islamic jurists) and their issuance of *fatwas* (non-binding religious edicts), as representative of the way Muslims engaged with Sharia and constituted Islamic authority before the codification and bureaucratization of Sharia in the late nineteenth century took effect at local levels.

The first of the two points I would like to raise from literature dealing with the transformation of Sharia in the modern era has to do with the lessening concern with ethical norms that has resulted from the reconception of Sharia as code. As Baber Johansen has noted in his illuminating work, “When the modern nation-states’ codification of the law reduced Islamic law to personal statute law, the state’s written law abandoned the purely ethical norms of that tradition and with them the concept of the individual’s own forum (*bāṭin*).”⁶⁶ Ethical norms in this case were central to each side of the local-authoritative equation, both for the party seeking guidance in an element of tradition or in a specific intervention from a religious authority, and for the party who interpreted such elements or articulated such interventions. Talal Asad, discussing the moral subject of pre-codified Sharia, writes that the notion of such a subject “presupposes that the capability for virtuous conduct, and the sensibilities on which that capability draws, are acquired by the individual through tradition-guided practices (the *sunna*)....Implied in this conception of *fiqh* is not simply a comprehensive structure of norms (*ahkam*), but a range of traditional disciplines, combining both sufism and the *shari‘a*, on which the latter’s authority depends.”⁶⁷ It is not clear, however, to what degree Asad intends “sufism” to refer to a mode of social organization and authority, outside its nature as a set of “spiritual” disciplines.

An important aspect of this ethical dimension is highlighted by consideration of the local nature of its manifestations, which in historical retrospect appears over and against the anonymous structure of state law. That local quality was not only a result of the stress on the ethical capacities of persons, whether religious authorities or otherwise, but also of the types of knowledge which were created when a person sought advice, and which informed the formulation of decisions. Brinkley Messick writes on this topic, in the context of the role of *muftis* in Yemen: “In a dialectical manner, locally generated

64 Asad 2003, pp. 227-228. [?]

65 See, for example, the discussion in Mahmood 2005, p. 48, of the “Muslim folklore” that the women’s mosque movement in Egypt has sought to displace with its modes of practice. Also, see Sirriyeh 1999, especially the second chapter, for an account of the mobilization of European and Muslim reformist arguments against Sufism.

66 Johansen 2003, p. 688.

67 Asad 2003, p. 250.

questions were related to locally interpreted jurisprudence. Muftis were the creative mediators of the ideal and the real of the *shari'a*.⁶⁸ For the *muftis* this meant bringing to bear specific knowledge that they accumulated: “A microsocial and historical catalogue of particular actors and specific occurrences, the ever-shifting ‘known’ of a place was tapped into by a judge in a specific manner. In one respect his knowledge inevitably became deeper and wider than the ordinary person’s as he became privy to otherwise guarded secrets exposed in situations of conflict.”⁶⁹

The second point I want to make has to do with the effects of the transformation of Sharia on patterns of people’s engagement with authority. Hussein Ali Agrama makes several important observations in this regard. He notes that “the mufti directly accesses, or claims to directly access, classical Sharia sources and texts to formulate his fatwas; the judge’s access, by contrast, is mediated because he refers to a legal code that is derived, or claimed to be derived, from the classical Sharia sources and texts.”⁷⁰ The difference he describes between the *mufti* and the judge is not as abstract as it might sound, because, as Agrama goes on to show, a person’s acceptance of a *fatwa* often requires, especially in cases where decisions are not in one’s favor, a certain type of moral agency different from that exercised in a system of codified law: “In this case, one’s susceptibility to a rightly guided word of guidance, one’s being moved despite oneself by the fatwa, can be indication that one has not veered hopelessly off that ethical path. That susceptibility to the fatwa itself might therefore be an expression of one’s ethical agency, a demonstration of one’s continued ethical potential. Ethical agency, in this case, would not be opposed to authority but, rather, an expression of it.”⁷¹

With these considerations in mind, we might frame a more specific question concerning the changes in modes of relation to authority that have accompanied the curtailments of the authority of Sufi orders, both by the general process of modernization and by specific campaigns of disenfranchisement undertaken by the Syrian state. In his classic work on Islam, Marshall Hodgson suggests a line of inquiry into Sufism that would seek to identify the “organic processes” involved. Hodgson seems to have in mind neurological or psychological factors in the following: “However independent a meaning one attaches to moral and religious phenomena, one must, so far as possible, identify the organic processes involved. Only when we understand such processes well can we speak with critical precision about the meaning and value of any human phenomena.”⁷² As I have sought to show, modifying this question to interrogate culturally-acquired modes of engagement with authority, and to shift the focus from the biological psyche to the psyche constructed and maintained as a node within fields of social authority, is perhaps a more fruitful guide for inquiry. How are the engagements of persons who were implicated in authoritative networks of the recent past—as healed bodies, as objects of *dhikr* pedagogy, as ethical subjects in extended relation with a neighborhood sheikh—how are their engagements in these networks articulated in memory, as specific forms of

68 Messick 1993, p. 151.

69 Messick 1993, p. 181.

70 Agrama 2010, p. 6.

71 Agrama 2010, p. 12.

72 Hodgson 1974, p. 397.

desire, of nostalgia, and of inspiration for future projects of the making of communities and societies?

First history of disenfranchisement

Sheikh Yasin's *dhikr* was the only one I attended in which regular mention was made of the Syrian President, Bashar al-Asad. As in Friday sermons in mosques across the country, the last supplication offered called upon God to protect and guide the President "to the good" [*li-mā fīhi khair*]. His *zāwiyah* was also the only *dhikr* space in which I saw portraits of the President. Among Syrians, the view on the manner of appearance of these photos (mostly in places that see public traffic of some type) is that a government representative, such as an inspector or fee collector on a visit, makes a casual reference to the absence of a Presidential portrait. When the worker returns to the place the next time, continued absence of a portrait can become justification for harassment, or more likely the demand of a bribe through the threat of a costly enforcement of code, whatever the violation.

The lack of visible State symbols among other *dhikr* groups naturally invites speculation on Sheikh Yasin's group. References to the President, which I believe the Sheikh was instructed or compelled to cultivate, legitimize the Sheikh's authority insofar as they show the State's concern to erect a reference to itself within the space where that authority is constructed and exercised. The Sheikh and his group become therefore implicated in the struggles for influence in Syrian society in a way that other groups are not, just as their social marginality is symbolically alleviated. At the same time, the State's symbolic presence effects an appropriation of the Sheikh's authority.

These portraits are also painful reminders of the history of the repression of the order during the violent clamp-down on Islamist groups under Hafez al-Asad, when in the 1980s the Rifa'iyya order, at the time highly organized in Aleppo and outlying areas, was effectively dismantled. In this sense, the State's symbolic presence in Sheikh Yasin's group supports Paulo Pinto's observation that "while local autonomous *zawiyas* exist in both urban and rural Syria, they constitute an unstable equilibrium in the system that results from the breakup of previously existing Sufi networks."⁷³ The concern showed by the State regarding Sheikh Yasin's *zāwiyah* as a site of potential instability also reflects the fact that the members of his group, unlike those of so many other Damascene *dhikr* circles, share little connection to the familial, class, and professional networks whose interests have been partially woven in with those of the State. The Sheikh's rejection of the decline narrative on *dhikr*, a narrative shot through with explicit and implicit observations on changing modalities of authority, and his cultivation of interpersonal power relations, is therefore partly an act of resistance to this history of disenfranchisement, a denial of the legitimacy, perhaps, of the configurations of state authority that have emerged.

73 Pinto 2007, p. 112.

Second history of disenfranchisement

For Sheikh Yasin, the past flows uninterrupted into the present, but is unexamined. By way of contrast, the men of other *dhikr* groups offered more perspicuous historical perspectives, but did so from within groups that seemed to have lost the sense of their social purpose. Those groups had settled, in many cases, on providing an arena for what the man in the next section might rightfully call “mere” individual religious experience. The final ethnographic illustration of this chapter follows his assertions of historical discontinuities in *dhikr*, and his pointed distinctions between individual and social piety and ethics.

I meet Rafiq al-Mawlawi on his day off from his job at one of the gulf-state consulates. We meet in a cafe on the main avenue of a well-to-do neighborhood of modern apartment buildings five and six stories high. Young Syrians sit, some with laptops, sipping lattes and cappuccinos that cost as much as they would in any Western cafe, about three or four percent of an average Syrian’s monthly salary. I find Rafiq seated with another man at one of the tables, and I sit down in the chair he has saved for me. I recognize a CNN World reporter at the neighboring table, discussing something with a middle-aged Syrian man.

Rafiq’s family is part of a network of families that have been custodians of several interrelated Sufi orders in Damascus for many generations. I have seen Rafiq at the gatherings at the al-Aita house, where he acts as a sort of utility player, helping the directing sheikh to keep things going smoothly, whether by conducting the dancers, playing the frame-drum and singing, or addressing problems with lights or microphones. Rafiq’s grandfather, Fa’iq al-Mawlawi, had been the Sheikh of the Mawlawi order in Damascus about forty years ago, having taken over from his brother, Sheikh Shamsi. Unlike some of the other orders, the Mawlawi are accustomed to intimate connections with state, reaching back to before the Ottoman era.⁷⁴

Rafiq is gaunt and clean-shaven, and wears his hair slicked back. He is in his late thirties, and is dressed in dark slacks, and a buttoned shirt and suit jacket that hang loosely on his body. He introduces me to a friend he has brought along. Rafiq begins discussing the more classical *majālis al-samā’* gatherings, which were written about, both descriptively and prescriptively, by eleventh and twelfth century theologians such as al-Ghazali. Smoking a cigarette, he talks about how the art of *inshād* grew out of these earlier forms of musical piety. His knowledge of classical concepts and texts reflects his membership in a family with a long history in Sufi scholarship and authority.

I ask whether he agrees with the notion of a decline in the practice, and he says, as many others have, that there is no question of an almost complete decline, and that neither the *sheikhs* nor the *murīds* are as they were in the past. I ask for clarification, and he continues, working towards an analysis of the relation between the local history of Western colonialism and the decimation of the social and political authority that, he asserts, was the base of the vitality of these practices:

74 According to Tringham 1971, p. 61, the Mawlawi order developed lasting “aristocratic tendencies” due to “the close association of the founder with the Seljuq ruling authority,” and unlike other orders its leadership was nearly exclusively hereditary.

What you see now is just folkloric heritage [*turāth*]. People come to learn the twirling [*fatla*], and then they go and work in a restaurant for tourists from the West, and from Lebanon or the Gulf. They get five hundred *lira* [about ten dollars, or five percent of an average monthly salary] for a night's work, and that's why they come to us. But we never see them again. And even with the people who come to our *dhikr*, whatever spirituality is there, even with the most pious person, it's just an individual thing. A person can feel this spirituality, and he's coming closer to God through the *inshād*, and through the movement, and this is good. But it's just a personal thing internal to him. It's no longer connected to the society, to the general community.

Rafiq takes an active role in producing *dhikr* as religious, folkloric entertainment. As part of the al-Mawlawi family, he has toured other nations to put on Mawlawi *dhikrs* on stage, and has helped conduct *dhikr* meetings for Syrian and Iranian television.⁷⁵ He is more enthusiastic, however, about having taken on the role of family historian, and is writing a chronicle of the Damascus Mawlawi order and the historical changes it has undergone. As any Syrian dealing with modern history, he operates under the strict limits the State places on works touching upon of the era which saw rise of the current regime. As he talks, and as I am increasingly impressed by the clarity and sharpness of his social and political analyses, I understand that a good portion of his thinking will be omitted from his final text.

For Rafiq, communal spirituality is not a matter of communal feeling, or shared celebration through music, but is defined by its relation to social and political authority. I ask whether he considers himself a Sufi, which, as indicated in the beginning of this chapter, is something very few *dhikr* participants would claim:

No, not at all. There's no relation with a *sheikh*, and no real application [*taṭbīq*] of the path and its principles. There's no real Sufism anywhere in the world. Spirituality [*al-ruḥāniyyah*] is lost everywhere. Sufism is the pinnacle of purity [*al-naqā'*], but now it's corrupt. When al-Shafi'i was having trouble with his memorization skills, he found that it was related to a disobedience [*ma'siya*] of God, because he was looking at women, allowing himself to be distracted. The relation to God is the basis for making all things correct, and Sufism addresses this relation by moving one towards asceticism [*al-zuhd*] and away from the things of the world. When the role of our order changed, roles like...*politics* [said quietly], roles like medicine, roles like helping people, and other social roles, the nature of the thing changed. The order's involvement with the community, and with the political leaders of the society, was the heart of its spiritual authority, because spirituality was not separate from the care-taking of the ethics of society. The body moves, and it moves the spirit. But in the 1940's, the gatherings were outlawed. The names of people who participated were written down, and the lands of the order were confiscated. Before, the leaders of the Mawlawi order were the ones who led any funeral of an important state official. They were at the head, as a symbol, and also as important figures in their community—politically,

75 See Shannon 2003 for an account of the various types of "staged" *dhikr* ceremonies.

spiritually, as advisers to the community. Now, even if we want to have a meeting, we have to get the approval of the Ministry of *Awqāf*.

Rafiq's analysis of the "corruption" of Sufism, which he defines, on one hand, as the spiritual program that leads one away from worldly things, but which is so rooted in what he sees as that program's loss of authority socially and politically, challenges the widespread assumption in Sufi scholarship of the primacy of the internal space of religious experience, whether individual or communal. His mention of the body moving the spirit sounds, on the surface, like a typical comment on the function of the practice of devotional dance in the gatherings. But its context, in the midst of a discourse concerned with changes in the social roles of the order at the hands of the State, suggest rather that the ways in which the social-political body of the order has been coerced—often violently—to move, have resulted in the loss of a spirituality not limited to internal experience. For Rafiq, no matter the depth of spiritual feeling engendered in the current practices, a return to the spirituality of the past is impossible because it was characterized, first and foremost, by the porosity of the border between individual piety, including experience, feeling, and ethical conduct, and ethics on the register of the social and political body. The purity he ascribes to Sufism is not to be found in the internal state of the practitioner, but is manifest in the group's capacity to engage authoritatively in the affairs of the wider community.

To my surprise, Rafiq then recites the same lines of poetry that Sheikh Yasin had recited when discussing the relation between sheikh and *murid*, the lines of tenth-century poet Abu Firas al-Hamdani: "*Wa laita alladhī baini wa bainaka 'āmirun, wa baini wa baina al-'ālamīna khurabu. Idhā ṣahḥa minka al-widdu fa kullu hayyinu, wa kullu alladhi fawqa al-turābi turabu.* [Oh, that what is between you and me may be built up, and between me and everyone else in ruin. If the love from you is true, then all is ease, and all that lies above the dust is truly dust.]"⁷⁶ Here, the same figure of longing is conjured, but with completely different signification. The longing Rafiq names is not that of the individual seeker of mystical illumination, nor of the *murīd* desiring emulation of his sheikh and of the Prophet. Rather, it is a longing that evokes the departed forms of social authority of which Rafiq's family were important figures.

Rafiq concludes his analysis by shifting gears, and sharing views on the West that reflect those held by many Syrians, but are expressed in language that is informed by Sufism:

The spirit [*rūh*] is the center, and spirituality is the basis for coming closer to God [*al-taqarrub min allāh*]. Religion is the guide for all social relations [*mu'āmalāt*], and the Sharia is the best law, even if we don't follow all its aspects today. It's the law which grants all rights. There is not a difference between taking care of the spirit and taking care of the way we act in these social relations, be it with family, friends, business, or political relations. But the West makes divisions, they create divides, like between Sufism and Salafism, or even Sunni Islam and Shia Islam, which they exaggerate, and we begin to accept these divisions. The spirit comes in all types, in a variety of types, and that's a blessing. But the Western way of

76 Translation mine.

thinking, even with our own system here, it's a corruption of this way of thinking about the spirit.

The friend accompanying him speaks for the first time. He addresses me with words that seem to have coalesced in his mind before our meeting. For one of the few times with Syrians I feel like the representative of a monolithic West. The friend evokes the asymmetrical histories between America and the Islamic world, as if I am to answer for them. I argue with him for a while, pointing out what I find to be lacking in his generalizations and his notions of how power works. Rafiq is leaning back in his chair, smoking a cigarette while he scans the cafe with his eyes. He takes little role in the discussion, aside from nodding every now and again at one of his friend's ideas, or clarifying it with a softer and less accusatory articulation.

Later, when I leave, the friend assures me, in a popular Arabic saying, "Difference of opinion doesn't spoil the issue for kindheartedness [*ikhtilāf al-ra'i lā yufsidu lil-widdi qāḍiyah*]" . It is hard for me to believe, at that point, but am heartened when on the ride home I remember that the lines of poetry were the same Sheikh Yasin had cited. I note also the symmetry between the explicitly political nature of Rafiq's analysis, and the fact this is the only time in my fieldwork I have found myself subject to political anger. The symmetry tells me there is something more to take from the exchange than the lingering bitterness, which will pass. It is possible that had more of my interlocutors spoke their mind, they would discuss more political and more controversial questions, and would similarly challenge my assumption of the neutral space of scholarly observation. As with Sheikh Yasin, I find myself wondering about what exactly it is that I am asserting when I try to inhabit these spaces outside the dense histories of *dhikr* in Damascus. It remains, after all, these moments of uneasy conflict which generated these questions on how authority figures into how *dhikr*'s past is recalled in memory.

INTIMACY, AUTHORITY, POETRY

Introduction

In a gloss on how St. Augustine approaches the question of truth, Talal Asad makes an observation that summarizes the impetus of much of his own work: “It was not the mind that moved spontaneously to religious truth, but power that created the conditions for experiencing that truth.”¹ If Asad’s point of departure has often concerned questions of religious meaning and symbology, it reflects less an inherent interest of his than it does the nature of the assumptions upon which many predominant approaches to religion have been based, approaches which he has critiqued for their neglect of the consideration of power. The symbols of religion, Asad argues, “cannot be understood independently of their historical relations with nonreligious symbols or of their articulations in and of social life, in which work and power are always crucial.”² These observations of Asad’s are equally germane to the formal and informal valuations, associations, and framings which situate a religious tradition at a given juncture. This chapter examines just such a set of framings as they have emerged in regards to *dhikr* over the last few generations.

I argue that there is an underlying pattern to these framings which informs, limits, and channels the types of political and ethical projects to which *dhikr* can be directed. This pattern, while not in a strict sense a singular development in the history of *dhikr*, is reinforced by the de-emphasis of the role of authority within conceptions of religion normative to modernity, by modern-era conceptions of cultural authenticity, resistance, and folklore, and by the recent informal incorporation of photography into the practices *dhikr*. The pattern inheres in a trend towards what I call synopticism, using a term modified from a critique of Foucault’s analysis of the panopticon by sociologist of law Thomas Mathiesen. Synopticism in the sense I employ it refers, as in Mathiesen’s model, to an event or spectacle wherein a small group of people are observed by many (an inverse of the panopticon), but also, vis-à-vis the term’s etymology, to a modality of viewing or thinking in which a complex object or phenomenon is encapsulated in its entirety, its essence thereby made available for mobilization towards ends that may have little to do with the phenomenon itself.

A primary assumption in my approach to the framings of cultural and musical authenticity, resistance to Western influence, and folklore is that technologies, discourses, and power share fundamental and intractable relations, and together constitute configurations that, much like the domain of the social itself, establish the conditions upon which engagements with a given practice depend. An important question when it

1 Asad 1993, p. 35. The work of Talal Asad has significantly influenced my interpretations of my fieldwork. In reading and discussing his work in graduate seminars with Saba Mahmood, Charles Hirschkind, and Stefania Pandolfo, anthropologists who each take up Asad in particular ways, I gradually developed an understanding of his work.

2 Asad 1993, p. 53.

comes to understanding transformations of *dhikr* framings, changes in the set of engagements that are socially viable, is how my assertion of a move towards synopticism is different from the claim that modernity, by constructing a category of tradition increasingly evaluated as spectacle, destroys the possibility of authentic engagements with tradition. Put differently, the question is how a claim of synopticism differs from a nostalgia-laden claim that ascribes representational practices (whether photography, tourism, or folklore) to a distinctly modern capacity that is opposed to a putative traditional capacity for immersive engagement free of representation.

In her work on Sufi practices, Valerie Hoffman notes that *dhikr* has often been approached by scholars through an evaluative dichotomy which offers that the practices might have either moral or mystical import, that is might being geared either towards the construction of ethical selves or towards the experience of spiritual truth.³ This distinction, suggestive of an opposition between power and truth, is indeed evident in characterizations of Sufi practices in a wide variety of contexts, from Western and Arab scholarship, to colonial-era observations, to everyday Muslim critiques of the social milieu of Sufism.

The dichotomy plays out in two somewhat related notions concerning religion and authority. The first, that the social-authoritative structures of religious communities are merely contexts in which truths, themselves power independent and geared towards individual consumption, are conveyed and grasped. The second, that the existence of relations of domination within such contexts give the lie to any particular religious truths generated therein, that religious truths associated with such relations inevitably act as a cover for them. The problem with these notions is their often unarticulated reliance upon norms that oppose truth and power, norms of a distinctly modern European provenance the acceptance of which lead to neglect of the question of how subjects are formed by power. These norms, which figure large in modern notions of religion, obscure the subtler distinctions evident in other configurations, several of which are discussed below.

Even within traditions of thought indebted to the Enlightenment, it is not always the case that power is conceived as inimical to the subject, or the domain of representation as one of ocular remove. Psychoanalytic theory, for example, has situated the subject within power relations, including the relation with the analyst, and within representational engagements in ways both formative and necessary. Many of the fundamental psychic processes and concepts articulated by psychoanalysis attest to this, including identification, transference, overdetermination, and the mechanisms of dreams. While it is true that psychoanalysis has been thus thought as a sort of counter-current to some of the tendencies of Enlightenment and liberatory thought, it nonetheless remains an Enlightenment-heritage framework not beholden to oppositional distinctions between power and truth, or between affective immersion and the capacity for representation. The examination of *dhikr* demands a similar willingness to engage with the terms of Enlightenment thought, which are unavoidable, without being beholden to the oppositions which they tend to enforce.

3 Hoffman 1999, p. 361.

Receptivity

A hundred years ago, the affective ties to individual and social ethical commitments constructed in *dhikr* were closely ingrained within local social authoritative forms. Much has changed in those social arrangements, yet the cultivation of such affective ties continues to produce an “inner binding,” an authoritative bond of the sort whose conceptualization requires, according to Asad, that we “rethink authoritative discourse, and the problem of authority, not simply as a matter of somebody or something exercising the power of command over gullible subjects.”⁴ In *dhikr* much of this work is done through evoking emotion through singing, dance, and percussion.

While *dhikr* and other Islamic vocal genres are not considered music *per se*, it remains the case that they are governed by conventions regarding the display of affect, its forms of discursive articulation, and the types of emotional content deemed productive of good ends. Ethnomusicologist Bruno Deschenes points out that musical acculturation involves not only “the learning of tonal structures” but also an “acculturation of listeners’ responses to and views about music.”⁵ We might add to the list of acculturated norms the question of the degree to which emotion or emotional display is itself foregrounded, either as a good in itself or as an element necessary for the achievement of other ends.

In ascertaining such conventions in regards to *dhikr*, it is best to begin with Qur’an recitation, long the primary model of affective receptivity in the Islamic world. As Kristina Nelson notes in her groundbreaking study: “The pervasive sound of recitation becomes basic to Muslims’ sense of their culture and religion even before they can articulate that sense.”⁶ By all accounts, the best reciter in the area where I lived was Sheikh Muhyiddin, whose voice often drew men and women from other areas to pray in the mosque near my apartment.⁷ Muhyiddin had memorized the Qur’an before his teens, and immediately caused a stir in the neighborhood with his remarkable renditions of established recitation styles. By the age of fourteen he had been made imam in one of the larger mosques of the neighborhood, eventually leading the morning, evening, and night prayers, all of which are read aloud. By the time of my fieldwork, Sheikh Muhyiddin was in his early forties and had completed graduate training in Sharia. His recitations continued to be a draw for the mosque, especially during Ramadan, when both the standard and special Ramadan (*tarāwīḥ*) prayers are very well attended.

Muhannad was a man I met from outside the neighborhood who made a point of praying in the mosque whenever he visited friends in the area. He said he liked to perform his religious obligations in the atmosphere provided by Sheikh Muhyiddin’s voice: “If the imam’s voice lacks a certain quality, you just feel that your prayers are a duty that you are fulfilling by rote. But when a voice like Sheikh Muhyiddin’s pulls you [*yashiddak*], it’s a different story.”

4 Asad 2006, p. 272. Chapter 2 “Memory and Authority” discusses many of the changes in *dhikr* authority over this period.

5 Deschenes 1998, p. 141.

6 Nelson 1985, p. 188, quoted in Danielson 1987, p. 28.

7 Sheikh Muhyiddin, like most imams in Syria, carries the title of sheikh, which does not imply a connection with Sufism. Sheikh Muhyiddin was a member of several Sufi orders, however, though he did not explicitly reference Sufism in his occasional lectures and lessons following prayers. His official position is that of mosque imam.

Ammar, a younger man from a more distant neighborhood, occasionally made the trip to pray in the mosque where Muhyiddin was imam. He described the importance of the voice of the man leading the prayers in the mosque in similar terms:

You depend on the voice of the imam or the sheikh reading the Qur'an. For example, if you're praying in the mosque, say the Friday prayer, when the imam recites *Sūrat al-Fātiḥa* [the short chapter read in every prayer] and takes a long time with his reading, or has a bad voice, then you feel like you're tired, you just want to get it over, you're not in a comfortable mood. But then with another imam, whose voice is beautiful and melodious, you're emotionally affected along with him [*taṭrab ma'ahu*], and you want the prayer to continue longer. You understand the words and meanings, and you feel a pious humility [*takhsha*] with the Qur'an.

For Ammar, the emotional and aesthetic qualities of the recitation, which share a close relation in his account, bear upon the listener's capacity to comprehend and engage with the text's meaning, beyond providing for an enjoyable experience or an enhanced religious feeling by itself.

The key to such good recitation, according to Ammar, is the psychological and spiritual state of the reciter:

It is a psychological state [*ḥālah nafsiyya*] where [Sheikh Muhyiddin] reads the Qur'an and cuts his ties to creation and is connected to the creator. He doesn't think about anything of the world, not even of the Qur'an, such as what verse comes next, but instead he remembers it from his heart. Allah is in front of him, Paradise is on the right, Hell on the left, and the Ka'ba is opposite him. The Angel of Death is behind him, and because he's surrounded by these things, he has cut his connections with other things. He's in a condition of pious fear and humility, a spiritual state. It's a big difference from the person who just reads the Qur'an, and doesn't affect anyone.⁸

This particular spatial representation of the ideal inner state for prayer originates from the Sufi figure Hatim al-Asamm (d. 852), as related by al-Ghazali in his *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*. Ammar, who expressed a mild distaste for Sufism and had not read al-Ghazali, no doubt knew it from its common circulation in mosque sermons and Islamic television programs. His description situates the affective state of the reciter as what produces a reading which affects listeners and allows them to be moved along with him. It is the reciter's immersion in a particular affective engagement that facilitates the entry of others into a similar engagement which thereby transforms the work done by prayer. A visual-spatial representation of a state provides a model through which Ammar understands and situates his own reaction to the imam's voice, making it both conventional and virtuous.

Ammar uses an intransitive verbal cognate of the term *ṭarab* (musical ecstasy or feeling) to mark an affective sympathy generated by the delivery of the Qur'an. He would not likely characterize the feeling itself as *ṭarab*, which is more quickly associated with music (and sometimes poetry), but he does articulate a kind of feeling cultivated within

8 The sense of the word *nafsiyya* here is not "psychological" strictly speaking, but something between what is covered by the terms "personal," "spiritual," and "psychological."

prayer, one whose conditions are marked by specific bodily movements and postures, specific social relations (between and among the imam and the praying men), and a specific location (the mosque). What is described is a model of immersion, but one in which representation and compliance with conventions play an enabling role. The prayer feeling brings Ammar into closer relation with the Quranic text, and with the interpretations and applications that it suggests in the context of his religiosity, which he described as a modern Sunni one centered upon the observance of Sharia.

Hussein Ali Agrama has demonstrated how the acceptance of a non-binding legal opinion, or *fatwā*, indicates a form of agency not encompassed by a notion of agency as more properly located in acts of resistance to authority. While he remains focused on the *fatwā*, which has a largely discursive character, what Agrama argues is in many ways germane to the effects of recitation as described by Ammar:

In this case, one's susceptibility to a rightly guided word of guidance, one's being moved despite oneself by the fatwa, can be indication that one has not veered hopelessly off that ethical path. That susceptibility to the fatwa itself might therefore be an expression of one's ethical agency, a demonstration of one's continued ethical potential. Ethical agency, in this case, would not be opposed to authority but, rather, an expression of it.⁹

Indeed, susceptibility to being emotionally moved by recitation is also an indication of ethical potential and agency, but not because the authority of Islamic tradition has thereby been prioritized over the dictates of one's immediate interests and desires. Being moved in this way renews Muhammad's and Ammar's previous commitments to that tradition, and it is the tradition which provides the mechanisms by which this happens, through the elicitation of a particular pleasure.

Jacques Lacan suggests that ethics be conceived in terms of a movement or dynamism between what agglomerates the social order and the subject's relation to it on the level of desire: "Ethics is not simply concerned with the fact that there are obligations, that there is a bond that binds, orders, and makes the social law."¹⁰ Rather, Lacan says, ethics "begins at the moment when the subject poses the question of that good he had unconsciously sought in the social structures. And it is at that moment, too, that he is led to discover the deep relationship as a result of which that which presents itself as a law is closely tied to the very structure of desire."¹¹ The space of *dhikr* is one where affective immersion performs work on the subject, but similar to Lacan's "ethics" its immersive substance is neither monolithic nor homogenous, but consists of zones of attraction and aversion vis-à-vis the social law and its representations.

A Model of Immersion

The practice of group *dhikr* cultivates affective states and attachments with a view towards rooting the subject in Islamic ethical commitments. This characterization of *dhikr* is especially true in the modern era, when Sufi orders have encouraged a more

9 Agrama 2010, p. 14.

10 Lacan 1986, p. 75.

11 Lacan 1986, p. 76.

general Sharia-based piety, downplaying traditional differences between the orders, between the major schools of *fiqh*, and between Sufi and non-Sufi religiosities. *Dhikr* practices accomplish this through authority relations, textual interpretation, singing and dance, and camaraderie. These elements come together in an overall atmosphere that immerses one in a distinct manner, and it is to this particular mode of immersion I now turn.

At the *dhikr* meetings I attended, a man might occasionally go into fits of hyperventilation or screaming, which if they did not subside on their own would draw the attention of the presiding sheikh. The sheikh would attend to him, still moving himself, and place his hand on his shoulder without attempting to constrain the other's movements, until he had calmed and returned to the current fold of the group's energy. These instances, seemingly observed or noticed only by small boys and myself, reinforce the capacity of the group to assimilate or metabolize whatever affective states might arise, and at the same time bear witness to the power of the poetic texts being vocalized. The sheikh's intervention, to borrow a phrase from Michel de Certeau, serves to "eliminate an exterritoriality of language" dramatized by the trance state, and the series of events as whole clarifies and reinforces the breadth of the purview which Islamic authority alone can regulate.¹²

This sense of authority, which is certainly not reliant upon the emergence of states like that mentioned, is a significant part of the feel of a *dhikr* ceremony. If *dhikr* is an experiential atmosphere, it is one that admits of a number of zones of intensity, from the participant who is indistinguishable from an uninterested observer to the singers, sheikhs, dancers, and the few men who occasionally fall into states like those mentioned. That these states are not remarked upon, and that no apparent hierarchy obtains among the various modes of engagement, aside from perhaps a general encouragement towards participation, suggests that the immersive space of *dhikr* and the intimacy produced therein is not invested in any one mode of affective engagement.

The combination of emotional display, touch, the calling aloud of singers' names, and close physical proximity stands apart from the various conventions of voice, movement, and contact that hold in daily public life and in the mosque. The relaxed intimacy is unique to the *dhikr* meetings, and generates a reinforcing association between two modes of authoritative submission, one to the Sharia principles that frame the meetings (and the authority relations within them), and one to the affective and energetic ebb and flow of *dhikr*'s sonic and kinaesthetic forms.

At a most basic level, the affect of *dhikr* is that of Arabic poetry. Musician and scholar of Arab Music George Sawa notes that it was al-Khalil ibn Ahmad (d. 786) "who created the science of Arabic prosody [the system of classification of various poetic-structural patterns] out of his knowledge of the discipline of music [specifically rhythm]" and thus "succeeded in unlocking the metric system that had regulated pre-Islamic and early Islamic poetry."¹³ The rhythms of *dhikr* serve to bring the group's enunciations of poetic texts together in an organized way. The play between rhythmic stress and the syllabic stress of words, and the extension of syllables to produce rhythmic effects, are

12 de Certeau 1992, p. 247.

13 Sawa 2001, pp. 387-388.

the fundamental rhythmical elements the vocalist has at his disposal. The goal of establishing a relation between text, melody, and rhythm, according to composer of *dhikr* works Zuheir Mnini, is the “anchoring” of the poetic text into the mind of *dhikr* participants, the association of ethically instructive content with the heightened affective states generated by the music and the coordinated singing, breathing, and movement.

The sonic arts of *dhikr* are the operative elements of the meetings, and form the main technology of the practice. When a chant or song is performed in *dhikr*, it enters a bodily relation of dance, movement, breath, and repetition, and it is in this intimate performance context, this atmosphere of immersion, that a poet of *dhikr* texts or a composer of *dhikr* songs intends as the arena for his productions to do their work.¹⁴ The mode of reception of the sonic materiality of a given text or a given melody and its relation to a semantic field is constrained along these purposive lines, as indicated by the fact that the coordinated raspings of the *dhikr* group in certain portions are unilaterally heard as either *Allāh* or *hūwa* (“He”), and never as merely rhythmic exhalations, which they no doubt would be in another context. At the same time, the flexibility in the association of text with melody, which provides for different degrees of vocal improvisation, guarantees that given the variegations of performance a text will never be constrained to a fixed or predictable signification. Performers have an often wide latitude to cultivate the type of delivery, and facilitating state, referenced by Ammar as that which allows the listener to “understand the words and meanings,” words whose clarity of enunciation is not the question. These spaces, for movement of various kinds and opened by movements of various kinds, are one of the defining features of the immersive atmosphere of *dhikr*.

AUTHORITATIVE FRAMINGS

Cultural authenticity and resistance

At any given historical moment, valuations and associations particular to it frame and naturalize religious practices, and reorient them towards ends dictated by the struggles of the present. Contemporary *dhikr* is likewise situated by framings that inform the types of commitments generated in the practices. As mentioned, traditionally articulated framings include the renewal of individual and group commitments to Sharia-based modes of life, the construction of the social authority of Sufi sheikhs and other religious authorities, and, on a more implicit level, the focusing of class interests and authority.¹⁵

14 There are certainly other contexts in which the music of *dhikr* is performed, including the folkloric stage, weddings, celebrations of the Prophet’s birthday, and Islamically-themed musical entertainment. The composer with whom I worked, Zuheir Mnini, wrote works for a variety of such contexts, but considered the *dhikr* ceremony itself as the model performance setting towards which his works were geared. Some questions generated by these other contexts are covered in Chapter 5, “Composition, Art, Creativity, Part II,” especially as regards the question of financial remuneration for performance.

15 As discussed in the Introduction, I consider the participant’s temporary submission to the authority of the group and the sheikh in the course of the *dhikr* meeting a relevant element.

The history of Sufism shows that religious or mystical functions narrowly understood were rarely the only ones performed by *dhikr* and the Sufi orders. J. Spencer Trimingham makes the point that the Sufi orders absorbed the delineations and organizational structures of the medieval trade guilds, by which the orders “consecrated other forms of co-operation” and agglomerated, in the tomb-centers where they were based, multiple modes of authority regional, professional, and tribal in nature. These centers were sites “which influenced not merely the lives of affiliated and initiated members, but all who belonged to that particular community or locality.”¹⁶ However, as these functions have declined or disappeared altogether, others have emerged as the social authority of the Sufi orders has been narrowed to the modern domain of the religious. These modern framings include cultural and musical authenticity, resistance to Western cultural influence, and folklore, and though they largely cast *dhikr* in a synoptic mold, they also act against the limiting of scope just mentioned.

Before treating these framings, it is necessary to briefly clarify the operative distinction through which their significance acts. An account of one of the weekly *dhikr* meetings I attended serves to illustrate this distinction between aesthetic and ethical-religious understandings of *dhikr*. In the *dhikr* meeting in question, the weekly highlight was always the later standing portion in which the sheikh sung solo, with choral responses from the group.¹⁷ Some of the men would sob loudly, and occasionally one of the men’s bodies might jerk and heave. The lights would be turned off, and everyone would be drenched in sweat as the sheikh sang and directed the group’s enthusiastic movements.

One of the singers of the group, a young man who had given up a career singing in nightclubs to follow the sheikh, had a truly remarkable voice and musical command, yet the responses to his singing were no different than responses to the lesser singers. The peak of emotion and energy of the meetings coincided with the sheikh’s singing, which always heightened the group’s outpourings of expression and movement. To my ear however the sheikh was the worst singer of all. His voice was unmelodious and incapable of either hitting notes consistently or improvising pleasing embellishments. In this particular group, musical-aesthetic standards played very little role in the effect and evaluation of various sonic contributions, whereas they most certainly did in the other groups with whom I worked. The standards that dictated the responses of this group were a reflection of the group’s authoritative hierarchy and the blessing (*baraka*) deemed to flow through it, and likely were aided by the sheikh’s view of sonic or musical aesthetics as an evaluative category that detracted from *dhikr*’s religious purpose, even if deployed in the service of worship.

16 Trimingham 1971, pp. 237 and 234.

17 These portions of the *dhikr* meetings, when men would dance and chant in unison, were often called the *ḥaḍra* in my fieldwork, a term referring to “presence” and connoting the presence of God, the company of the Prophet, and the presence of the believer before God. But the term *ḥaḍra* was equally used to refer to the meetings as a whole, synonymous with others’ use of the terms *dhikr* and *ḥalaqat al-dhikr* (“*dhikr* circle”), and sometimes was used to refer to particularly large meetings open to passers-by. I have chosen to refer to the meetings consistently as *dhikr*, and when necessary to differentiate the various portions that constitute them with descriptive phrases. I found slippage in usage between the various terms among practitioners, singers, and Sheikhs to be much greater than what is evidenced in scholarly work and in scholars’ consensus regarding the terms.

It is commonly noted that Quranic reciters are left to their own to absorb the *maqāmāt* (the Arab musical scales), despite the centrality of the *maqāmāt* in successful recitation (such as the type described by Ammar above), and despite the otherwise very systematic nature of the recitation curriculum.¹⁸ For many, including the sheikh who sang badly, to understand the Islamic vocal arts on a musical-aesthetic register, despite their great degree of aestheticization, is to undermine their function. Similarly, many of the singers I knew had no interest in participating in performances outside *dhikr* meetings, not only as regards non-religious singing but also religious singing performed for recordings, the cultural or folkloric stage, and weddings and other celebrations, most often for money. Singers who did so faced the prospect of being deemed by others opportunists, or insufficiently committed to the social and ethical projects toward which their practices were supposed to be geared.

The above sheikh's stance discursively and pragmatically embraces and makes more stark the traditional distinction between Islamic vocal arts and the category of music. Paradoxically it is likely due to, and not in spite of, this distinction that two of the modern framings to be discussed—authenticity and resistance—took such prominent and clear form. Over the last hundred years and more, Islamic vocal arts have come to stand as powerful markers of musical authenticity, as noted by Ali Jihad Racy: “The domain of Islamic religious genres is generally viewed as the epitome of genuineness and the purest manifestation of Arab music. It is not uncommon to find terms such as *tarab* [musical ecstasy] and *asalah* [authenticity] applied to religious performances particularly of Sufi genres such as the *qasidah* and *tawshih*.”¹⁹

Virginia Danielson's early work too shows that musicians deemed to have emerged from the milieu of *dhikr* and Qur'an recitation became standard-bearers for musical and cultural authenticity in early and middle twentieth-century *tarab* music, an association, she notes, which is directly related to that of cultural resistance. Musicians from such backgrounds were “credited with representing authentic Egyptian musical culture and preserving Egyptian musical heritage from extinction threatened by extensive and prolonged contact with foreign cultures: Turkish, European, and American.”²⁰ She observes further that discourses of authenticity “emerged with concurrent debates over Westernization, which concerned the role that Western resources might best play in Egypt,” and that the widespread embrace of Western musical approaches occurred alongside a “traditionalism [that] acquired strength and importance in an environment where a strong foreign alternative existed and held a certain appeal.”²¹

18 Even before studying the commonly-taught seven styles of recitation, students learn the precise points of the mouth, tongue, throat, and lips used to articulate each Arabic letter. They practice pronouncing the letters correctly based on this classification of *makhārij al-ḥurūf* (“exit points of the letters”), and must overcome their colloquial Arabic habits of enunciation, which often differ significantly from recitation norms. Non-Arab foreigners can greatly improve their accent with the same training, as I did while learning Arabic in Syria from 2000 to 2002. I do not intend with this remark to reinforce the place of the Quran as a key to authenticity, but only point out that the training is a place where systematic and detailed critique of one's pronunciation is given.

19 Racy 1982, p. 402. In my fieldwork I found a somewhat more contentious situation regarding the applicability of the term *tarab* to the music of *dhikr*, as discussed in Chapter 5.

20 Danielson 1989, p. 51.

21 Danielson 1989, p. 57.

Indeed, citations of *dhikr* as a site of early musical learning where *maqāmāt*, rhythmic patterns, and their performance conventions have been absorbed by the musically astute are common enough, and have circulated long enough, to constitute a convention of sorts. By doubling as assertions of musical-cultural authenticity, whether by musicians or critics, these claims have established a conventional mode of relation between the categories of *dhikr* and music, a relation that is paradoxical insofar as it depends on their continued separation.

In my experience as a hobbyist musician, I have learned to hear claims about skill acquisition as reflecting circulating standards of authenticity as much, and sometimes more, than they do fact. In the context of rock music and drumming, for example, the high value ascribed to musical illiteracy and the corresponding category of “feel” dictates that study from instructional books or videos (which sell very well) will rarely be mentioned, while claims of learning by ear or by feel will be encountered regularly.²² This is not to suggest that *dhikr* citations, which like other researchers I encountered often, are not factual, but to stress that their articulation necessarily reflects circulating configurations of value, and that these configurations warrant attention.

Musical learning in *dhikr* is almost entirely implicit, as it is acquired through participational repetition and not through the articulation of principles or theory, or through structured practice and exercise. The authenticity ascribed to *dhikr*, similar to that ascribed to the notion of feel in Western popular genres, is partly due to this implicitness, which, *dhikr* singers aside, has become increasingly rare over the last century among Arab musicians. European interventions in Arab music, as I discuss in brief below and in detail in Chapter 4, were largely centered on standardization and the application of music theory, approaches which effect the explicit articulation of music as a category and generate a need for theory-based practice regimes. That *dhikr* has largely resisted absorbing these approaches, while at the same time upholding its distinction from music and cultivating complex and nuanced practice of the *maqāmāt*, ideally situates it to be valued as a site of authenticity hearkening to an Arab musicality less altered by European musical practices and norms. Steering clear of music discourses thus helps situate *dhikr*, Quranic recitation, and *adhān* (prayer-calling) as markers of authenticity, while effectively guaranteeing, at least in principle, that they will not be transformed by market-based models of creative or artistic success.²³

Dhikr citations have the most value among musicians, critics, and listeners whose musical activities are not limited to *dhikr* ceremonies. They have much less value, except perhaps as points of pride (“They acquired their skills in *our* practices.”), among *dhikr* singers who do not approach music as an end or domain in itself. Discourses identifying Islamic vocal-arts contexts as sources of musical authenticity and resistance to colonial forms rely on this separation between the contexts where the citations are meaningful and

22 I was told by one older man among some Bay Area musician acquaintances that he learned the baroque fingering of his flute by feel, which I did not believe given the unintuitive nature of its layout and the man’s general reluctance to engage in musical-analytical talk, even though none in our small circle could read music. Reflecting on my doubts of his claim spurred some of the ideas of this section.

23 Clearly these arts have developed significant imbrications with these models, as evidenced most acutely by the careers of early star reciters such as Egypt’s Abdel Basit Abdel Samad. I present this line of reasoning rather with a view towards how it might play out within the logics of authenticity.

contexts where they are not. In this way, assertions that recitation and *dhikr* are not music are part of a structure that is also bolstered by citations of Islamic vocal-art authenticity and the nostalgia suggested therein. While the distinction between *dhikr* and music far predates the modern era, the type of encapsulation of *dhikr* that is effected by cultural authenticity and resistance valuations is novel. When *dhikr* is mobilized in these ways, it is grasped at once and in its entirety as an essence, and this essence is transferable to other contexts such as secular art-music performance. Even for those singers who decline to perform in contexts other than *dhikr* ceremonies, these mobilizations are familiar enough conventions that the synoptic encapsulation of *dhikr* becomes an enduring possibility.

Aesthetics of Harmony and East-West Comparisons

For those whose activities in *dhikr* serve to regulate its musical aesthetics, that is for composers, the more influential singers, and sheikhs who take an either explicit or de facto interest in musical aesthetics, the historical introduction into the Arab world of Western musical discourses and practices has opened a set of musical-aesthetic questions about *dhikr*'s sonic material. The most common issue in this regard is the question of the adoption of Western harmony, and just as Islamic vocal arts have come to stand for cultural authenticity and resistance, the question of harmony is charged with broader questions of cultural identity.

Harmony is two or more different notes sounding at the same time, and because its effect is dependent upon the interference patterns of note frequencies, notes that fall outside the modern piano's standardized range of precision are generally not amenable. The adoption of harmony in Arab music limits a good deal of the non-harmonic nuances of intonation upon which that music is largely seen to be based. In this way the question of harmony in Arab music is not simply one aesthetic question among others, because to adopt harmony is to permanently transform the interval relationships upon which the music is based.

Indeed, quarter-tones (which lie between adjacent piano keys) are often proffered as the essence of Arab music, and their effective banishment by harmony is often seen as tantamount with the destruction of Arab musical heritage. Zuheir Mnini, an elderly singer and composer of *dhikr* works, made the following observations: "Eastern music is more beautiful than Western music. It's got things that don't happen in Western music at all. It's got the quarter-tones. Western music—it's color—is all power." Mnini imitated, with a furrowed brow, a symphony crescendo gravely resolving to a tonic, and continued, "The Eastern music is more calm, more beautiful."²⁴

As another man, a violinist and singer put it, "Harmony is not right. It becomes a flaw [*'aib*] in *inshād* [here, *dhikr* singing]. Western singing is built on it, but it doesn't work in Eastern music. It's an attempt at renewal [*tajdīd*], but an errant one. When harmony is used, Eastern music loses its melodic color. They put in harmony, they lose

24 The terms *sharqī* ("Eastern") and *gharbī* ("Western") are commonly used to discuss the differences between Arab or Middle Eastern, and European or American music and culture. Mnini, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, was not beholden to a fixed notion of the quarter-tones, themselves standardized and seized upon by early European and Arab reformers as providing the specific difference Mnini cites.

the beauty of the melody.” At my mention of the use of harmony in many of the pop-influenced religious vocal songs featured on Islamic satellite channels, another musician then present, a singer, *ūd* player, and friend of the violinist, said, “I like harmony on the Western instruments, but I hate it in Eastern music completely.”

The opinions expressed by these men are long predated by the changes instituted by Western and Arab music reformers at the 1932 Congress of Arab Music held in Cairo.²⁵ The related goals of standardization, modernization, and systematization which motivated the Congress and its changes were argued in moral terms of cultural improvement that continue to resonate. The stances taken against harmony are not therefore a case of the sudden charging of previously existing musical-aesthetic elements with moral and cultural value. If elements such as quarter tones, which have acquired an emblematic salience in the modern era, are imbued with associations of cultural authenticity and resistance, it is part of a larger process of the reconfiguration of all the relations in which musical practices are situated.

Dhikr becomes amenable to being deployed in claims of cultural authenticity and resistance when it can be grasped as a whole apart from the authority relations which traditionally have constituted it, and this deployment is likewise enabled by the category of music assuming a role in the network of valuations situating *dhikr*. The ways *dhikr* has come to mark musical authenticity among art-music audiences and musicians suggests that *dhikr*, *tarab*, and music cannot be taken as self-evident Arab or Islamic categories, but must be considered together as categories that implicate one another in shifting ways. Valuations of *dhikr*, as a whole and of its specific musical-aesthetic elements, do not therefore suggest a departure from other purer modes of valuation, but rather reflect changes in *dhikr*'s relation to other domains of society, which has always exceeded the domain of the religious as it tends to be understood in modernity.

DHIKR AND THE CAMERA

Umawi Mawlawi Photo

Photography, given its modern provenance and its often prominent place in discussions of the spectacle, of folklore, and of the commoditization of tradition, is a practice whose examination is ideal for exploring general claims about modern transformations of tradition, and the limits of those claims. This is especially true given the extent that such claims take the form of assertions of the emergence of particular ways of seeing and its effects on social life. In this final group of sections I approach the camera as a technology that may indeed buttress the synoptic trend I have been discussing. My point, however, is less to demonstrate this buttressing than it is to put to question the logics which often play out in evaluations of visual modes as essential and determinative axes of social change.

I begin with a look at a photograph lent to me by a man whose family long led the Damascene Mawlawi (Mevlevi) Sufi order. The photograph, from the mid sixties, shows the *fatla* (whirling) of boys and men dressed in the white robes of the Mawlawi order,

25 The 1932 Congress is covered in more detail in Chapter 4, “Composition, Art, Creativity, Part I.”

with a lesser number of black-robed figures turning more slowly.²⁶ This is the portion of the Mawlawi order's *dhikr* ceremony which has become iconic of the order, and in the West of Sufism itself. The photo was taken in the Umayyad Mosque, the most prominent architectural symbol of Islamic and political authority in Syria for well over twelve centuries, and shows the folkloric performance being observed by Syrian onlookers in the background. The photographer is evidently right in the action, as the camera seems about to be chopped by the outstretched hand of a dancer off to the right. One of the men in the background, most likely one of the caretakers of the mosque, stands and leans from behind one of the robed figures to peer with curiosity into the camera. The audience of men is half sitting on the ground, half standing, and seem to be enjoying themselves, a few of them apparently conversing. Several of them also are looking into camera lens, especially in the foreground.

At the time the photo was taken few Syrians would have owned a camera, and only a small percentage would have ever been themselves photographed outside the context of identification papers. If this had been the first visit to Damascus for any of the onlookers from more distant areas of the country—a distinct possibility since the mosque is a more popular spot for non-Damascenes to visit and linger than it is for Damascenes—the sensory encounter with the city, its main mosque, and the Mawlawi dervishes would flesh out impressions prefigured in the imagination. Even if an onlooker had never seen the Mawlawi, he would be more familiar with them than with the roaming configuration of photographer and camera. In this particular photograph, as is often the case, the subjects elicit a response to the process of the photo's generation, which here involves the camera's purposive flash punctuating some moments and not others. The photo shows that the stylized forms of worship characteristic of Sufi orders has been imbricated for at least fifty years with both the camera and with folkloric modes of performance outside of the context of a *dhikr* meeting proper.

Another important point about the photo is brought out by comparing it with another the man let me borrow, a stately portrait of the order's leadership and disciples from the 1920's.²⁷ The photo represents an earlier conventional mode of photography, the portraiture of authority. Unlike this earlier convention, the photo from the 1960's shows the camera to be more integrated into the action, the photographer and his subjects freed from the constraints of still pose. The later photo, both on its own and considered alongside the earlier one, documents the development of the folklorizing mechanism of the camera. The possibility of viewing and conceiving the practices in a specifically folkloric manner is introduced and circulated by the photographic process, which is witnessed by the onlookers and dancers in the photo, and by the resulting prints which can be seen by many more.

This framing of *dhikr* practices, which invites the view of the outside observer and situates the practices as objects of aesthetic, if ethical, enjoyment, shares an important formal parallel with the colonial view from outside, and with what is claimed to be the modern tendency towards visual disengagement. These ocular framings and conventions dovetail with the synoptic encapsulations of *dhikr* and of Arab identity that

26 See Figure 2 for the image.

27 See Figure 3 for the image.

have come to attend *dhikr* over the last century as I have discussed them, yet the significance of this formal resonance requires more interpretive work.

A common line of reasoning in regard to the themes just mentioned situates photography as evidence of, and as a contributing cause for, the modern loss of the capacity for experiencing and encountering the world. Susan Sontag's influential essay, "In Plato's Cave," is maybe the most articulate expression of this familiar, and rather mournful, thesis: "It would not be wrong to speak of people having a *compulsion* to photograph: to turn experience itself into a way of seeing. Ultimately, having an experience becomes identical with taking a photograph of it, and participating in a public event comes more and more to be equivalent to looking at it in photographed form."²⁸ For Sontag, the notions of experience and participation stand as modes of authentic encounter, but are not themselves given any specific definition other than that their loss is due to photography's fundamental alteration of our sense of what it means to encounter the world: "Finally, the most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads—as an anthology of images."²⁹

The important point here is that recourse towards an ill-defined, highly valued notion of experience, and away from an only slightly better-defined notion of representation, is a modern convention that despite being important in its own regard is not sufficient to serve as an explanation. It is important to point out that Sontag's argument is not that taking pictures engages one in all kinds of tasks and calculations which divert one's attention away from the world. Many of us might in fact agree with the assertion that using a camera inhibits one's ability to do other things within a given social context. Her argument, rather, is that photography constructs, activates, and maintains a more or less permanent representational mode of consciousness that is directly opposed to the capacity for immersive social experience. The notion that representations and representation-making, through their divorce from the world, prevent our encounter with it is a notion host to a number of problems, including most importantly the neglect of the roles of language, culture, and authority in creating the social world and enabling its encounter.

Bab Msalla Accosting

Images of *dhikr* have come to have a familiar folkloric value, but can also evoke the not entirely discrepant charges of unorthodoxy and backwardness, which have little to do with representational practice as correlative of social engagement. *Dhikr* participants are distinctly aware of their practices being the object of a folkloric appreciation, whether for other Syrians, other Arabs, or, more rarely, non-Arab foreigners. A less well-intentioned use of *dhikr* representations, whether by Westerners or other Muslims, is another source of wariness. As a very old man on a city bus said to me when I told him I was studying *dhikr* in Syria, "The German scholars came many years ago to study *dhikr* and Islam, because they wanted to put a few bits of truth in their lies, so they could make their lies more penetrating to the mind."

28 Sontag 1977, p. 24.

29 Sontag 1977, p. 3.

At a small *dhikr* meeting in a small house in the Old City of Damascus, I was videotaping the singing, dancing, and banter of *dhikr* at the bequest of one of the elder authorities of the group. About two hours into it, a young man entered and walked up to me. He shook my hand firmly and ordered me to turn off the camera. He recited a hadith concerning the painful afterlife awaiting creators of likenesses, and turned to greet the meeting's authorities, including the man who had asked me to videotape it. I was stung by his reproach, and packed up my things. It was, I told myself, a cheap-shot bid for status before the more senior participants who had stood opposite me at the time, an attempt to demonstrate his leadership capacity, his notion of what it meant to contribute to the *dhikr*'s stewardship and defense.

A few days later, I heard from the man who invited me to the event and encouraged me to video record it (it was only one of two events where I took extended video during my fieldwork) that the young man had taken me for a Salafi spy of sorts. He had feared, the man said, that the footage might be used in anti-*dhikr* propaganda. The young man had used a conservative theological reasoning as a defense tactic against what are most often conservative anti-*dhikr* campaigns. He also told me that when the young man made his way around shaking the hands of the meeting's leaders, his hand had been grasped and held firmly by one of the old men as he was rebuked for treating a guest badly.

Whatever the case may be, video and images of *dhikr* have clearly been used effectively in campaigns against the practices, often by Muslims convinced of their backwardness. As evident in the scene from Chapter 1, where a neighbor of mine expressed displeasure at seeing a small clip I had made on my phone, *dhikr* images can evoke a strong sense of embarrassment and incompatibility with the present. Several other men I met during my fieldwork who expressed negative views of *dhikr* admitted, when asked, that they had not attended an event themselves, but had seen television pieces about them. The sense that *dhikr* (and other practices and traditions) are backwards may be tied to the circulation of images, but it is not necessarily the case that this connection implicates modern modes of viewing as a whole.

To distinguish the role of the synoptic sense of *dhikr* that I have characterized from the latter thesis, I offer a series of observations by Timothy Mitchell on similar themes as they apply to Egypt in the late nineteenth century. Mitchell identifies some of the shifts in cultural and social self-perception that emerged with European articulations of, and Arab reformist attempts to address, the perceived shortcomings of Egyptian society. He notes that the problem of order became a pressing one across a vast number of domains, from the suddenly perceived messiness of Arabic literary texts, to the lack of military and educational discipline, to the layout of cities and streets. Mitchell writes:

Similarly, as we saw, the methods of discipline in the modern school made it suddenly possible to talk of the 'chaos' and the 'brouhaha' of the teaching mosque. Once the same methods of coordination and control were envisaged for the civilian and the city, existing cities in the same way suddenly appeared filled with the crowd. In terms of the new perception of the crowd one encounters the same sudden discovery of a problem of social order.³⁰

30 Mitchell 1988, p. 114. Interestingly, this pattern of perception and reform is quite the same in European

It is not difficult to see the connections here between perceptions of disorder and backwardness, on the one hand, and the influx and imposition of modern European norms of discipline, systematization, and standardization on the other. The same is true, as I have suggested, with norms of affective expression in regards to *dhikr*. The question, however, is to what degree this connection implies, as Mitchell asserts that it does, what has been characterized by Sontag as a particularly modern mode of viewing. Contestations regarding the use of *dhikr* images are one example of representational politics where the question of a divorce from encounter plays no role, and nostalgia for a putatively pre-representational immersion does not surface.

Conclusion: Camera Uses

A small number of *dhikr* participants play active roles in the presentation of their gatherings for folkloric consumption by audiences of non-participants. Others express distaste for such projects, seen as a transformation of religious devotion into something like light entertainment. Various opinions on the folklorization of *dhikr* circulated within all the groups with whom I had contact, and a few individuals even cited their views on the matter as a reason for not wanting to be participate in my research. My requests to interview these men were likely not helped by a rumor that had circulated briefly that my purpose in Syria was to put together an introductory book on Sufism for Westerners, replete with full color photographs, an indication of the now conventional status of the folkloric framing.

This rumor was similar to a story from the 1970's told to me by the composer Zuheir Mnini.³¹ A German aficionado of *dhikr* had come to Syria then, seeking the *fatla* (whirling) that is the hallmark of the Mawlawi Sufi order. Working with Mnini, who was tangentially connected to the order, the German made audio and video recordings of *dhikr* at a time when "no one had seen such devices in Syria," and upon returning to Germany produced a 33-rpm record and accompanying color booklet. Mnini mentioned the story a few times, yet himself had little knowledge of recent European and American consumptions of folkloric *dhikr* in the context of world music.

The typically highly-organized and coordinated modes of performance common to folkloric presentations before Western audiences play little role in the sense of folklore that circulates among *dhikr* practitioners. Folklore (*fulklūr*) is a relevant category to practitioners not because they have experience with coordinated performances geared towards folkloric consumption, but because a folklore-based appreciation of their actual practices is one with which they are familiar, both on the part of occasional non-participant onlookers and as a mode of appreciation which they themselves have incorporated into their own enjoyment of the practices. Participant encounters with folklore, whether in performance or as regards photography, inhere primarily in the casual consumption of *dhikr* by Syrians (including, in the case of photography, by the participants themselves), and in some cases by other Arabs or Iranians.³²

and Arab engagements with Arab music at the time.

31 The rumor and story were unrelated, as I heard them in groups having no overlap.

32 See Figure 4 for one such instance.

Whenever *dhikr* events were held in buildings with nearby foot traffic, such as downtown mosques or home courtyards, inevitably there were passers-by who dropped in to look on, and at times it seemed each one of them held up a cell-phone camera. *Dhikr* groups themselves occasionally hired video teams to record special events, such as the *dhikr* on the evening of *laylat al-qadr* near the end of Ramadan. These recordings were made for their own viewing, and as a document to be archived for future generations, according to one sheikh.³³ This comfortable incorporation of photography took a few years to happen, and it did so over the course of time in which I have been visiting Syria.

When I first began wandering in and out of various religious musical gatherings in Syria in 2001, whether Shiite songs of mourning and repentance (*laṭmiyyāt*) or Sunni *dhikr*, Quranic recitation, or prayer-calling, I saw almost no cameras. I tried several times to document something of the atmosphere in which these performances affected me, but found it impossible to do so without becoming myself an object of attention or feeling that I was detracting from others' engagements in the events. Only five years later, digital cameras, camcorders, and cell-phones had become ubiquitous. In Shiite pilgrimage sites, such as the Ruqqayya and Zainab mosques and the tombs of members of the Prophet's family, Iranian pilgrims video-recorded each other singing, mourning, and weeping. In 2007 at *dhikr* events, it was commonplace for participants to hold up cell-phones and record, even while they sang in group sections.³⁴

This type of photography shows that a certain sensibility of *fulklūr* circulates among *dhikr* participants through informal practices highlighting a visual and aural appreciation of *dhikr* as *dhikr*, something of the tautological engagement which Sontag claims debilitates the capacity for engagement. Sontag's essay is powerful, yet its power may stem from its expression of the modern Western romanticization of and nostalgia for experience, participation, and immersion. These valuations have specific Western histories, and reflect specific Western anxieties regarding the image that are no doubt somehow instructive and edifying in modern Western life. Yet they cannot be imposed upon the representational and photographic practices of *dhikr* without also imposing those same histories and anxieties, which do not hold.

The emergence of synoptic encapsulations of tradition, folkloric modalities of appreciation, and the related positings of putatively more authentic prior forms, is a complex phenomenon that includes shifts across a number of registers. A postcolonial, post-Romantic "view from outside" has become partially come to bear upon *dhikr* in several ways, as evident in many of the elements discussed in this chapter. Yet in *dhikr*, this view does not seem to detract from the way participants are engaged by singing, poetry, and dance to clarify authoritative ethical principles and root them in their lives, creating that inner binding of the individual and group to the principles of Islamic religiosity as they understand them. It is not the case, at least with *dhikr* and probably more broadly, that synoptic valuations and encapsulations of traditions and practices, and photography and other representational modes, exert a singular or determinative effect on those traditions and practices, or that they pull them inevitably and irretrievably into ruin

33 See Figure 5, which shows this kind of "in-house" production of video documentation.

34 See Figure 6 for an exaggerated instance of cell-phone camera presence.

through the action of an “abstract code or structure which is thought to exist, in the world-as-exhibition, as something separate from the world’s materiality.”³⁵

35 Mitchell 1988, p. 101.

Chapter Four
Composition, Art, Creativity, Part I

*In fact, to a certain degree, at a certain level, fantasms
cannot bear the revelation of speech.*¹
Jacques Lacan

INTRODUCTION

Opening

“Most *munshidīn*, they won’t sing unless it’s for money.² That’s how it’s become.” Zuheir Mnini peers down at the calligraphy he has just pencil-sketches. He blows on it, and straightens up in his chair. He sings, and his aged, dry voice strains to reach the high notes in the middle of the passage:

I raised my hand, my heart going out in secret conversation,
Help me, O Great, help me, O Great, help me, O Great of Height, and accept my entreaty.

I have sought refuge in you, grant mercy to the core of my plea,
Far be it from you to turn down, O Lord, the refuge-seeker.³

He drops his hand percussively, conclusively on the writing desk. “The melody drives you crazy! [*bjannin hal-lahn*].” After a pause he adds, “That’s why you find when I go to a *dhikr*, or to the Ummayyad mosque, in the street, everyone loves me, because I’m walking on the path of *inshād* [*li-anno māshī bi-tarīq al-inshād anā*].” The door of his workshop opens and a man comes in for directions to the nearby court building. Mnini goes back and forth with him before the man leaves. He looks back down at his work. “In Syria the artists are poor, but happy,” he says. He rearranges the ink and pens around the perimeter of the sheet of paper. “But *inshād* is a waste of time. You could even say it’s a bunch of fantasy nonsense [*khuzā‘ balāt*].” Taken by his change of tack, I ask, “You regret the years of composition?” “Definitely!” he declares. “No one appreciates the art I work in. I compose for people, and they take the songs and perform them without ever visiting me again or asking about me. I don’t take any money for these *anāshīd*, but they earn money from performing them. It’s all a headache.”

1 Lacan 1986, p. 80.

2 A *munshid* (pl. *munshidīn*) is a singer of religious songs performed at ceremonies of *dhikr*, and at other occasions such as weddings or celebrations of the Prophet’s birthday (the *mawlid*). The term *inshād* refers both to this vocal genre, and to pieces (pl. *anāshīd*) of such music, the lyrical contents of which are poetic texts. Michael Frishkopf defines *inshād* as “the melodic vocal performance of Arabic poetry as an Islamic practice,” one that is “regarded as a form of worship, though it lies outside the core of Islamic ritual.” Frishkopf 2001b, p. 65.

3 My translation of the Arabic, from Mnini’s composition log, with repeated phrases as sung: “*rafa‘tu yadī wal-qalbu rāha munājīyan / aghith yā ‘aẓīm, aghith yā ‘aẓīm, aghith yā ‘aẓīm al-ṭūl wa iqbal du‘ā’iya / laji‘tu ilaik irḥam ṣamīm darā‘atī / wa hāshāk mā khayyabta yā rabbī lājīyyan.*” Mnini attributes the text to Abu al-Huda al-Sayadi (d. 1909), identified in Abu Hanieh 2011, p. 146 as an Aleppine Sufi sheikh who was one of “the most renowned followers of the Rifa’i Order at the end of the Ottoman era,” and who “developed close relations with Sultan ‘Abd al-Hamid II.”

The next two chapters are in some ways an inquiry into the ambivalence of Mnini's assessment of his sixty-year career of composing religious songs, *anāshīd* of the *muwashshah* form, to be sung in *dhikr* meetings and other musical-religious gatherings.⁴ Ali Jihad Racy describes this form, not in and of itself a religious one, and mentions the composer under whom Mnini studied it, Umar al-Batsh:

The *muwashshahāt* of Syria and Egypt have medieval literary features but apparently use formal structures and metric patterns typical of Turko-Arab or Ottoman classical music and are influenced by the Mawlawi dervishes of Syrian cities, particularly Aleppo....In Syria, the *muwashshah* has been associated with several celebrated names: the composers Ahmad Abu Khalil al-Qabbani (1841-1903), Umar al-Batsh (1885-1950), and Shaykh Ali al-Darwish (1872-1952); and the singers Muhammad Khayri and Sabah Fakhri.⁵

In these two chapters I address the social and historical factors which inform his musical training, the production of his works, and their modes of reception. Mnini, who describes himself as a musical artist devoted to preserving the lofty musical-poetic form of the religious *muwashshah*, has remained relatively outside the structure of religious authority that regulates the social contexts where religious *muwashshahāt* are performed. He is neither a Sufi sheikh nor a religious scholar, two endeavors which together have largely defined the social roles and self-identifications of those who composed *dhikr* music in the generations immediately preceding his. As suggested in his above remarks, he has also refused participation in the regnant market-oriented modalities of artistic status, with the result that his career outlines some of the tensions between modes of musical creative production past and present.

The place of art notions

The question of artistic status remains nonetheless a central impasse for Mnini, one partly informed by his training in Western music theory, a corpus of techniques and ideologies whose origin is in European art music. The category of art, inseparable from Western aesthetics and from Western philosophical distinctions between domains of intellectual activity, is an implicit concern in these chapters to the extent that Western art notions have come into play within the discourses, institutions, and practices in which Mnini and other informants, especially musicians, are situated and act. The category of art, along with attendant notions of creativity, authorship, and social status, is taken as a configuration whose introduction and imposition through colonial and postcolonial

4 The vocal form of the *muwashshah*, pl. *muwashshahāt*, has been defined by anthropologist of Syrian music, Jonathan Shannon, as “a musical-poetic genre of probable Andalusian provenance but of mixed melodic, rhythmic, and literary heritage” whose structure is “a ‘strophic’ poetic form...composed of verses of metrical poetry set to music.” Shannon 2003, p. 86 and 87. The musical esteem in which *muwashshahāt* were and continue to be held is attested by Virginia Danielson, who writes, “The melodic lines of the old *muwashshahāt* were thought to be the best source of training in exposition and development of the musical modes (*maqāmāt*). One who knew the *muwashshahāt* was better able to compose and to improvise with sophistication than one who did not.” Danielson 1989, p. 56. In more recent decades recorded performances of *muwashshahāt* have become an important medium of transmission. For more detail on the form, see the concise definition provided in Racy 2001.

5 Racy 2001, p. 550.

projects of social and cultural reshaping has conditioned forms of practice that can only be understood in its light. My concern with the category is limited to its practical effects within Mnini's mode of artistic production, his self-definition, and his somewhat problematic status within the community for which he composes.

One of the questions implicitly addressed in this chapter and the next is the degree to which creative practices, musical and otherwise, might sometimes work alongside, and even be part of, the structures of colonial domination, the set of structures which Elliot Colla identifies as a source of so much ambivalence in the lives of postcolonial subjects:

One could argue that the real focus of postcolonial criticism has been to deconstruct not so much colonialism, but colonial structures of domination as they are reproduced by the discourses of the nation-state. In these readings of colonial culture, we find ambiguity instead of binaries, hybridity in the place of pure opposition, and insofar as the identities of the colonial Self and Other necessitate each other, they also coexist—perhaps painfully—within each other.⁶

As anthropologies of art and music have established, the prevalence of art notions is not a necessary cultural condition for the development and proliferation of creative traditions. Part of the purpose of these chapters is to suggest the importance of thinking such traditions, and even the possibility of creative life, outside the framework of art. Likewise, these chapters point to some of the ways art ideologies, so often thought in the West in universal terms (“Every culture has art.”) might present challenges to modes of creative production which have flourished in other cultural contexts, but which have not been conceived as art *per se*.⁷

Mnini's compositional work is a historically specific configuration of elements of diverse origin, and my presentation of it is not intended to stand as a model of Arab creative production in general. Arab history is rich with such production, especially in the domain of poetry, and with systems of patronage for such work that closely resemble those of other histories, including European, East Asian, and Southeast Asian. What Mnini's work might more effectively represent is a type of creative tradition that has not been historically associated with the artist figure, broadly understood, in the period before contact with European institutions and ideologies. Jane Bennett, in her book *The Enchantment of Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*, treats the relation between aesthetics and ethics in a way that could indeed serve as a theoretical framing of Mnini's work, as she touches upon what are the most germane elements of that work without invoking the category of art as a standard-bearer for aesthetics: “Regardless of whether the ethical code is conceived as divine command or pragmatic rule, if it is to be transformed into acts, affects must be engaged, orchestrated, and libidinally bound to it.”⁸ *Dhikr* composition, designed to instantiate a pleasurable investment in Islam's ethical

6 Colla 2003, p. 1051.

7 A very interesting exploration of such questions in the context of Javanese gamelan music is Sumarsam 1995, especially Chapter Three, “The Impact of Western Thought on Javanese Views of Music.” Sumarsam's study describes many of the same historical patterns and effects that I explore here, including the effects of Western notation and music theory on the ways Javanese musicians theorize and perform gamelan, and the effects of Western notions of “high art” on the way elite Javanese came to approach reception of gamelan performance.

8 Bennett 2001, p. 131.

system, and to bind the participant affectively to its principles and to the community of *dhikr* practitioners, can be viewed as a practical instantiation of Bennett's argument, which situates aesthetic concerns within the domain of the ethical, rather than demarcating them within the domain of art: "The key claim is that ethics requires both a moral code (which condenses moral ideas and metaphysical assumptions into principles and rules) and an embodied sensibility (which organizes affects into style and generates the impetus to enact the code)."⁹

The apparatus

The notion of the *apparatus*, as developed by Michel Foucault and reworked by Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben, has guided my examination of Zuheir Mnini's compositional training, process, and career. The apparatus, with its stress on the interrelations between various domains of activity, is useful for unearthing connections between aesthetic practices and the social and political contexts which enable them to acquire meaning, and in which they function.

My examination of Mnini's work in the following two chapters makes use of the apparatus concept's three main features: its relationality, the combinatorial potential of its constitutive elements, and its strategic orientation. Agamben identifies the French *dispositif*, of which the English *apparatus* is an approximation, as having two important semantic dimensions: "A technological meaning: 'The way in which the parts of a machine or of a mechanism and, by extension, the mechanism itself are arranged.' A military use: 'The set of means arranged in conformity with a plan.'"¹⁰ This latter purposive aspect is defined by Foucault, the thinker primarily responsible for developing the concept of the apparatus, as its "dominant strategic function."¹¹ This strategic quality is, he says, "a matter of a certain manipulation of relations of forces, either developing them in a particular direction, blocking them, stabilising them, utilising them, etc."¹² The apparatus shares its implication in historically-situated strategy with another notion of Foucault's, the *problematization*, and both concepts stress the dynamic ways new combinatorial functions might take shape. Problematization is glossed by Paul Rabinow in the following way: "a historical space of conditioned contingency that emerges in relation to (and then forms a feedback situation with) a more general situation, one that is real enough in standard terms, but is not fixed or static.... [and is] constituted by and through economic conditions, scientific knowledges, political actors, and other related vectors."¹³

In these chapters I approach *dhikr* composition as an apparatus that includes Zuheir Mnini's background and training, his composition process and associated states, and the social contexts in which performances of his works and related practices are situated, including their status entailments. As perhaps evident from the above formulations of the concept, artistic or creative practice is not generally cited as a typical

9 Bennett 2001, p. 131.

10 Agamben 2009, p. 7.

11 Foucault 1980, p. 195.

12 Foucault 1980, p. 196.

13 Rabinow 2002, p. 139.

example of an apparatus at work. Agamben's reflections on the apparatus concept are a notable departure, however, as he widens the scope of the apparatus beyond the set of structures typically associated with Foucault. Beyond facilitating the inclusion of *dhikr* composition in the space of the apparatus, he articulates the overall sense of the concept in a perhaps more straightforward and elegant manner:

I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, juridical measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular telephones and—why not—language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses...¹⁴

Other thinkers besides Agamben have seen a need to expand the apparatus' purview (though perhaps not to such excess) both in terms of the nature of the relations it subsumes and the types of historical and class contexts to which it is relevant. Stephen Collier, while acknowledging the increasingly "supple" approaches of Foucault's later thinking, takes inspiration from the organicity and fluidity of Gilles Deleuze's work to characterize the relations of elements within the apparatus as a *topology*, a set of relations he defines in a twofold manner as "the 'patterns of correlation' in which heterogeneous elements—techniques, material forms, institutional structures and technologies of power—are configured, as well as the 'redeployments' and 'recombinations' through which these patterns are transformed."¹⁵ Deleuze himself also reworked Foucault's concept, including by asking a perhaps obvious question suggesting the apparatus' applicability not only to the ascendant side of asymmetries of power, but to the descendent as well: "Couldn't we cite apparatuses where subjectivation no longer goes through aristocratic life or the aestheticized existence of free men but through the marginalized existence of the 'excluded'?"¹⁶

In light of these reworkings, the apparatus concept becomes more applicable to post-colonial contexts, where instances of the recombination of heterogeneous elements, and of entire apparatuses of different provenance, more obviously present themselves. Clearly, it is not only modern apparatuses that make and orient subjects, but while modernity incorporates and indeed depends upon the retroactive construction of "traditional" apparatuses, it also constrains their action in such a way that orients their subjectivizing effects inevitably in relation to the institutions, discourses, and norms associated with the nation-state and the market.

14 Agamben 2009, p. 14.

15 Collier 2009, p. 80.

16 Deleuze 2007, p. 341.

***Dhikr* composition as apparatus**

Mnini, as a product of *dhikr* practice and community, of various musical pedagogies, and more generally of Syrian society around the time of independence, approaches his creative activities in ways that are personally and historically particular. Elements formative to his compositional methods and his approach to music here are grouped into sections that examine his social biography, his musical training, and the set of changes which were happening in Arab music around the time of his youth, specifically those emanating from the 1932 Cairo Congress on Arab Music. Mnini's training encompasses a diverse set of contexts, including childhood absorption of *dhikr* music, private instrumental lessons, compositional apprenticeship, and institute training. The latter two included the study and use of European music theory and notation, and exposure to the notions of creative authorship that attend European art music. These topics and contexts form sub-sections within the first part of this chapter. They are followed by a treatment of Mnini's compositional approach, including an analysis of a healing memory in which music plays a role, and a detailed examination of the tools and subjective states that play roles in his compositional process as he represents it. The first of these two chapters, then, deals with Mnini's particular engagement with music, with his development and work as a composer.

The pieces Mnini composes are performed primarily in *dhikr* ceremonies, sites where the works become part of the set of resources called upon by *dhikr* practitioners to orient themselves to God and the Prophet, to Sharia, and to one another, in the sense that Agamben cited in his articulation of the apparatus. The social reception of his works is not limited to *dhikr*, however, and Mnini's status as a composer of *dhikr* music even within the *dhikr* community is largely informed by his training in early-middle twentieth century institutions of Arab music learning. The second of these chapters takes up examination of the patterns of social reception relevant to the *dhikr* composer. The first topic treated is *tarab*, a concept that serves as a normative model for the experience of musical affect, and as a site for the discursive articulation of its bounds. The chapter then turns to the notions of authorship that bear upon the social status of the *dhikr* composer, and the complications of that status as represented by Mnini. It is hoped that the model of *dhikr* composition developed here will allow for productive comparisons with modes of creative production in other contexts.

BACKGROUND, BIOGRAPHY, TRAINING

Situating our interactions

During my fieldwork in 2007 and 2008, Zuheir Mnini turned seventy nine.¹⁷ I visited him several times a week in his small calligraphy workshop, located off a ground-level walkway that passed through a building, connecting a street on one side to a large

17 I met Mnini thanks to directions provided by anthropologist of Syrian music, Jonathan Shannon, to whose generosity this dissertation are deeply indebted. My association with Mnini at many *dhikr* events granted me a certain freedom of movement, and freedom from curiosity, which might not have otherwise been possible. A photograph of Mnini in his workshop can be seen on page 29 of Shannon's excellent book, *Among the Jasmine Trees: Music and Modernity in Contemporary Syria*.

parking lot on the other. The lot was encircled by buildings whose first floors housed computer hardware and software shops, racks of their wares set up on the sidewalks. Located in the heart of the al-Bahsa area of Damascus, Mnini could walk to the Old City, and thus to the Umayyad Mosque where he occasionally directed and participated in the performance of the group call to prayer.¹⁸

In Mnini's workshop I always sat at the side of his desk in a chair backed against the wall. When he needed to get out from behind his desk, or climb the ladder up into the ceiling storage space, I had to move around towards the door to let him pass. Customers came in once an hour or so, and were perhaps outnumbered by people seeking directions or asking money for themselves or for a charitable cause. The walls were lined with rose-tinted ceramic tiles, their contoured edges multiplying in bright slivers the fluorescent lighting above. The inside of the display window was draped with a translucent plastic curtain, at the foot of which lay samples of his work. Beautiful calligraphic pieces of his were framed on the walls, Quranic passages of complex stylization. In the storage space above many more frames lie stacked against the walls. It had been many years, however, since Mnini had been commissioned for such pieces, the production of which until recently required years of study under a master of calligraphy.¹⁹ Computers have made it easy enough for the average craftsman or graphic artist to do such work themselves, while mass-produced Quranic calligraphy is readily available. Mnini's calligraphy still adorned the walls of several of the neighborhood mosques, many of which were quite old, but his living is now made penning molds for signatory stamps and the brass nameplates that the educated and managerial classes affix outside their office and home doors.

Mnini's main artistic pursuit, however, which he represents as something akin to a calling, is the composition of religious praise-songs, or *anāshīd dīnniyya*. These pieces constitute one of the genres, and of them the most melodic, performed in weekly *dhikr* gatherings, where men congregate to recite the Qur'an, chant supplications, sing pious songs, and dance.²⁰ This type of *dhikr* practice, as opposed to the individual recitation of names of God and other pious formulations, is strongly associated with Sufism, the mystically-inclined traditions of practice and interpretation within Islam, and its purpose, in the view of the sheikhs and participants with whom I spoke, is to inculcate personal and communal engagement with the principles of sharia, and to facilitate insight and affective experience, including the shared pleasures of religious music and movement.²¹

18 Most *adhān*, or call to prayer, is performed by a solo voice, but the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus is one of the few places with a tradition of calling the *adhān* as a group, in a call-and-response manner.

19 See Figure 7, a photograph of Mnini and his calligraphy instructor.

20 Women's participation in men's *dhikr* is usually limited to observing from a curtained or lattice-walled gallery adjacent to the *dhikr* space. *Dhikr* meetings of women only, though less common, tend to be held in the homes of the women who participate.

21 I delimit my use of the term "Sufism," itself problematic and subject to debate both within the Islamic world and in scholarship on Islam, in Chapter 1, but generally speaking I take it to include any of a variety of practices that reference Sufi ("mystical") literature, social organization, practices, or concepts as developed from the ninth, but especially twelfth century onwards. Other points covered in Chapter 1, but which also contribute to the difficulty of providing a definition of Sufism, are the strong reluctance of people to self-identify as Sufis, and the significant incorporation of Sufi practices and ideals within Damascene and Syrian Islamic practice in general, including, for example, the unique group format of the *adhān* at the Umayyad Mosque.

Mnini was a respected figure in the *dhikr* community in Damascus, and had been involved in the meetings from his boyhood as a singer, composer, and one who seeks to “remember” God, as the literal definition of the word *dhikr* conveys.²²

Family and social context

The historical context of Mnini’s life, and specifically the fact of colonial influence within it, was brought to my attention by a photo hung on the wall behind his writing desk.²³ In the black-and-white photograph, an electric trolley stands in front of a corner mosque, a minaret rising adjacent to a two-story home, and to the right of the trolley a man sits on a donkey, a loaded camel in tow. Before meeting Mnini, I had seen the same image in tourist shops, in prints and sketches showing much less detail than the photo. In the lower right corner of the photograph was written “Damascus—Midan, al-Sweiqah, the year 1927.” Mnini said of the image, “I was born in this room, in al-Sweiqah on the road to al-Midan. This picture is from the first day this tram ran, in 1927, during the time of the French. It passed by here, and went out all the way to the Hamidiyyah market.” He tapped on the photo, on the second-floor window. “I was born in this room, in 1929, after the passing of this tram by two years. I keep hold of this picture because of that room.”

Mnini was born into a world of *dhikr* meetings and music where, as he says, the Eastern musical scales became fixed in him. The transformations wrought by the confluence of Ottoman, French, and emerging Arab nationalist histories had already effected a significant uprooting of the Sufi orders from positions of social and political authority, an upheaval that Mnini’s father, a Sufi sheikh, no doubt witnessed first-hand.²⁴ The French Mandate had already been established, on the heels of the suppression of the Syrian Revolution of 1925-1927, a time when Damascus suffered heavy bombardment.²⁵ Mnini’s life has spanned most of the governing regimes of twentieth-century Syria, the sole exceptions being the end of Ottoman rule and the brief tenure of Faisal bin Hussein under the Kingdom of Syria in 1920.

By Mnini’s estimation, his family had lived in Damascus for at least a hundred and fifty years by the time he was born, though their origins lay in the nearby town of Mnin. In 1914, his family began a lasting association with the al-Aita family, recent arrivals from Medina who had been expelled from that city, along with other families wielding positions of authority in the Sufi orders.²⁶ The Mnini family helped the al-Aita’s to settle, and Mnini’s father and Sheikh Umar al-Aita began holding joint *dhikr* meetings, spurred by the fact that the men were sheikhs of related Sufi orders, and that each tended

22 The word *dhikr* means “remembrance,” and as both concept and practice is by no means limited to Muslims partial to Sufism. See, for example, the official signs along many highways in the Gulf countries, not noted for their embrace of Sufism in the modern era: “*la tansā dhikra-llāh* [Don’t forget remembrance of God].”

23 See Figure 8 for an image of the photograph.

24 Chapter 2, “Memory and Authority,” explores some of the lingering effects of these transformations.

25 For a detailed account of this conflict, see Provence 2005.

26 This information was provided to me by Sadiq al-Aita, the grandson of Sheikh Umar al-Aita, the one who arrived from Medina and became close with Mnini’s father.

to compose poetry and vocal pieces to be performed in the ceremonies. Unlike Mnini, neither of the men identified himself primarily as a poet or composer, and not at all as an artist, despite their mutual inclination to create such works.

Training

Ethnomusicologist Benjamin Brinner, in a study of skill acquisition among Javanese Gamelan musicians, provides a working definition of musical competence which highlights the relations between musical and extra-musical domains, and between individual and social registers. He suggests that musical competence be thought as “individualized mastery of the array of interrelated skills and knowledge that is required of musicians within a particular tradition or musical community and is acquired and developed in response to and in accordance with the demands and possibilities of general and specific cultural, social, and musical conditions.”²⁷ In educational institutions of different types, including in Mnini’s case contexts of varying degrees of pedagogical formality, skill acquisition is only one part of a process that also includes enculturation within given evaluative schemes and regimes of truth. What Brinner calls “demands and possibilities,” or those elements which lie outside the set of skills proper but whose absorption are crucial to a skill’s successful deployment, may conflict with one another across different educational contexts insofar as those contexts imply different frameworks of ethics and truth.

What determines the success levels of potential learners may be a matter of what Jane Bennett calls *sensibility*, a notion that articulates the embodied capacity to negotiate the demands and possibilities of different social and cultural contexts:

Sensibility, a refinement or new assemblage of sensible primordia, is culturally encoded and temperamentally delimited, but it is still educable to some uncertain degree. Like the code dimension of ethics, techniques of sensibility-formation are concerned with governing and refining behavior. The difference is that these techniques respond to subtle norms of admirable behavior and thought; they address the question of which modes of perception and which styles of comportment, and not simply which actions, are most laudable.²⁸

The formation of sensibilities is clearly an important aspect of the acquisition of musical competence, which as Brinner argues involves much more than the musical domain itself. Despite differences in their stated interests—Brinner’s in the acquisition of musical competence and Bennett’s in ethical enculturation—both articulate models wherein felicitous action is determined by much more than proper technique *per se*. It is with such a broad view towards learning that Mnini’s musical education needs to be considered. As suggested by Brinner in the same study cited above, “a comprehensive approach to the study of competence acquisition should examine the patterns, expectations, possibilities, and limitations associated with particular ages, the more or

27 Brinner 1995b, p. 28.

28 Bennett 2001, p. 150.

less formally instituted processes of education, and the other interpersonal contacts that may be gathered loosely under the rubric ‘association.’”²⁹

Mnini often referred to his early acquisition of musical sensibilities and skills, a product of the *dhikr* meetings he attended, as an anchoring (*raskh*) that took place in the organs of his ear and throat. Others’ recognition of his boyhood musical talent and capacity for attention led to his enrollment in lessons on *‘ūd* and other Eastern instruments, and eventual study in the recently-established musical institute. There, alongside his brother Adnan, he was trained in European musical notation and theory. Because of this latter element of his training, his mode of discussing music with me was different from that of other singers (*munshidūn*) who made similar remarks about the anchoring and fixing of Eastern modes in the context of *dhikr*. Their remarks support Jonathan Shannon’s assertion that “the *dhikr*, as some musicians [argue], serves as a de-facto conservatory (in the sense of conserving through training) for the modal and rhythmic cycles of Arab music,” although for the singers this meant a generally practical, and not theoretical, relation to the music, as they could often not name the mode or scale within which they sang and improvised.³⁰ Mnini’s musical education and subjectivization generated for him new musical capacities, and rechanneled existing ones, but at the same time transformed the possibilities of his later social recognition within the *dhikr* community.

In an entry on Arab melodic modes in the *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, Scott Marcus writes:

Thus musicians learn the intricacies of the various *maqāmāt* by an ongoing process of osmosis, beginning in early childhood. To the extent that students take music lessons (a rather rare phenomenon until the advent of conservatory training in the twentieth century), they learn to play specific pieces of music during these lessons. There is no direct, explicit teaching of the characteristics of the individual modes beyond, perhaps, their most basic scales.³¹

Marcus’ observations are borne out by Mnini, who asserted that musical elements never formed a topic of conversation in the broader social context of *dhikr*, for instance in conversations outside the meetings themselves, and were not singled out as objects of explicit aesthetic concern.

In contradistinction to the implicit nature of the musical training provided in *dhikr*, the musical institute articulated both the musical object, and the process of training musicians in its production and reception, as problems in their own right. Under state tutelage, and by virtue of being abstracted from the social and authoritative context of *dhikr*, a different sort of relation to music was enabled by institute-training. The previously unarticulated relation, in which *dhikr* music was not conceived as music, and not approached through the terms of a distinct and specialized language, faded among those who composed. The conditions of possibility for *dhikr* composition, in the manner

29 Brinner 1995b, p. 110.

30 Shannon 2004, p. 387. Ali Jihad Racy also mentions Qur’an recitation and *adhān* [prayer-calling] as sites of early learning for musicians, certainly true for Mnini, and notes the early twentieth-century mixing of traditional musical apprenticeship with tutored and institute-bound instruction. Racy 2003, pp. 25-26.

31 Marcus 2001, p. 34.

in which Mnini has practiced it, emerged when the unarticulated musicality of *dhikr*, which implied its own set of possibilities for social recognition within the *dhikr* community, was brought into relation with the configuration of skills, technologies, discourses, and practices that constitutes art-music in the modern conservatory. This relation, facilitated by the naming of the melodic and rhythmic material constitutive of *dhikr* as music, cleared the space for *dhikr* composition to be constructed as a pursuit which would both fall under the rubric of art, and would constitute a social identity more or less independent of the rapidly decreasing field of the Sufi orders' social authority.

Brinner has argued that the codification of native schemes of aesthetic and structural knowledge concerning music and performing arts can transform the understanding of those schemes, especially as regards their place within specific economies of artistic status.³² For Mnini, the aura facilitated by institute training was that of the composer-artist, the pure specialist in musical form. And though Mnini has embraced that identity, its lack of precedent within the *dhikr* tradition has complicated for him the possibility of recognition within the *dhikr* community. The reconfiguration of musical learning in the institute, opened by the government in 1943, occurred in the midst of significant transformations of religious authority, and helped change the conventions by which the skills of those recognized as possessing musical talent were developed and cultivated.³³ Musical institute training was combined with traditional modes of learning-through-exposure, and aided the development of a category of musical specialization. This category and its emerging social roles helped to displace the conventions whereby musical composition had sometimes been incorporated within the activities of the Sufi sheikh, who outside the social category of artist composed poetry and musical works to be performed in *dhikr* ceremonies.

The final stage of Mnini's training was his instruction under Umar al-Batsh, a Syrian composer who played an important role in Arab music of the time. With al-Batsh, Mnini developed his compositional sense along the lines of early twentieth-century *tarab*, the broad art-music genre that came to be perceived by many as Arab music's most essential manifestation. Mnini honed his application of music theory to the structures and aesthetics of the *muwashshah* form, which then had become well-established elements of the secular *waşla* (medley) performances popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He also developed further contact with the musical elite of the Arab world, and under al-Batsh Mnini had as his lesson-mate Sabah Fakhri, who became an internationally famous singer of traditional genres. Mnini was proud to know him, even showing me his phone number in his pocket address book.

As will be seen, Mnini's synthesis of the elements of his background and training, guided by his devotion to the *dhikr* milieu and his understanding of its principles and ethics, necessitated a different path than that of Fakhri or of those who would aspire to similar musical success. The latter inevitably followed the broad media and commercial conventions forged earlier by Umm Kulthum in her emergence as a singing mega-star, and Mnini developed his approach to *dhikr* composition within ear-shot, as it were, of the

32 See Brinner 1995, especially p. 453.

33 See Shannon 2007 for more on the ambivalent relation of the Syrian State and elite to Arab music in this era.

social conditions and conventions of that success. Though he considered Umm Kulthum, Sabah Fakhri, Muhammad Abdel Wahhab and others kindred spirits in their meticulous attention to musical detail, the mediated social identity of these figures as commercial musical artists set them apart from the type of identity Mnini would desire to craft.

1932 Congress of Arab Music

The abstraction of musical structures and pedagogy within the musical institute helped cast the learning that occurred within *dhikr* ceremonies as informal, as only partially fleshing out the potential of musical forms which the tools of musical theory and notation could putatively more fully explore. At the same time, European-style art discourses, including assumptions about the artist's social role and about modes of consuming art, came to be adopted by musicians and appreciators of music in the Arab world. The 1932 Congress of Arab Music held in Cairo is an event that concatenates many of these changes, and its decrees profoundly affected the ways music was thought and performed across the Arab world. Discussion of the Congress' effects makes clearer the degree to which Mnini's synthesis of the diverse elements of his training is in fact a hybridization, one we might call, after Foucault, an *institution* within the overall apparatus of *dhikr* composition. In his reflections on the apparatus, Foucault defines an institution as "every kind of more-or-less constrained, learned behavior," and as that "which functions in a society as a system of constraint and which isn't an utterance, in short, all the field of the non-discursive social."³⁴ In the context of asymmetrical power relations between the West and the Arab world, and between Westernized Arab elites and other Arabs, changes in musical practice and meanings were undergirded by an often unarticulated ethos, and served to shape musical social domains according to the model of European art music. In detailing some of the Congress' decisions and effects, my goal is to bring to attention the ways such shaping might have occurred in the norms and conventions of musical experience, including Mnini's own.

By the turn of the century, European art music and art ideologies had made significant inroads among the upper classes and the musical artists who sought their patronage. Anne Elise Thomas makes the point:

In the late 19th century, the Victorian idea of music as a part of a cultured upbringing began to take hold among the Egyptian elite. The Khedive Isma'il was a patron of music whose initiatives, including the construction of the Cairo Opera House and sending Egyptian singers to Istanbul for education in Oriental music, supported both Western and Arab music in Egypt.³⁵

The institute Mnini attended, though founded nearly half a century later, operated according to the same model, providing instruction in both Arab and European music, and generating new possibilities for musicians to counter their traditionally vexed status. The absorption of Arab music into the newly-established conservatories represents a significant shift in the context and manner of Arab music learning, and although Mnini's

34 Foucault 1980, pp. 197-198.

35 Thomas 2007, p. 1.

institute training did not promote *dhikr* music or religious *muwashshahāt*, these were the directions in which he eventually applied the training he received.

At the time of the Congress in 1932, Mnini would have been three years old, and would have already been absorbing the melodic and rhythmic conventions of the *dhikr* meetings to which he was being taken. In Cairo of that year, King Fuad I convened the Congress of Arab Music, a reform-minded initiative of the French musicologist Rodolphe d'Erlanger that would shape some of the training that Mnini would undergo. Ethnomusicologist Ruth Davis writes that d'Erlanger was motivated by an understanding of Arab music shared at the time by a good portion of both its Western and Arab appreciators, not to mention its practitioners. D'Erlanger was particularly interested in the Tunisian musical tradition of *ma'luf*, and “maintained that as an oral tradition, lacking an independent, currently-applicable theoretical basis, the *ma'luf* was inherently vulnerable.”³⁶

As Thomas puts it, the Congress “codified a category called ‘Arab music’”³⁷ by both diagnosing the “ignorance and disorder” that plagued the music’s then-current form, and by proposing appropriate remedies: systematization, standardization, and “a more scientific approach to music.”³⁸ The construction of the subjugated other through diagnosis and remedy is a familiar one to students of European colonialism, and is a process that also engendered the emergence of elite nationalist identities suffused with the absorption of colonial perceptions.³⁹ What is important here is that the category of Arab music emerges precisely from such an operation, even as the music is being systematically changed by it. Music theory played a crucial role, not only because it was a vehicle for articulating particular changes to be instituted, but because of the normative relation of practice and theory that it enforced, a relation indebted to Enlightenment models of science. As Thomas suggests, there was a direct relation between organizers’ “belief that theory should generate practice, not the other way around”⁴⁰ and the changes they hoped “would stamp out the disorder rampant in Arab music and the lack of discipline among its practitioners.”⁴¹

In a sense, d'Erlanger’s opinion that Arab music forms were vulnerable was a self-fulfilling prophecy, as no comparable theoretical framework existed to resist claims that might be made on behalf of European music theory and notation. Studies on the ways music was thought by its practitioners in the pre-modern or medieval Middle East are few, aside from those that deal with music as a social category. How musicians thought of and approached musical structures is a topic that remains vague at best. Musician and scholar George Sawa is one of the few researchers to focus on Arab elaborations of melodic and rhythmic theory. He writes that the two most significant systems produced prior to the Congress were those of al-Farabi in the tenth century, whose system “included not only pitches and durations but also dynamics and timbre,” and Safi al-Din’s

36 Davis 1997, p. 73.

37 Thomas 2007, p. 1.

38 Thomas 2007, p. 4.

39 The work of Edward Said and Timothy Mitchell documents the double movement of diagnosis and remedy quite effectively, as does that of Achille Mbembe in the context of West Africa.

40 Thomas 2007, p. 4.

41 Thomas 2007, p. 5.

thirteenth-century system, which divided the octave into seventeen steps.⁴² However, neither of these approaches became widespread, and Sawa concludes that “the oral medium was the rule in music transmission, whereas the visual medium (i.e. notation) was a very rare exception indeed, and it remained confined to the field of music theory.”⁴³ As mentioned to me several times by Mnini, the few existing instances of older notation employ notational schemes whose precise mode of interpretation is unknown: “No one knows how to read them.”

The changes the Congress instituted manifested standardization and systematization as normative values that defined a good seemingly of themselves. The notes that constituted the various melodic modes or *maqāmāt* were fixed to a set of 24 precisely defined potential intonation values.⁴⁴ The *maqāmāt* were made duplicable across octaves so that inter-octave differences were eradicated, and were reconceptualized according to the more rationally-ordered model of the scale and mode of European musical theory, a rethinking aided by the substitution of Western notation and *solfège* for the previously-used Arabic and Persian note names. Ethnomusicologist Scott Marcus, whose work is an extensive treatment of the changes in Arab music over the modern period, makes the point that this involved the rethinking of non-Western notes as variants and exceptions to the new order, wherein “the note *sīkā* came to be called ‘mi half-flat’ (*mī niṣf bīmūl*),” a renomination “based on the assumption that the Western E-natural is, in fact, the ‘natural’ note.”⁴⁵ The practice of characterizing the *maqāmāt* partially by their typical melodic movements was abandoned. Previously part of the manner of the differentiation of the *maqāmāt*, the practice was discouraged, both by Western reformers and those Arab musicians who agreed with their views, in the interests of ridding what “would clutter an otherwise uniform and systematic music theory” and of establishing “a uniform theory so that the teachers in the same institution and in different parts of the same country would be teaching the same music theory.”⁴⁶

These changes cemented the decline of regional differences in the *maqāmāt*, aided by the spread of the Egyptian approaches to the *maqāmāt* dispersed through that country’s recording and film industries.⁴⁷ The Congress’ decisions were not without detractors, and it was the Syrian delegation which raised the most objections in Cairo in 1932. Jonathan Shannon writes about the gap between musical theory and practice which formed the concern of many of those who objected to the Congress’ terms: “In many ways this is a problem inherent to music theory in general, which constitutes a meta-discourse on music; that is, it represents an attempt to contain and describe in referential

42 Sawa 1989, p. 255.

43 Sawa 1989, p. 255.

44 See Marcus 2001 for quick but fairly detailed example of how the European notions of scale and mode do not map to the practice of a given *maqām*—in this case, *maqām bayyāti*. I sometimes use the terms here interchangeably for readability’s sake, to simply remind the reader that a *maqām* is something like a scale or mode.

45 Marcus 2001, p. 34.

46 Marcus 1989, p. 45.

47 See Marcus 1993, p. 47 and Davis 1997 on this point. More generally, Benjamin Brinner writes, “It is ironic that the growing use of notation as an aid to memory has coincided with the disappearance or absorption of many local traditions that once featured unique repertoires and performance practices.” Brinner 1993, p. 260.

terms what are pragmatic and dynamic processes of employing and interpreting various musical rules and guidelines.”⁴⁸ Indeed, the most salient of the Congress’ effects on Mnini’s training and experience as a composer was the expansion of music theory’s role, which Marcus describes as having “blossomed in the twentieth century, aided by the growth of institutionalized music training from the first decades of the present century.”⁴⁹

The Congress was a key moment in the transformations that were occurring in Arab music, but its effect was not limited to changes in music practice. Rather, the new relation to music theory took root because of other simultaneous shifts in the social meanings and functions of musical practices in the Arab world. The effects of the inroads made by European art ideals and norms are perhaps more difficult to trace than changes in musical terminology and practice proper, but as Brinner suggests in a comment on “formalized musical education,” they are intimately related: “This transformation of traditional learning processes, often motivated by desires for rationalization and standardization, may drastically alter the structure and content of musicians’ competence.”⁵⁰ The rest of the chapter is an exploration of a possible set of such changes.

THE MUSICAL OBJECT

Healing memory

The following is a portion of a joint interview I conducted with Zuheir Mnini and Sheikh Sadiq al-Aita, the grandson of the man from Medina with whom Mnini’s father conducted joint *dhikr* meetings, beginning around the end of the Ottoman Empire when the latter were both young men. The memory is from Mnini’s early adulthood, probably sometime in the early 1950s, and serves, I suggest, as a kind of founding document for his musical identity. Some interpretive frames which contest the representation of *dhikr* music, specifically as regards the question of its abstraction *qua* music, are indexed in the interaction surrounding the memory’s telling. Mnini regularly referred to the memory during my time with him, and its enduring power speaks to the constitutive nature of the tension in *dhikr* composition as Mnini practices it, and to the role that tension plays in the complications of status for the *dhikr* composer, the composer of religious *muwashshahāt*.

It was again in Mnini’s calligraphy workshop where I sat with him and Sheikh Sadiq. They had been recalling the *dhikr* meetings held during the tenure of Sadiq’s father, Sheikh Hashim al-Aita. After a pause, Mnini spoke, alternately addressing me and Sheikh Sadiq in his sleepy voice:

Before, I had epilepsy. The result of a break here, in my head [*holds his hand up edge-wise against the top of his forehead, with a sawing motion*]. Something that was frightening me severely. I’d have attacks at home, wherever I was. I’d fall on the ground and bite my tongue. For fifteen years I had this condition. My father was a sheikh of the Rashidiyya [Sufi] order, and I’d go to him, to the *dhikr*, and to your family’s place, to the *dhikr*. With him the illness went away. Your father

48 Shannon 2006, p. 73.

49 Marcus 1993, p. 39.

50 Brinner 1995b, p. 113.

gestured to me, “Come here,” he said, right when I’d come through the door. I was dizzy. When I got up to him, it was as if something exited me. As if something changed inside me. Right with the words... [*pauses, struggling to recall, and sings in a slow, tentative melody*], “*Wa ṣallī rabbī ‘alā al-muṣṭafā*. [Oh Lord, bless the Chosen One, i.e. the Prophet].” A thought came to my mind: “What’s the meter [*wazn*] of that phrase?” I was completely dizzy! The guy who brought me was a man doing some work on our house. When I went through the door, I was dizzy, and he was holding my hand. Your father put his hand on my head, and it was as if I had just woken up right then. “*Wa ṣallī rabbī ‘alā al-muṣṭafā*.” His hand is here [*motions to his forehead*], and I’m wondering, “What’s that meter?”

Mnini laughed, and shook his head. Sheikh Sadiq added, in the grave manner that was his from time to time, “*ashhadu an lā illāha illā allāh*, [I bear witness that there is no god but Allah]” repeating the declaration of faith that can serve so many different meanings in the course of conversation—surprise, gentle admonishment of an interlocutor, plea for protection in a situation of doubtful import.

Mnini continued, “I even figured out what it was.” He sang again, through a few tenuous starts, until he arrived on the correct phrase and melody, “*wa ṣallī yā rabbī ‘alā al-muṣṣarī* [Oh Lord, bless the Facilitator].” Besides the change of the last word, the insertion of the particle of direct address, *yā*, brought the syllables of the phrase into alignment with the now more confidently-sung melody and its underlying pattern of stress.⁵¹

Sheikh al-Aita interjected, “*Now* I see that it’s metrical! [*halla’ shift anno mawzūneh*].” The phrase was as familiar to Sheikh al-Aita as a phrase could be. But despite having known it from childhood *dhikr* gatherings, and himself singing it now when directing them, he only then realized that it implied a metrical figure, that its rhythmical pulses were regular enough to be marked as a time signature.⁵²

Together, they sang the complete phrase again, and Mnini started in with a different, more energetic melody, in 4/4 time, “*bi luṭfi yā ilāhī jud ‘alainā* [with kindness, oh God, be generous with us],” clapping his hand on the downbeats, the clarity of which stood out against the vague, slow swells of the previous triple-meter phrase. Mnini

51 Shannon notes, in an illuminating discussion on the particular metrical features of the *muwashshah* form: “The lyrics are made to fit the musical rhythm through the use of filler words such as ‘ya layl’ (O Night), and nonsense syllables such as ‘ya la lali,’ and other words derived from Arabic, Turkish, and Persian. This is especially the case in Aleppo, where not only are there heavy Ottoman influences on the music and culture but the various and complex rhythmic cycles that the Aleppine composers prefer require extensive use of filler words; they become an aspect of the song’s aesthetics.” Shannon 2003, pp. 86-87.

52 Given the prevalence of ametric phrases in *dhikr* chants and songs, some of which are performed in congregation daily in Syrian mosques following prayers, it is possible that Sheikh Sadiq’s expression of surprise was genuine, and not merely flattery, as might appear. Having an ear for rhythm, I noticed early in my attendance of mosque and *dhikr* gatherings that ametric pieces were performed. I wondered at how a group could chant together irregularly-timed phrases with such exaggerated vocal accenting of given syllables, and all the while remain more or less “on time.” Ametric accenting was a relatively foreign phenomenon to my ear at that time, with the exception perhaps of solo chanting I had heard from priests in Russian Orthodox churches, with much more subdued accenting. In the West generally speaking, most all sung melodies are metric.

exclaimed, with exasperation: “It’s all rhythmic! Who’s the one who composed this melody, which drives you crazy? [*kullu mawzūn yā rajul! min elli laḥḥan hal laḥn elli bjannin?*].” He clapped his hands loudly: “I left your dad’s place that night, *yā laṭīf* [O Gentle One]! The second day, the third day, I didn’t see the condition at all anymore. Epilepsy! Epilepsy!”⁵³

Healing memory analysis

Mnini’s condition returned, and lasted until he sought treatment from an Italian neurosurgeon in Lebanon years later, but it is the memory of this healing episode that remains salient for him. In his telling, Mnini fathoms, from within a state of profound disorientation, one of the technical characteristics of the phrase being used to heal him. His response to the chaos of epileptic attack, in which Mnini is taken out of all relation to time, is a return to the possibility of engagement with form via an inquiry into the very aspect of musical structure that contains, constructs, and modulates the experience of time.⁵⁴

Mnini’s dizzied attention to the meter of the phrase is not a random grasping towards any element of structure. Rather, his interest is piqued precisely by its most subtle musical-structural feature, whose slightly lilting character almost completely submerges all traces of its rhythmic regularity. To Mnini, with his talent and multiple trainings, these metrical traces formed an object of expert interest and fascination, while to Sheikh Sadiq they were, at first glance, unapparent, despite being manifest in his own vocal performances of the piece in *dhikr* ceremonies over the years.

Space for understanding the brief exchange between the two men is partially cleared by noting a general functional aspect of the phrase interjected by Sheikh Sadiq. In diverse Muslim speech conventions, utterances of the declaration of Islamic faith, the *shahādah*, often can serve to regulate, mark, or contest the trajectory of discourse’s flow. So common in much Arab speech, phrases such as the *shahādah* are exceedingly difficult to translate due to their often subtle, context-dependent function. Their distribution in Muslim speech naturally plays out in different ways, but among the pious deployment of the *shahādah* and other phrases can serve as enactment of the Islamic principle of “enjoining the good and forbidding the evil [*al-’amr bil-ma’rūf wa al-nahī ‘an al-munkar*],” a social-discursive duty of each believer.

Sheikh Sadiq’s declaration of the *shahādah* comes at the juncture when Mnini highlights how, from within his disorientation, and at the hearing of a phrase meant to heal through directing attention and affection towards the Prophet, he became singularly focused on a technical problem of musical structure. His stated focus isolates the phrase’s materiality, its meter, from its meaning and use. His repeated mention of dizziness amplifies the sense of urgency attached to the question of meter that emerges. It also partially echoes an Islamic trope wherein piety, in the form of a heedful relation to God, is seen as best tested and most efficaciously cultivated during moments of acute

53 The expression *ya laṭīf* fairly often conveys the sense of being overwhelmed, frightened, or shocked.

54 I thank Benjamin Brinner for suggesting that a relation between musical form and the chaos of Mnini’s attacks might prove a fruitful approach to certain aspects of this memory. This was an important narrative for Mnini, and Brinner’s suggestion furthered my understanding of it.

subjective destabilization, including states of illness, poverty, and abandonment.⁵⁵ While Mnini lays the discursive foundation of this trope, recalling just such a state, the object of attention that emerges in his telling redirects the trope and leaves it unfulfilled.

Mnini's memory illustrates a particular investment in musical structure, one in which the sufferings of epilepsy are transcended, and also effects a claim upon the musical objects and relations the manipulation of which constitutes his work as a composer. His rhetorical question, "Who's the one who composes a melody like this, that blows the mind?" is a reference to Sheikh Sadiq's grandfather, Sheikh Umar al-Aita, who indeed was the composer. It also points to the question of his own status, since he himself is known as one of the very few composers of religious *muwashshahāt* in Syria. However, unlike Sheikh Umar, for whom composition was an activity subsumed within his role as Sufi sheikh, Mnini's musical work constitutes his self-definition as composer and artist. According to Mnini, Sheikh Umar did not consider himself a composer, nor was the language of music theory part of his discursive world. As mentioned, musical modes and rhythmic patterns had been named and described by Arabs since at least the tenth century, and *dhikr* music was a tradition of change before the introduction of European musical approaches, but Sufi sheikhs who composed pieces for *dhikr* did not identify as musical experts apart from their religious role.⁵⁶

Of all the *dhikr* groups in Damascus with whom I worked—about six in total, ranging in economic background and regional-cultural makeup—only a subset of one group, consisting of Mnini, two or three experienced *inshād* singers, and two members of the extended al-Aita family, discussed *dhikr* music in something like music-theory terms, despite all groups employing various melodic modes and rhythmic meters in their ceremonies. These groups' differing approaches to the possibility of a meta-discourse on music, like the difference between Mnini and Sheikh Sadiq, are reflections of different inclinations, opinions, and modes of training, but also reflect different responses, within a community that strongly cultivates an Islamic ethics, to the types of changes that the 1932 Congress of Arab Music instituted and propagated throughout Arab musical culture.

In what follows, I turn to Mnini's compositional process, first focusing on tools and techniques, and then on representations of subjective states associated with the process. With the heterogeneity of the apparatus concept as a guide, I abstract some of

55 See, for example, al-Ghazali's *Kitāb dhikr al-mawt wa-mā ba'dahu*, volume 40 of the *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn (Revival of the Religious Sciences)*, translated as "The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife," in which al-Ghazali suggests his readers meditate on topics such as death, bodily decomposition, and potentially terrifying eschatological encounters in order to strengthen their faith through the deliberate cultivation of such states. Al-Ghazali's work echoes themes from many Quranic verses describing the Day of Resurrection (*yawm al-qiyāma*) as an event where human beings will likewise require a solitary piety and heedfulness. The above-mentioned text of al-Ghazali is explored by Stefania Pandolfo (Pandolfo 2007, p. 353) as an important background to the discourses of Moroccan youth weighing the perilous journey of illegal migration to Europe, and her illustration of the role and resonances of these notions, a mode of analysis she has elsewhere applied to the notion of *al-amr bil-ma'rūf wa al-nahī 'an al-munkar* ("enjoining the good and forbidding the evil"), has served as a model for my own examination of roles Islamic theological concepts sometimes play in Muslim discourse.

56 See Feldman 2001 for examples of the musical changes in Mevlevi *dhikr* during the Ottoman rule. Clearly, such changes have always been part of the traditions of *dhikr*, although their historical documentation is sparse.

the elements which inform the social predicament, the predicament of status, that Mnini sees himself to inhabit. An observation on the apparatus by Agamben reminds us of the dynamic nature of the subject's negotiation of that heterogeneity, and evokes a similar non-nostalgic relation to historical change as that evinced, as we will see, by Mnini:

The boundless growth of apparatuses in our time corresponds to the equally extreme proliferation in processes of subjectification. This may produce the impression that in our time, the category of subjectivity is wavering and losing its consistency; but what is at stake, to be precise, is not an erasure or an overcoming, but rather a dissemination that pushes to the extreme the masquerade that has always accompanied every personal identity.⁵⁷

COMPOSITION

Process: Tools

The shifting relations between the constitutive elements of an apparatus, their capacity for recombination and functional mutation, suggest a certain slippage between ways of doing and ways of thinking. Techniques and tools may bear ideological seeds, and a novel concept may imbue a pre-existing technology with a new moral trajectory. Michel Foucault may have pointed to this slippage in asserting that within the apparatus “identifying what is discursive, and what isn't, isn't central to the issue.”⁵⁸ In the following section, I draw out some of the parallels between this aspect of the apparatus concept and Martin Heidegger's influential discussion of equipment to examine Mnini's use of compositional tools in writing religious *muwashshahāt*. The section on tools is followed and contextualized by another section on subjective states as they relate to the composition process.

Mnini's preferred instrument for working out his compositions was not the *'ūd*, as one might expect of a self-described defender of the tradition of *muwashshahāt*, but the VL-1, a small “calculator-synthesizer” released by Casio in 1980. Though Mnini has been composing pieces since the 1950s, the VL-1 became an important tool for him in the second half of his career. A passage in a U.S. magazine advertisement from the time of its release calls the VL-1 “an amazing new instrument that's so advanced, even a person who's never tried playing Chopsticks can compose a recognizable song, the first time out.”⁵⁹ In the U.S. and Europe the device has a kitschy status among synthesizer aficionados for its famously unrealistic tones—piano, violin, guitar, and flute—and its tinny rhythm tracks. The battery-powered device, about twelve inches wide, also features a sequencer, which enables it to record notes as they are played. As I detail below, all these features were important to Mnini, and he liked *al-kāsio* so much when he first got it that he acquired another, at considerable cost and trouble, in case the first failed.⁶⁰

57 Agamben 2009, p. 15.

58 Foucault 1980, p. 198.

59 See Figure 9, a magazine advertisement for the VL-1.

60 Until Bashar al-Asad came to power in 2000, foreign electronics were difficult to procure in Syria, and were available to most people only on the black market at exorbitant prices. Only the Syrian brand of TV's, for instance, was permitted to be sold, as trade in imported TV's was said to serve foreign

Mnini kept *al-kāsio* in his calligraphy desk drawer. I was already vaguely acquainted with the VL-1, and when he first produced it I was somewhat puzzled. Its toy-like sounds were absurdly incompatible with the *muwashshahāt* of the *dhikr* events, and with the elevated spiritual and moral sentiments of their texts. Further, like a piano the VL-1 is only capable of producing twelve tones per octave, while Arab music, as mentioned, makes ample use of notes that fall between the adjacent keys of a piano. Mnini said this did not present a problem because he could hear what he intended, and could make an on-the-fly substitution of notes in his head. To demonstrate, he played part of a piece in *maqām ‘ajam*, an Arab mode which maps closely onto the Western major scale. He followed that with a piece the VL-1 could not come close to reproducing, *al-ṣalātu ‘alā al-muḏallā* (“Blessings be on The Shaded One”), in *maqām sīkāh*. “This mode has three notes you don’t find on the piano, but I know where they are.” He sung a line from still another piece, *rafa‘tu yadī* (“I Raised My Hand”), slowing down as he approached a quarter-tone in the *maqām rāst māhūr*. He repeated the phrase, again stopping on that note. “We studied it with our voices, so it makes no difference. It would be hard for you. It would be a small miracle if you could learn to sing these *maqāmāt*.”

Mnini continued, “When we were young, we learned instruments in the music institute, and how to read music. But here [in the calligraphy workshop], I use *al-kāsio*. If I’m working on calligraphy, and a musical phrase comes to mind, I get it out and set it on top of the paper.” He turned the device back on, and with a slightly shaking hand pressed a button. A disco beat sputtered out of the tiny speaker. “See? There’s a big difference, but I do old things with a new method. I notate [the phrase], but if I can’t just write it, because I need to work on it more, I use *al-kāsio*.” He flipped another switch, and played a few slow phrases from a more recent piece, *aḥsin bi bāri’ika al-zunūn* (“Cultivate Good Thoughts about your Absolver”), which I had heard at the al-Aita *dhikr* gatherings, and at a gathering of *inshād* singing in the Ummayyad Mosque. He pressed another button. “See? The music is played back, and I don’t forget anything.”

Mnini described his childhood learning in *dhikr*, “The *maqāmāt* became anchored in our throats [*ṣārat al-maqāmāt rāskha bi ḥunjuratnā*].” This bodily anchoring enabled him to auto-suggest at given junctures the perception of Eastern tones over and against the Western ones produced by the VL-1. The VL-1’s functional capacity is in a sense expanded by the combination of Mnini’s childhood *dhikr* training and his later musical-institute education. His bending of technology, achieved through the combination of the organs of the ear and throat and the cognitive network of enculturated and trained patterns of musical perception, is what allows the device to serve him as a sketchpad for traditionally-styled *muwashshahāt*.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger discusses the use of the hammer with a view towards a critique of the Western philosophical heritage of the notions of subject and object. As Heidegger says, “[W]hen we deal with [things] by using them and manipulating them, this activity is not a blind one; it has its own kind of sight, by which our manipulation is guided and from which it acquires its specific Thingly character. Dealings with equipment subordinate themselves to the manifold assignments of the ‘in-

economies.

order-to’.⁶¹ Heidegger’s action-centric understanding of equipment, with its de-emphasis of the isolated components of actor and instrument, forces us to think of the synthesizer in Mnini’s workshop as a conglomeration, a *bricolage* of various technologies and trainings of different origin, put to work in the service of his compositions.

We might think of this work as entailing transformation of the VL-1 into *al-kāsio*, but though impressive the process does not contain many clues as to why he would settle on such a roundabout method of composition. Heidegger’s thought again proves helpful in this regard, because of his insistence that understanding the actor-instrument configuration necessitates consideration of inter-equipment relationality, the relation of objects, in his rearticulated sense of them, between themselves.⁶² Heidegger writes: “Equipment—in accordance with its equipmentality—always is *in terms of* its belonging to other equipment: ink-stand, pen, ink, paper, blotting pad, table, lamp, furniture, windows, doors, room.”⁶³ Indeed it is insufficient to approach *al-kāsio* as a free-standing piece of technology, even taking into account Mnini’s modulation of it. From his writing desk, the set of inter-object relations implicated might appear to involve precisely those tools Heidegger mentions in the last passage, with the important additions of the framed works of Quranic calligraphy lining the walls, and perhaps the signatory stamp molds displayed in the window. However, the most significant relation for filling out our understanding of *al-kāsio* draws us towards an absent tool—the *ūd* Mnini kept at home.

Once while I walked with him through the Old City’s alleys, Mnini jokingly chastised a man playing an *ūd* in front of his small grocery kiosk. The man was an old acquaintance of his, and took the admonition in good humor. As we walked on and talked, I tried to gauge how serious Mnini had been, and he expressed disapproval for the man’s choice to play “in front of people [*adām an-nās*],” or out in the general public.⁶⁴ Mnini played the *ūd* only at home, and from time to time in small private performances for enthusiasts of religious *muwashshahāt*. He had no objections to *ūd* performances in restaurants, concert halls, or wherever conventional performance spaces might be delimited.⁶⁵ He used his *ūd* to flesh out phrases *al-kāsio* could not articulate, and to hear melodies composed on *al-kāsio* or in notation in their full “Eastern” form, on the

61 Heidegger 1962, p. 98.

62 Heidegger’s text constrains us to understand the whole of the hammer-carpenter configuration before we can approach what were, prior to his critique, subject and object. The sheer technical difficulty of his treatments of the latter elements on their own terms, as compared to the clarity of his more summary assertions of configuration, mirrors the primacy of the configuration as we absorb it in his texts. See also his related discussion of the “thingness” of the jug in the essay “The Thing” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*.

63 Heidegger 1962, p. 97.

64 George Sawa, in an article on the status of musicians in the tenth-century, cites a passage from the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* (Book of Songs) of al-Isbahani: “When he came to the majlis of the Caliph al-Wāthiq, Ishāq did not carry his *ūd* in the street. When Ishāq sang, an *ūd* was brought to him and was taken away as soon as he finished.” Sawa 1985, p. 74. Sawa notes that even in the context of the Caliphal court, “a performer could not completely escape the stigma attached to his musical activities.” pp. 74-75.

65 For more a comprehensive treatment of the complicated status of musical practices and practitioners in the Arab world, and of the complicated analytical purchase of the English and Arabic categories “music” and *mūsīqā*, see al-Faruqi 1985. In her article, al-Faruqi prefers the term “vocal art,” or *sawti art*, to encompass the wide range of forms that from a Western perspective might be termed “musical.”

instrument said to be more generative of *ṭarab* (“musical ecstasy”) than any other apart from the human voice.⁶⁶ It would be inappropriate, he said on another occasion, to keep an *‘ūd* in his shop, in front of “everyone coming and going [*adām kul jāyeh wa rāyeh*].”

The above considerations fill out *al-kāsio*’s purpose. The VL-1’s unconvincing beeps, its inability to produce any of the nuances of tone Arab musicians consider the heart of their music’s expressive capacity, combine to make *al-kāsio* a maximally disenchanting instrument. A sort of anti-*‘ūd*, Mnini’s *kāsio* shares in few of the meanings associated with the VL-1 among Western musicians and synthesizer collectors. The ironic, kitsch-laden deployment of the instrument by the latter may act as a symbolic containment of consumer technology’s domination, since the VL-1 facilitates momentary amusement at technology’s failure to affect and impress. Mnini employs this failure as well, but his reasons have less to do with the question of technology’s seductive powers than with the conventionally high enchantment capacity of the *‘ūd*, the disruptive potential of which dictates that it cannot be kept in his shop.

The complex, ambivalent status of music in Arab and Islamic tradition is clearly a determining factor in Mnini’s and others’ sense of the impropriety of musical instruments being handled in social spaces not conventionally arranged for it, and is therefore also the primary social condition informing Mnini’s use of *al-kāsio*, just as his multiple trainings do at the level of the device’s narrower functional capacity.⁶⁷ Music’s complex status also helps imbue with ethical stakes the question, more pressing since the advent of reform campaigns like the 1932 Congress, of how extensively and how explicitly might be developed a discursive treatment of the musical structures of *dhikr*.

Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus, in a commentary on Heidegger, articulate tool use’s comprehensive integration of objects, actions, meanings, and conventions, writing that in using equipment, “we actualize a skill (which need not be represented in the mind) in the context of a socially organized nexus of equipment, purposes, and human roles (which need not be represented as a set of facts).”⁶⁸ The disarticulation, over the last hundred years and more, of the multifaceted social role of the Sufi sheikh into separate domains of expertise, has on the one hand made possible the emergence of the social identity Mnini embraces, that of composer-artist specializing in religious *muwashshaḥāt*. But this disarticulation, which is perhaps the broadest context of Mnini’s use of *al-kāsio*, has also made ascendant the explicit musicality of the composer over the subsumed musicality of *dhikr*. This partial opposition between approaches is evident in the frequent wariness of musically astute *dhikr* practitioners of adopting musical-theoretical language to discuss

66 Neubauer, a scholar of Arab writings on music, discusses the *‘ūd*’s status as the quintessential musical instrument, not only in terms of its *ṭarab*-potential, but in terms of pre-modern theorizations of music as well: “Arabic music theory proper is connected with the short-necked lute (*‘ūd*) as a means of experimentation and inspiration in acoustics, in the depiction of the tonal and metrical systems, and in the approach to musical notation.” Neubauer 2001, p. 364.

67 During my field work in 2007 and 2008 I noticed a good number of young men carrying guitar cases in public, something I had not seen in my first stay from 2000 to 2002. In the interval of these and other shorter visits, guitar lessons had become a popular pursuit for high-school and university-aged young men. A portion of the comments I heard framed this trend—not of the lessons, perhaps, but of the guitar cases being carried in public—as a sign of carelessness among the youth.

68 Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1988, pp. 28-29.

what they do, a trend to which Mnini, and to a much lesser degree Sheikh Sadiq, are exceptions.

Process: Sleep, being gripped, *al-wahī*

Mnini's descriptions of composing tended to cast it as hard work interspersed with moments in which he felt like a passive agent to a process outside his control. On his general engagement with music he often noted, "Music's got me gripped, by God [*qābidnī al-mūsīqā wallāh*]" More specifically, he cited interruption of sleep as the site where solutions to pressing musical problems tended to emerge, events of abandonment facilitated by his training, experience, and extended periods of frustrated labor. Most of the time, these instances occurred only after a period of growing worry over the possibility of a piece's completion. He relates:

What happens is that I get extraordinarily concerned about religious *inshād* [*aghār 'alā al-inshād al-dīnī ghīrah gharība ktīr gharība*]. It takes a lot of work and time, and I don't get the *muwashshah* out until I get it completely right, and there aren't even the smallest flaws in it. I'll be asleep at night, a verse of poetry will come into my head from the day, one I was trying, trying, trying to put to melody, but which wouldn't work out. It's pounding in my head [*'am yaḍrub bi-rāsī*] and I get up, turn on the light, get a piece of paper, and *da-da-da-da-da*—I've written it. I'll be asleep, and a musical phrase will come to me, the whole phrase at once. It'll take me two or three hours before I can sleep again. When I get up, it's sudden. I'm completely awake, and I write it down. *Wallāhi* [by God], in my body I feel joy in these instances.

Mnini told another story of a particularly troublesome religious *muwashshah*, and like the above description of being woken from sleep it shows his use of notation to overcome the potential shortcomings of memory: "I'd spent two or three whole days working on the phrase, and I couldn't do it." He played the piece on *al-kāsio*, singing while he tapped the rhythm on his desk with his free hand. "At night, I got up, wrote it, played it on the *ūd*, and it was fantastic [*kān raw'a*]. I gave the piece to a group of singers, Salim al-Aqqad's group [one of Syria's elite religious singers], and they recorded it at the *idhā'a* [the Syrian broadcasting and media center]. He telephoned me from there, and said, 'Where did you get this piece of music?' I told him I had been asleep, with this verse of poetry that was turning in my head [*kān yftil bi-rāsī*], and it wouldn't be melodized in the day. At night the inspiration [*al-wahī*] came to me in the composition, the phrase came at night."

Anthropologist Amira Mittermaier has described *al-wahī* as "a dense signifier and a highly charged term, [which] raises the author's authority to a level that comes dangerously close to that of the Prophet himself, for whom the term is generally reserved."⁶⁹ As "an exceptional modality of God's speaking to His creatures," *al-wahī*

69 Mittermaier 2007, p. 245. Mittermaier further explicates the term *al-wahī* in a way that, aside from extraneous allusions to "danger" and "offense," is germane to Mnini's understanding of the interruptions of his sleep: "As has been argued in studies of other forms of 'extra-Qur'anic' or 'extrascriptural' revelation, the question of how to define the boundaries around revelation has troubled Muslim scholars for a long time. Different schools disagree on whether the Sunna is itself a kind of revelation. Other troubling genres are the *shatahat*, ecstatic expressions of Sufis, and the *hadīth qudsi*, hadīths in which God speaks in the first person but which are not included in the Qur'an. The blurrier

does not often apply to Muslims' experience, except in marking its boundary.⁷⁰ In Arabic art discourses, the term more often used is *al-ilhām*, which though still sometimes associated with divine agency, is less exclusive than *al-wahī*, and comes closer in use to the English *inspiration*. Distinctions between the two terms underscore the specificities of both the concept of prophethood [*al-nubuwwa*], and of inspirational content which, in a common doctrinal understanding of *al-wahī*, is intended for delivery to the broadest possible audience.⁷¹

Musical phrases as such do not conventionally form part of *al-wahī*'s content, and yet Mnini's use of the term does not seem intended as a claim to an exceptional relationship with God. Nor did he employ the concept of *al-wahī* metaphorically, or as an expansion of the term's scope, as an artist might when using religious concepts in describing their process. Rather, it was for him simply the most accurate characterization of the way musical phrases for religious *muwashshahāt* emerged for him. After all, in well-known narratives of the Prophet's reception of Quranic verses, the concept of *al-wahī* often accompanies a foregrounding of the auditory sense, and of states of disorientation, fear, and trance. "It's precisely *al-wahī*," he said, when I asked about the term. "If you're sleeping and there was something that was proving very difficult for you in the day, and it works out at night, this is from God *subhānahu wa ta'ālā*. One has to believe in God. The next day, I came to the shop and played the phrase on *al-kāsio*." He played it again and sang. "A really beautiful phrase. The group did it with four frame drums, two *nāys* [bamboo flutes], an *'ūd*, and a violin."

Process: a temporary conclusion

Levi-Strauss, writing about the facilitation of difficult childbirth in "The Effectiveness of Symbols," notes the necessary condition, common to both a shaman's cure and to psychoanalysis, that the healer become a protagonist in the patient's narrative. He cites Freudian transference, whereby the healer becomes imbued with psychic significance for the patient, as a cause of the "reorganization, in a favorable direction" of the patient's previously unintelligible, painful experience.⁷² Transference, along with several other of the processes conceived by Freud, including abreaction, displacement, and cathexis more generally, articulate the subjective capacity, even necessity, of

the lines between revelation (*wahī*), divine inspiration (*ilhām*), and prophecy (*nubuwwa*), the more dangerous and offensive it becomes to cross them. Dream visions in particular are prone to complicating the boundaries around prophecy and revelation, because dream visions constituted part of the revelation, and according to a hadīth, 'the dreams of the prophets *were* revelation.'" Mittermaier 2007, p. 245.

70 See *The Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition* (Brill) for a description of Qur'anic instances of *al-wahī* as revealed to Prophets, and also to nonhuman agents of God's will, including heaven, the earth, and bees.

71 Seferta 1985, p. 163 (and notes) provides a brief treatment of the notions of *al-wahī* and *al-ilhām*, including slippages between "inspiration" and "revelation" in English translations of the Qur'an. Also, Michot 2008 describes Islamic theological categorization of different modalities of divine speech, including by Ibn Taymiyya, who calls inspiration "in the awakened state or during sleep" *al-ilhām*. Michot 2008, p. 182.

72 Levi-Strauss 1963, p. 198.

charging objects, people, and relations with affective and libidinal energies. Stefania Pandolfo, in describing the notion, highlights its dynamism in a manner that recalls metaphor itself, and gestures to a breadth of scope neglected in narrower understandings of Freud: “Transfers then: as one can speak of a transfer of funds from one account to another, of a transfer of property from one person to another, of a transfer of water from one irrigation canal to another; of a transfer of sense from a word, or a language, to another; of a transfer of the impossible into the possible, and of the invisible into a concrete form.”⁷³

The narrative of Mnini’s healing memory, it will be remembered, indexes a particular sort of investment in musical structure, one forged in historically specific ways in the face of the grave threats posed by epileptic attack. His compositional process emerges within a set of secondary zones of disruption that iterate or mirror an initial, much more sinister series. A collection of sites, including sleep, being “gripped” by music, the moments of *al-wahī*, and even of jotting things down for later, are linked as instances of interruption where musical structures, by virtue of their manipulability, become means for the establishment of an economy of order, shared pleasure, and the sheer possibility of embodied subjectivity. As Mnini told me, “I’ve got diabetes, but I don’t pay any attention to the word ‘diabetes,’ or even know I have it. These things [music, composition] always occupy me—in sleep, in wakefulness, in bed. Things come to me. I’ll be asleep and get up. I write it down.” Transformations made possible by transfers, and transfers that have been negotiated from the conditions of historical transformations.

Jacques Lacan, in his seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, suggests that “we should perhaps conceive of pain as a field which, in the realm of existence, opens precisely onto that limit where a living being has no possibility of escape.”⁷⁴ That limit has its figure for Lacan in the Thing, or *das Ding*, “the prehistoric Other that it is impossible to forget,” a thing “strange to me, although it is at the heart of me.”⁷⁵ When Mnini awakens at night to capture the form of a phrase, and when he departs from the mundanity of stamp-mold penning to carve out, with the disenchanting *kāsio*, the potential of a musical and poetic phrase to enrapture, he approaches the border of an unassimilable experience, recalling another of Lacan’s articulations of *das Ding* as that which “seeks whatever is repeated, whatever returns, and guarantees that it will always return, to the same place.”⁷⁶ But just as Mnini’s musicality and compositional methods are products of historical change, specifically colonial interventions in musical practice and institutions, so have the social possibilities of the reception of religious *muwashshahāt*, and the agents of their creation, been restructured, and it is to this question the next chapter turns.

73 Pandolfo 1997, p. 174.

74 Lacan 1986, p. 60.

75 Lacan 1986, p. 71.

76 Lacan 1986, p. 75.

Taṭrīb is a term that has the literal meaning of “the act of delighting or enrapturing through sound.” This expression denoting both recited poetic and performed musical expression has sometimes been used as a loose equivalent for music...¹

Lois Ibsen al-Faruqi

INTRODUCTION

This chapter continues the examination of Mnini’s career of *dhikr* composition, with a focus on its social dimensions, how his compositional methods and musical investments intersect with the possibilities and terms of his social recognition. First, I trace develop these issues through a detailed exploration of the concept of *ṭarab*, glossed in the last chapter as both “musical ecstasy” and the art-music genre that cultivates it. Then I address how Mnini’s individual compositional approach plays out in the social milieu of which he is part, based on the notion of performativity as developed in commentaries on the work of J. L. Austin. The latter provides a strong model for examining social action as a process dependent not merely upon intention and unproblematic communicative conventions, but also upon a dynamic social context in which conventions can be contested, misapplied, and, most importantly, can act to change the social context itself. In highlighting the range of potential pitfalls in the space between an action and its socially recognized meaning and effect, developments of Austin’s work have shown that conventions always implicate in various ways the networks of power and authority in which they are deployed.²

It is with a view towards the problem of Mnini’s recognition as an artist, a problem with which he himself is concerned and troubled, that I describe and ethnographically contextualize the various notions of art and creative authorship that play into it. My examination of these notions and others situates them in terms of their effects or their manners of action within the social milieu of *dhikr*, the primary context of Mnini’s compositional work. As anthropologist Webb Keane writes, “Understood as ‘practices,’ representations do not exist only in the abstract—as, for example, some disembodied ‘discourse.’ Rather, that they take concrete forms, situated in activities, is

1 al-Faruqi 1985, p. 6, on the verbal form of the word *ṭarab*.

2 I cite Austin’s work as a reference, but also works by Charles Hirschkind, Saba Mahmood, Alexei Yurchak, and Judith Butler, whose treatments of Austin and those who have responded to him have done much for my understanding of various readings of the performative. Different graduate seminars led by Hirschkind and Yurchak helped develop my understanding of the notion performativity and its applications, as did my work as a teaching assistant for Charles Briggs, in an introductory Folklore class. The general concept of the performative, I hope, is well enough established that the reader can follow my basic application as it develops.

critical to their signifying, performative, and even causal capacities.”³ This chapter likewise contains some speculative suggestions, based on this ethnographic case, on the way the modern category of art may contribute to the “practice” by which different traditional modes of creative production, or different social configurations in which creative work occurs, are transformed and too often made obsolete.

TARAB

Introduction: Nuriyya Sheikh’s admonishment and Mnini’s response

Following a large afternoon *dhikr* session in the Nur al-Din Zengi mosque in the Old City, I was introduced by a man who had helped me find the event to one of the sheikhs who had directed it.⁴ Unlike many smaller *dhikr* meetings, the one in the Nuriyya Mosque was managed by a sizable group of sheikhs and other men, each taking turns without any standing out as particularly more authoritative than another. The sheikh, a large man in his forties, turned his attention to me after bidding farewell to some Pakistani men who had attended. He asked about my research, and after describing my interest in *dhikr* and *inshād*, I said, “I’m interested in religious *ṭarab*,” offering a phrase I had heard from Mnini. The sheikh thought seriously and said, “But this is not *ṭarab*. You can’t say ‘*ṭarab*’ for *dhikr* and religious *inshād*. It is worship [*ta‘abbud*].” We continued to talk for a moment, and the sheikh excused himself, perhaps unimpressed by my conflation of terms.

A few days later, I mentioned this exchange to Mnini, eager to get his sense of it. He asked several times about what was said before offering his understanding of the sheikh’s intent: “He meant [to object to] *al-hiyām* [‘passion’, i.e. the sheikh mistakenly understood *ṭarab* as romantic love and passion]. Hot air, hot air, hot air [‘*allāk*, ‘*allāk*, ‘*allāk*].⁵ Haven’t you seen that same sheikh, holding onto my hand from here?” He held up one hand tightly in the other as his voice trailed off in laughter. I felt Mnini was brushing off an important issue in so readily pointing up the sheikh’s responses. “No, I think the sheikh meant that *ṭarab* applies to Um Kulthum,” I began. “To common singing [*al-ghinā*],” Mnini interjected. “Yes, to common singing, and that it doesn’t apply to *inshād* [here, specifically religious praise-singing].” He nodded, “In *inshād* there is *ṭarab*. Sadiq al-Aita has said so. *Ṭarab* applies to all things. At the *dhikr* you heard the praise-singers, and the *ṭarab* took you and made you incline with them yourself [*al-ṭarab akhadhak innak tmīl ma‘hun anta*]. This is *ṭarab*, everything that delights the heart [*yusirr al-khāṭir fil-ghinā*] in singing.”⁶

3 Keane 1997, p. xiv.

4 The mosque is part of a historic complex in the Old City of Damascus, named after Nur al-Din Zengi, the Turkic Zengid ruler, and leader of resistance against the Second Crusade, who governed the Syrian province of the Seljuk Empire until his death in 1174. Lapidus 1988, p. 352.

5 ‘*Allāk*: a “chewer” or “chomper,” one who moves his mouth around noisily, but says nothing.

6 I have translated *al-khāṭir* as “heart,” but it can also mean “mind,” “desire,” and “notion.” On this difficult term, Lila Abu Lughod writes, “it seems to refer to the inner person,” but without the “metaphysical or religious connotations” of the English *soul*. Abu Lughod 1986, p. 182. Also note here Mnini’s double use of the term *ghinā*, “singing,” which he first uses in the widespread sense of a common or lower type of vocal art (the type to which the sheikh had purportedly meant to object), and

It did not take me long, in ensuing discussions with other *dhikr* participants, sheikhs, and with Syrians having nothing to do with *dhikr*, to see that my comment to the Nuriyya sheikh, and more importantly Mnini's statements on the subject, indeed represented an exceptional deployment of the concept of *tarab*, which I will reference below.

Definitions of *tarab* and relation to other concepts

The most widely recognized work on *tarab* is that of ethnomusicologist Ali Jihad Racy, which has expanded the notion beyond a reference to musical emotion and the interactive dynamism of performance. While glossing *tarab* as “musical ecstasy,” and “the extraordinary emotional state evoked by the music,” Racy shows the concept to encompass the set of encultured, embodied responses that make those emotions socially readable, and to hold important associations with elite social classes, literacy, and urban life.⁷ All these aspects, he notes, have been remarked upon in Arab writings on music from the medieval era to the present, but Racy culls his findings into a definition which directly recalls the type of configurational approach we have been taking to Mnini's work: “Tarab can be viewed as a specialized cultural domain [encompassing] artists, repertoires, and music related ideologies, attitudes, and behaviors, including ways of listening and reacting to music.”⁸

The conventions of *tarab* become imbued with a sort of normative weight when the category is used to define moral and aesthetic boundaries, for example when *tarab* is opposed to *dhikr* by the Nuriyya sheikh, and when *dhikr* is valued as *tarab* by Mnini. In commonly circulating distinctions, *ghinā'* [singing] is taken as a less artful, more vulgar form of vocal art, despite *tarab*'s strong association with vocal rather than purely instrumental performance. A singer is called a *muṭrib*, active participle of *taṭrib*, the verb referenced in the epigraph of this chapter, if he or she elicits *tarab* in others, and a *muṭrib*'s status is of a very different order than that of a *mughannī*, a singer whose craft is *ghinā'*. The associations of the *muṭrib* and the *mughannī* are sufficiently different to make it difficult to transpose between either of these terms and the more comprehensive category implied by the English word *singer*, which carries little moral distinction.

Within Islamic theological debates on music, *tarab* has been cast as morally suspect, as the Nuriyya sheikh seems to imply, though within classical texts different categories have been deployed to refer to the music generative of such responses. As ethnomusicologist Amnon Shiloah explains, one distinction has been the line drawn between the category of *samā'*, which often referred to *dhikr* ceremonies of the Sufi orders, and that of *ghinā'*. As Shiloah notes, delineations of these categories have at times been quite acrobatic, but still attest to the moral concern of the regulation of music's power:

which he then uses to refer to vocal art in general, including *inshād* and *tarab*, often conceived as distinct, more elevated categories.

7 In the next chapter, I briefly treat evidence for the ways the concept of *tarab* can act as a concatenation of models of urban sophistication in the realm of *dhikr* sonic forms, vocalization styles, and modes of affective display, especially over and against those of the villages and countryside.

8 Racy 2003, pp. 6, 15.

The concept of *samāʿ* is contrasted with *ghināʿ* (cantus) which by extension designates music, music making and performance, associated mainly with secular art music; this is normally banished by most of the authors who deal with the *samāʿ*. It is interesting to note in this respect that the exclusive assimilation of the concept *ghināʿ* with a kind of urbanized art music and music making has occasionally led religious authorities to combine Koran cantillation, the singing of unaccompanied hymns, old bedouin songs and the simple functional folk tunes marking events in the life of individual and community in the category of permissible forms of *samāʿ*. In other words, they consider all these forms as ‘non-music,’ contrasting with *ghināʿ*—the sole genre to which the appellation music is applied.⁹

Tarab, as Racy notes, is “[c]losely linked to mysticism and centuries-old courtly traditions,” and shares a formative relation to Qurʿan cantillation and the recitational practices of Arab poetic forms, yet such deep historical connections, which include the music of *dhikr*, often take the form of patterns of distinction and separation.¹⁰ As a description and model of affective experience and display in the context of music and poetic performance, *tarab*’s purview overlaps with that of the central Sufi notion of *dhawq*. *Dhawq*, or “tasting,” emphasizes affective states as an important adjunct to the performance of religious duties and the acquisition of religious knowledge through study. In the context of *dhikr* ceremonies, *dhawq* more narrowly refers to the experiential and affective states achieved in listening to and participating in religious chants and songs. Mention of *dhawq* in Sufi discourse is often made alongside, and as distinct from, reason and rational proof, which in the contemporary context might evoke apologetic associations of the Qurʿan’s consonance with modern science, and Sharia’s agreement with Western stress on the rational ordering of society. *Dhawq* and reason articulate a typology of sorts, describing two different but equally valid modes of religiosity and religious appeal. Sheikh Sadiq al-Aita often spoke of this typology when discussing *dhikr*, which he saw as the ideal means for people who tended towards affective criteria, rather than reasoned proof, as a basis for religious life. It was Sheikh Sadiq’s opinion which Mnini referenced when I questioned him on the phrase “religious *tarab*,” when he said, “In *inshād* there is *tarab*. Sadiq al-Aita has said so.”

An important point concerning these distinctions is that they are almost entirely based on social and moral criteria, which largely explains the curious inclusions of the categories noted by Shiloah. Objections to the overlap between *dhikr* and *tarab* have little to do with their respective musical forms, which are to a large degree shared. Both feature *muwashshahāt* or other poetic-musical forms, the vocal delivery of which is guided by conventions stressing improvised embellishment and repetition, and the

9 Shiloah 1997, pp. 143-144. Note that what Shiloah identifies as *ghināʿ* in these older texts would now most likely be called *tarab*. Other discussions of music’s status in Islam can be found in Racy 2003, Gribetz 1991, al-Faruqi 1985, Frishkopf 2001b, Mardsen 2007, Lewisohn 1997, Danielson 1997, and Shannon 2003, each of which illuminates some aspect of this issue, from the context of the earliest Islamic eras to the present-day. Arab sources on the subject include Fuʿad 1997, al-Ghazali’s classic discussion in al-Ghazali 1901/1902, and al-Maktabi 2000.

10 Racy 2003, p. 197.

cultivation of a sense of unrehearsed emotional intimacy.¹¹ Extra-musical exchanges between the singer and listeners are nearly identical as well, with the same shouts of appreciation heard from the listeners, and in cases of close physical proximity, the same touches and whispered communications traded between singer and listener during longer pauses. *Ṭarab* and *dhawq* both suggest the experience and display of a conditioned affective receptiveness to vocal performance, but in different performance contexts and with different ends.¹² Mnini's conflation of the two is consonant with his musical training in the Western-style conservatory, and with the assumptions of a music theory that relies upon a purported isolation of musical structural elements from their cultural (here, moral) connotations. As will be seen, Mnini's perspectives on composition are strongly informed by moral and social considerations, and yet his discursive departures from more commonly circulating notions reveal something of the idiosyncratic nature of his artistic identity.

A phenomenology of *ṭarab*

Before addressing Mnini's articulation of *ṭarab*, I want to remind of the embodied nature of the concept's stakes, and heed a suggestion Mnini made to me on numerous occasions: "When you came [to the *dhikr*], how did the spiritual feeling come to you? [*kaif iġat lak al-rūḥāniyya?*] You have to write about this." Mnini kept an eye on me during the *dhikr* gatherings we attended, and said after the first one, "I noticed that you were attuned with the atmosphere [*annak insajamt ma'a al-jaww*]. This is the most important thing for your study." I understood his mention of "spiritual feeling" and "attunement" as equivalent references to physical and emotional engagement, evident in my sitting and standing with the other men, holding hands and dancing with them, and evincing facial expressions (wincing, most likely) that showed I was moved. While the vast majority of people at *dhikr* meetings paid me no mind, I was approached a handful of times by men who expressed appreciation of my being affected by the *dhikr*, and was sometimes engaged by *dhikr* participants, Mnini included, to observe affective displays in others.

In what follows I describe my own responses, linking them to a selected technique in Arab singing, the repetition of a phrase, which I have portrayed based on observations of the *munshid* whose singing I found most moving.¹³ In doing so I hope to give a sense of the degree to which the body is implicated in the zones of experience to which the contested concepts I am discussing apply, even as debates concerning the ethics of singing, and the various categories of music, are conducted through those concepts' more

11 Virginia Danielson (Danielson 1987) discusses the perceived influence upon Umm Kulthum's singing of her early training in Quranic cantillation, the elements of which for many listeners marked her singing as especially virtuosic. Also, see Danielson 1991 for an exploration of the impact of both Quranic recitation and traditional poetry upon the construction of authenticity in twentieth-century *ṭarab* music.

12 See al-Faruqi 1985, pp. 18-19, for treatment of the key role played by social context in the ways Islamic theological opinions on music have traditionally been developed and articulated.

13 I only heard him sing a few times, and never learned his name, but he can be seen along with Mnini in the photos in Figure 10, taken at a *dhikr* ceremony held near Bab Msalla in Damascus.

abstract deployment. Regarding the question of categories, I adopt Mnini’s elision between *ṭarab* and *dhikr* to a large degree, simply for the ease of describing what for me are very similar experiences, but without intending necessarily to support his views. If anything, the manner of circulation of these terms work against the grain of his articulations of them.

When I became affected by *dhikr* singing my throat felt contracted, and I felt a tension in my chest. The constriction gave me the feeling that a wrongly-directed or too-deeply-taken breath would cause some painful fissure. The sensations would come and go, but perhaps once every other *dhikr* meeting I would become aware of my responses having become hitched to the emerging contours of the *munshid*’s voice, and therefore of my vulnerability to his ongoing vocal improvisations. This domination of the emotional and physical organism of the listener seems to be one of *ṭarab*’s defining features, beyond what is sometimes articulated as an exchange of appreciation, or a general affective sympathy, between performer and listener. The *munshid* or *mutrib* channels the emotions of a listener who is doubly-overcome: first in being subdued and made to respond emotionally, and second in being made to anticipate, not without trepidation, the vocalist’s effect in coming phrases. I think it likely that this effect, clearly dependent on listener and performer occupying the same space physically, is not fully possible in recorded performances of *ṭarab* music or *inshād*.

At the times I felt this way, “on the hook” as it were, I noticed how devastating the conventional repetition of a phrase can be. The technique, which generally lies at the *munshid*’s disposal, can be routine, but can also be executed with dramatic virtuosity and effect, typically at lyrical junctures articulating in a poignant manner a feeling of love, despair, or abandonment. As I found, these repetitions only ratchet the music’s hold, and tend to set up the delivery of a line of text that resolves the first both musically and semantically. The following couplet, from a composition Mnini based on a text by poet Abu al-Huda al-Sayadi (d. 1909), provides an example, though by necessity a hypothetical or reconstructed one.¹⁴ I have chosen part of the lyrical text of the same work cited in the previous chapter, called *rafa‘tu yadī* (“I raised my hand”), to describe how the repetitions might be executed. First, I provide the couplet in full, as it has been memorized by all the singers present: “My distress has weighed me down, and my open paths have narrowed / And indeed you, Lord, know my state.”¹⁵ The line might be repeated several times, in part and in whole, with significant pauses between vocalizations, and an initial repeated pattern might consist of the following: “My distress has weighed me down. [pause]. My distress. [pause]. My distress. [pause]. My distress has weighed me down. [pause]. My distress has weighed me down. [pause]. My distress, [pause]. My distress,

14 Unfortunately, the only recording I made of this particular *munshid* is nowhere near clear enough for me to transcribe the text. I have therefore chosen a work of Mnini’s, one I heard sung several times, and have applied to it the principles of lyrical delivery that I noted in the singing of this *munshid* and others. The result is a plausible representation of how these lines might be sung in a *dhikr* ceremony.

15 My translations here of the couplet and the one that follows are from the text as it appears in Mnini’s book of compositions, whose original Arabic is: “*wa athqalanī karbī wa ḍāqat manāhijī / wa innaka yā rabbāhu ta‘lamu ḥāliya / a‘ālima al-asrāri al-‘ibādi tawallanī / raḍaytuka yā rabbāhu mawlān wa hādiya.*” See Figures 11 and 12 for scans of this work, including the lyrical text and musical notation, in Mnini’s hand.

my distress, has weighed me down, weighed me down, my distress has weighed me down.” The pauses indicated can be as brief as a few seconds, or long enough for several exchanges of praise, jokes, or other comments between the *munshid* and those immediately around him, perhaps ten or more seconds.

When the technique is applied, improvised variations of melody form iterations which loop slowly forward through the text, breaking it down into semantic elements each representing a sort of single unit of signification and affective charge. In the above example, the notions of distress and being burdened are each isolated in this way and contemplated vocally before being reconnected. As will be noticed, the indicated pattern of repetition only works its way through the first quarter of the couplet, which might take several minutes. As the *munshid* continues, his voice gradually ascends, through increasingly dense ornamentation and increasing volume, to a peak marking several simultaneous shifts—in general melodic direction, in degree of textual integrity, and in theme. The *munshid*'s voice might then descend in a long-breathed, terraced cascade of phrases which reconstruct the text out of its previously broken-down elements, and lead from the phrase's full articulation into the next line. When the looping ascent gives way to a repetition of the verse in its entirety, it is usually much less ornamented, and despite being quite long-breathed, is delivered over a much shorter duration than the ascent, with its numerous repetitions and pauses.

Finally, once the *munshid* creates such effects, he sometimes takes to delivering subsequent couplets in a quick, fairly unornamented fashion that seems to generate a discursive rather than a musical intensity of affect. As always, he may return to the lines in an iterative fashion, but these junctures are effective in their own right. To end our example, the next couplet reads, “O, knower of the servants' secrets, take me in your charge / For I have accepted you, O Lord, as my Protector and my Guide.” Here, trust in God provides the semantic resolution to the despair previously articulated, and the *munshid*, by delivering the lines in a resolute and direct manner, in a low tonal register but with volume, folds the entire preceding affective experience into the discursive clarity of these punctuating sentiments. Even during these more “discursive” moments, I found myself bracing from the effect, what I think is not an uncommon response in *dhikr* ceremonies, despite the much rarer screams and shakes sometimes gaining more attention in literature on *dhikr*.¹⁶

Mnini on *ṭarab*

In discussing *ṭarab*, Mnini made surprisingly little mention of emotional types of responses, often the first thing arising in definitions of the concept. Arab talk on differences between “Eastern” and “Western” musics likewise often focuses on emotion, with the former represented as more emotional and the latter more detached and cerebral. The only such association Mnini mentioned regarding *ṭarab* was that it had the effect of making a person relax [*yṣtarkhī*], whether “in *inshād*, in Sufism, or in singing [*ghinā*’, non-religious singing, or perhaps non-*ṭarab* singing].” He situated the affect of *ṭarab*

16 See Racy 2003, p. 198-200 for his remarks on the exaggerated descriptions of *ṭarab* responses in much literature on the subject.

primarily on a quasi-cognitive register: “Now, you and me are talking, and I remember a melody of Sayyid Darwish, for example, *zūrūnī fī sannah marrah* [‘Visit me, once in the year’]. This is *ṭarab*, when a person is taken by a musical phrase. It’s basically when a major-scale melody has control in you [*huwa kināya ‘an ‘indmā yusaītir ma‘ak naghm al-mājūr*]; it has control here [points to his ear], and when you leave the instrument, the *ṭarab* remains. It isn’t seen, but it’s felt.”¹⁷ Mnini’s elucidation of being “taken,” agrees with other assertions of his casting *ṭarab* as a perceptual effect of music’s sonic materiality, of sound that dictates the course of attention and expectation: “*Ṭarab* controls the ear [*yusaītir ‘alā al-udhn*] and whatever becomes set in that moment in people’s minds.” In the silence following a phrase or piece, the mode persists. For Mnini, *ṭarab* is akin to the bodily anchoring of modes and scales that he described as the lasting result of childhood participation in *dhikr*, but on a more momentary and evanescent level.

His articulation of *ṭarab* closely resembles the concept of *salṭanah* as variously described by Racy and Shannon, and is likely a partial conflation of the concepts. Just as his notion of *waḥī* (“divine inspiration”) absorbs experiential elements others might describe as compositional *ṭarab*, his notion of *ṭarab* absorbs some of the cognitive and perceptual aspects articulated in *salṭanah*. Racy describes *salṭanah*, a specialized term that unlike *ṭarab* is used primarily by musical specialists, as “a mental state of deep musical involvement” marked by “the domination of a specific melodic mode over the mind.”¹⁸ To reach the state requires at least a modicum of musical astuteness, and that one be modally steeped, as it were, “listening or performing in the *maqam* for at least a few minutes.”¹⁹ Shannon glosses the state as “when the mood of the mode dominates the artist’s emotions,” and relates it to “the idea that the tune or melody or even mode will remain in one’s head almost despite oneself.”²⁰ Shannon’s definition points to an important fluidity between cognitive and emotional registers, which perhaps speaks to the gap between what Mnini recognizes as the clearly emotional *ṭarab* responses in others, and how he articulates his own musical-perceptual sense of it. Given his early illness experiences, as mentioned in the last chapter, Mnini may have reason to de-emphasize those aspects of *ṭarab* suggestive of an extraordinariness of state. In any case, his articulation of *ṭarab* shifts it away from the conventional domain of an encultured affective experience, towards a concern that is reminiscent of music theory in general, and is focused on the ostensibly more objective topic of perceptual effects.

Of the apparatus’ relation to things and conceptions formative to it, Deleuze writes, “Visibility does not refer to a general light that would illuminate preexisting objects; it is made up of lines of light that form variable figures inseparable from an apparatus.”²¹ Deleuze’s notion of visibility helps to frame Mnini’s store of concepts as

17 Mnini cites the major scale for my benefit, as my perception of the *maqāmāt* is limited to just a few of those that differ from Western major and minor scales. I fear this is a limit of my study, and I wonder what other questions my fieldwork might have addressed, and what different conclusions might have been reached, had I possessed a more trained ear for the *maqāmāt*, and deeper background in music theory.

18 Racy 1982, p. 392. See also Racy 2003, pp. 120-146, for a more extensive discussion.

19 Racy 1982, p. 392.

20 Shannon 2006, pp. 136, 165.

21 Deleuze 2007, p. 339.

part of an approach to composition that, in the manner of an apparatus, plays out as a social practice, a particular, historical manner of becoming as much defined by its patterns of social engagement and recognition as by the concepts it encompasses and the solitary compositional work in which they are ingrained. A central if implicit part of Mnini's later training concerned the conventions and norms of *ṭarab* in their early twentieth century form, when Middle Eastern societies had already been radically transformed by European military, social, and cultural projects. His explicit curriculum dealt with the sonic materiality of music, whose naming as such and whose isolation and division into constitutive units made it amenable to analysis, just as it supported the emergence of the dedicated specialist, the composer-theorist.

Categories such as *ṭarab* are often not described in relation to such changes, but given *ṭarab*'s historical association with the urban elite, often the first to be impacted by and adopt Western practices of art, music, and sociability, we might consider the *ṭarab* configuration as a site for the absorption, resignification, and dispersal of these practices. Mnini offered the following description of *dhikr*, deploying his unique conceptual reworkings and providing a sense of his notion of art: "*Dhikr* is basically an artistic picture [*lawḥat*] of religious *ṭarab*. Like if a religious person fasts and prays, they will shy away from or humbly fear [*yakhsha*] listening to low or base songs [*aghānī hābiṭa*] on TV. So, they come to the *dhikr* circle and remember God. It's better than TV or sleeping. It's an old practice, from poets of old, and composers of old." This definition is a far cry from definitions of *dhikr* found in Sufi discourses, traditional or contemporary, which overwhelmingly stress the deliberative and programmatic aspects of exercises rooted in the context of other Sufi concepts and modes of social organization. It is a conciliatory definition in that it abandons the history of specific mystical notions, with which Mnini does not generally concern himself, in favor of a general religiosity opposed to bourgeois pastimes and the commodified forms of mass media entertainment. The remainder of this chapter elaborates upon the strategic orientations of Mnini's compositional approach and practice, and explores some its social ramifications in his bid for recognition as an artist.

THE *INSHĀD* COMPOSER AND STATUS

Introduction

In what follows, I examine Mnini's struggles to come to terms with his somewhat ambivalent status within the Damascene *dhikr* community. Outlining these struggles helps trace the social effects of the techniques and discourses Mnini has hybridized in the wake of postcolonial transformations of *dhikr* traditions. Mnini's articulations of the concepts suffusing his identity as a composer are tied to modes of authorship and notions of art manifest within social conventions and hierarchies. Like the approach to music Mnini has adopted, they are formed from elements of different historical origin whose trajectories sometimes conflict. Authorship notions vary widely, both in quality and salience, and condition the desire for, and the potentially achievable forms of, social recognition within a community, while at the same time determining the relation an artist takes to what he creates.

Inspired by Webb Keane's approach in the ethnography *Signs of Recognition*, I take recognition to be a contingent process that on one hand results in the framing of a given case in terms of a given conventional class or set of classes, but whose contingency "is mediated by relations of authority" within the social contexts where recognition occurs.²² Like Austin's framing of speech acts, Keane presents recognition as subject to a range of potential contestations and breakdowns ("hazards" in his terms) on the way to a desired felicitous outcome. As he characterizes this two-sided approach, the sense of recognition "as a known type becomes involved with the social and political dynamics of [its sense] as acknowledgment or affirmation."²³ For artists, conventional configurations of creative prestige and authority are significant elements conditioning their recognition, and like the apparatuses of which they may be part, help to shape subjects by channeling and orienting them in particular directions.

The techniques of composition and ways of thinking about music facilitated by Mnini's training, which have been generative on one hand, have also placed significant limits on the social roles he might inhabit. Mnini sees himself as an artist, a composer of religious *muwashshahāt* who on the one hand is not a Sufi sheikh, but who also rejects the market orientation of the artist roles that are available among local religious *inshād* groups. There are only a handful of religious *muwashshahāt* composers in Syria, and Mnini is perhaps the only one who identifies the work as a primary calling, who articulates his personal identity as a composer-artist first and foremost.²⁴ My point is not to imply that had Mnini been willing to embrace the opportunities afforded by market-based modes of artistic status, recognition and greater material ease would have no doubt followed. Rather I hope to clarify, through an examination of his expressed frustrations, and of what his negotiation of recognition forecloses, the limits imposed by postcolonial transformations of creative traditions on the modes of recognition possible within them.

Mnini's career speaks to the ways the modern category of art, a discipline associated with certain social and economic arrangements and conventions, may contribute to the dismantling of preexisting configurations in which cultural productions such as musical compositions were generated, and in which they and their makers were situated. The category of art, especially as manifest in authorship notions and economic and other social arrangements, may gain ascendance over preexisting social and cultural configurations simply by being more compatible with, and thereby supporting, other social and economic arrangements within the modern nation-state. Along these lines, we might approach artistic authorship and notions of art as a set of relations imbued with questions of power, what Stephen Collier, drawing on Foucault, calls a *topology*:

22 Keane 1997, p. 15.

23 Keane 1997, p. 15.

24 The only remotely similar figure of which I am aware is the late Sabri Mudallal of Aleppo, about ten years Mnini's elder. Mudallal emerged at an early age from the *dhikr* context to become a student of Umar al-Batsh. His musical career took him through Syrian radio in the late 1940s, and to world-music festivals in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, where with his own group of instrumentalists he performed secular *tarab* alongside religious *muwashshahāt*. Mudallal has composed many religious *muwashshahāt*, but his primary renown came as a performer, a *munshid* who was a living symbol of Aleppo's rich musical heritage, and a model of Aleppine musical authenticity.

One technology of power may provide guiding norms and an orienting telos. But it does not saturate all power relations. Rather, it suggests a configurational principle that determines how heterogeneous elements—techniques, institutional arrangements, material forms and other technologies of power—are taken up and recombined. This configuration of elements, and the principle through which they are related to each other, is what Foucault calls a ‘system of correlation’. It would be preferable, perhaps, to call it a topology of power.²⁵

A notion of art

Often after evening *dhikr* meetings, Mnini and I would walk together towards the nearest square, where the chances for catching a midnight minibus or taxi were greater than on whatever narrow street the meeting might have been held. Mnini would give various estimations of the meeting, often remarking on the level of art [*mustawā al-fann*] reached that night by a given singer, or by the group as a whole at a given moment.²⁶ He used similar art-discourse terms in his calligraphy workshop when assessing the construction of musical phrases he found particularly appealing or objectionable, and when characterizing the general musical tendencies of various local *dhikr* groups. On one of these late-night strolls he said of the weekly event we had just attended, “They have beautiful praise-singing [*inshād*] there, but no art. The art at al-Aita is higher.” I was not clear what he meant, and asked the difference. “The rhythm. At this group, all the *dhikr* is the same, one kind. The al-Aita house has progressed with *dhikr* [*taqaddam bil-dhikr*] more than here. Here they don’t change the rhythm at all. It’s all 8/4.”

On a more general level, Mnini applied the term high art [*fann ‘ālī*] to the genre of religious *inshād*, especially the *muwashshah* tradition, due to its combination of elevated [*rāqī*] and nuanced [*raqīq*] features in melody, rhythm, and lyrics, and its provision of spiritual and ethical sustenance [*taghthiya*] to the listener. The *maqāmāt*, often called “Eastern” by Arab musicians, contained for him a *de facto* Islamic character, differentiating them from European schemes of tonal organization and making the *maqāmāt* such that each was most effectively realized in pieces that not only moved the listener, but gave them moral edification [*tahdhīb al-nafs*]. In its strong blending of aesthetic and ethical concerns, Mnini’s notion of art was similar to a more general concept of aesthetics developed by Jane Bennett, out of the work of Schiller and others: “For Schiller, we’re born with potential for the aesthetic, which must be cultivated by the self and by culture; the aesthetic is a disposition, and has the power to harmonize and reconcile the physical and moral characters.”²⁷ This modified aesthetic capacity Bennett calls sensibility: “Sensibility, a refinement or new assemblage of sensible primordia, is culturally encoded and temperamentally delimited, but it is still educable to some

25 Collier 2009, p. 89.

26 My evaluations sometimes differed sharply from Mnini’s. After one *dhikr* meeting, I expressed admiration for the singing of one of the men, and Mnini said his voice is “mentioned in the Qur’an.” At this another man walking with us had laughed, so I asked what Mnini meant. He cited a Quranic verse, Sura Luqman 19: “Be moderate in your bearing, and keep your voice low. Surely the most repulsive voice is the donkey’s.” Ali 1984.

27 Bennett 2001, p. 140.

uncertain degree. Like the code dimension of ethics, techniques of sensibility-formation are concerned with governing and refining behavior.”²⁸

The prominence of the ethical spirit in Mnini’s idea of art, as opposed to a more purely formal or spectator-oriented mode of valuation, is evident in his assessment of a situation that would sometimes arise at the meetings in the al-Aita courtyard, which he describes above as having rhythmically “progressed with *dhikr*.” As noted, Mnini derived deep pleasure and satisfaction from witnessing *dhikr*’s emotional effects on participants. He expressed a lighter, but nonetheless joyful amusement when *dhikr* participants made certain kind of errant physical response. This happened when the men went on performing their usual bodily movements, based on regular rhythms of 2, 3, or 4, to a piece whose rhythmic mode was a *’raj*, or “limping.” A *’raj* meters imply cycles of five, nine, ten, or some other count that is hard to feel, less self-evident somatically. In these instances, if the sheikh or others directing the participants’ movements failed to correct them, their enthusiastic motions would only occasionally coincide with the primary beats of the song, leading to a situation where two independent musical processes seemed to be going on within the same space, sometimes breaking down altogether.²⁹ Mnini found it funny when these differences in phase arose, and would motion for me to notice, but they had little impact in his view of *dhikr* portion’s artfulness. Unlike the context of a world-music stage, say, where movements would need to be coordinated lest they been perceived as errant execution, and thus in violation of the heavy stress on formal perfection, these junctures of divergence in *dhikr*, while humorous, merely spoke again to the participants’ degree of affective engagement.

Mnini’s saw his primary artistic purpose to be the care-taking of religious *inshād*, which entailed its defense against encroachments by two other musical forms, each of which represented a particular type of artistic shortcoming. First, he disparaged the pop-influenced *inshād* found in CD markets and on satellite TV as unartful in its composition and performance, and, as he said, “from the point of view of its musical work [*min nāḥiyat al-shughl al-mūsīqī*].”³⁰ Mnini was particularly vexed by this type of *inshād*, since for a good number of Syrians without specific interest or knowledge, this music was what came to mind at the mention of religious *inshād*, testament to the power of mediated forms to erase cultural memory. The second but less threatening form was *inshād taghazzulī* [courtship singing], a long-standing genre of religious songs and *muwashshahāt* in which God is addressed in metaphors of sexual or romantic love. These works Mnini deemed *manbūdh* [“rejected,” or “discarded”], and called unartful on a moral level, “from a moral point of view [*min al-nāḥiyat al-akhlāqiyya*].”

Most singers and sheikhs involved in *dhikr* made no reference to art discourses when framing their vocal practices, and the only decidedly positive responses I met when

28 Bennett 2001, p. 150.

29 Often one of the sheikhs conducting a *dhikr* event, or someone close to him from among the participants, will direct the participants rhythmically, especially during more vigorous sections of chanted *dhikr*. This direction coordinates movements in order to maximize their energy and reduce their potential for becoming muddled or confused. It is not seemingly aimed at shaping their outward appearance *per se*.

30 The word “work” here, *shughl*, relates to skillful execution, and implies craft, as in a remark on the intricate work within a painting or piece of silver.

raising the issue tended to be based on the understanding of religious *inshād* as a sort of craft, a complex practice that demanded skill, and whose performance naturally made clear degrees of proficiency among its practitioners. Jessica Winegar, writing on a related issue among Egyptian fine artists, notes the difficulty encountered by those who try to separate out art from craft, and points to the impact of this question on that of social recognition: “Yet the distinction between art and craft needed constantly to be maintained, particularly in a place where the word for ‘artist’ (*fannan*), to many Egyptians, implied a skilled craftsman. While artists wanted to be placed higher in the social hierarchy than craftspeople, craftspeople had more legitimacy, because their field was at least socially recognized.”³¹

Mnini’s use of the term “high art” (*fann ‘ālī*) makes a similar distinction, and assessments of its applicability to *dhikr* were most often negative, since worship, as one singer said, had little to do with why someone might visit a museum or sit in a concert hall. Another singer and extensive collector of religious *muwashshahāt* recordings said he knew that some people looked at it this way (he may have been referring to Mnini, since he knew him and knew I was working with him), but felt it was in the end wrong. It amounted, he said in a pensive tone, to “adopting or conceding to terms and ideas of colonial origin [*al-muṣṭalahāt al-isti ‘mārī wa mā warāhā*].” He said *dhikr* participants needed to be careful not to understand the practices as anything but a means of strengthening their commitments to God. The pieces used in *dhikr* did this by “shedding within the listener’s heart a light by which their selves could be examined in the context of their affairs and their social and familial relations,” a formulation clearly recalling Islamic social principles as represented by Sharia.

These differences of opinion might, on one hand, be put down to semantics. After all, by Mnini’s estimation *dhikr* music is an art precisely because, beyond its formal sophistication, the emotions and thoughts it evokes bring the listener closer to God and to Islamic modes of life. Its purpose is not, for example, to provide a new way of hearing, and Mnini’s articulation of art, though perhaps indebted to notions rooted in post-Romanticism, has little to do with avant-gardism. However, questions about potential relations between art and *dhikr* also have social implications, and Mnini’s development of an art concept drawing upon Islamic principles does not in the end overcome the base of objection among others. His assertions on the topic act to carve out a space in which he might be recognized as a *dhikr* composer, as an artist of a particular type, but the other views work in the opposite direction, maintaining more traditionally sanctioned social roles, even when those roles’ functions have been significantly transformed and narrowed.

Authorships

Perhaps the most important convention conditioning the prospects for Mnini’s recognition is that of authorship. Art notions may remain at odds, or even unarticulated, and yet social recognition may be forthcoming by virtue of the conventional arrangements and possibilities for an author or maker to be recognized, in whatever way,

31 Winegar 2006, p. 63.

as part of the agency that brought a work into being. Mnini's relation to authorship, as we might expect, does not emerge spontaneously from the context of *dhikr* ceremonies, or that of the traditionally-styled compositions to which he is devoted, but takes shape also in the wake of the art notions discussed above, and of the increasing salience of the individual *tarab*-composer since the early 20th century. As in the elliptical question concluding his epilepsy-healing recollection in the previous chapter ("Who's the one who composes a melody like this, that blows the mind?"), Mnini in a sense arrives at his concern with authorship by working backwards from the enchanting presence of the musical work that must after all have been composed by someone. In this section, I examine the multiplicity of authorship conventions, in the overlapping domains of poetry and music, religious and non-religious, and across different historical eras, that condition any bid for authorial recognition in the *dhikr* context.

The first such element is the sheer diversity of modes of author-attribution in Sufi contexts, which, when authorship is even an issue, place little stress on the individual author as commonly understood. Michael Frishkopf notes generally that Arab conventions of authorship are "complex, and variable, social constructions" that incorporate several modalities of attribution, and makes the observation that a "sort of partially individualized author has long existed in traditional Arab society and literature, certainly long before English empiricism and French rationalism, from famous pre-Islamic tribal poets to the court poets of the Umayyad and Abbasid eras (Imru' al-Qays, 'Umar ibn Rabi'a, al-Mutanabbi, Abu Nuwas, etc.)."³² However, in the context of Sufi poetry which is his primary focus, Frishkopf notes a variety of more complicated situations, including Sufi sheikhs being posthumously listed as the author of poetry compiled by their devotees, and being listed as the author of verses transcribed "from the mouth of" [*alā lisān*] other persons acting as channels.³³ In a similar vein, Amira Mittermaier describes a mode of transpersonal authorship among a contemporary Sufi group in Egypt, where women followers of a sheikh receive in dreams lines of poetry which are then included, alongside lines written by the sheikh, in poetry collections attributed to him.³⁴ For his part, the sheikh's contributions are often a product of visionary encounters with the Prophet and his family, suggesting a type of authorial agency a bit less direct than that typically associated with most artistic authorship, even when it includes processes like inspirations or visions that are extra-agentive from the perspective of the artist. These modes of attribution show Sufi-related contexts to weigh against the acknowledgment of authorial agency not connected to the authoritative role of the sheikh.

32 Frishkopf 2003, p. 84.

33 Frishkopf 2003, p. 81. Also, note that the great Sufi sheikh al-Rifa'i, father of the widespread Rifa'iyya order, has not been linked by scholars to any extant writing, though a great deal of poetry and prose is attributed to him. Here, as above, authorship clearly *is* an issue, but the primary purpose of attribution may be to concatenate authority within the figure of the sheikh, rather than to trace historical origin. This is a somewhat crude formulation, and an interesting topic for future research would be an inquiry into the relation between these types of attributional practices and the normative forms of subjectivity cultivated in their social context, a project which might also include a comparative aspect applying the same questions to specific modern art contexts.

34 Mittermaier 2007, pp. 235-237.

Other factors are more specific to the types of works Mnini himself creates, rather than their context. Though formative ties bind Arab poetry and music, the *muwashshahāt*, and especially the religious variety, have had a much weaker relation to conventions of attribution than has poetry, the most strongly established Arab authorial convention.³⁵ Jonathan Shannon provides examples of conventions for listing unknown authors of *muwashshahāt*, including the terms *qadīm* (“old”) and *majhūl* (“anonymous”), both found in collections of compositions.³⁶ Shannon cites these categories from texts meant, as he says, for a relatively expert musical audience, and therefore they do not necessarily reflect a historical concern with composer-attribution on the part of the broader audience of *muwashshahāt* listeners.³⁷ Mnini himself often ascribed pieces to a city or region when he did not know their origin, giving them a geographic provenance, often Aleppo or Andalusia, the two locales most associated with *muwashshahāt*, or otherwise if the melody sounded to him “Iraqi,” “Persian,” or “Turkish.” These terms were descriptive, but for Mnini also served as identifiers of the unknown composer. Historical evidence for the attribution of portions of *dhikr* music to a composer extends back only to the seventeenth century, according to Walter Feldman, who also notes that such attribution is an exceptional development particular to the Turkish Mevlevi order about which he writes.³⁸ Since the late nineteenth century, the figure of the individual author has become an increasingly common mode of attribution, but primarily for secular art music, with *tarab* composers such as Sayyid Darwish (d. 1923), Ali al-Darwish (d. 1952), Muhammad Abdel Wahhab (d. 1991) becoming household names throughout the Arab world.

A final factor potentially complicating the authorship question within Mnini’s context is the relation between the musical forms of *muwashshah* and *qadd* (pl. *qudūd*). The *qadd* form is defined in various ways, as is its relation to the *muwashshah*, and a precise idea of it can, perhaps appropriately, be rather confusing to trace. The term *qadd* means “equivalent,” and is used colloquially to mean “the same size as” or “the same weight as” when comparisons are made. Among the varying definitions of the *qadd* as a musical form and genre is that it is produced by taking an existing composition and substituting an Islamically-themed poetic text, either new or old, for another, often on romantic love or wine. It was this definition that I encountered among the men with whom I worked, whose concern was with religious *qudūd*. More commonly, though, the term refers to the genre of *qudūd ḥalabiyya*, or Allepine *qudūd*, defined by Racy as an “Aleppo-based strophic song with a colloquial text.”³⁹ Allepine *qudūd* can also be religious, but more often it is the case that a non-religious colloquial text is introduced to

35 For more on the connections between poetry and the *muwashshahāt*, see Shannon 2003, p. 84.

36 Shannon 2003, p. 89.

37 The question of a composer’s identity, commonly raised by listeners of European classical music, never arose in my fieldwork among *dhikr* participants, except with Mnini. The importance of attribution in European art music is attested by the fact that the vague question “Who is this?” is just as likely to be understood as a request for the composer’s name as it is for that of the performing musician or group. A symphony orchestra of fifty musicians thereby comes to weigh in the balance against one individual.

38 Feldman 2001, p. 118. It is worth noting, too, that there are historical links between Mnini, via the extended al-Aita family, and the Mawlawi order in Damascus, which is now largely defunct.

39 Racy 2003, p. 65.

accompany a melody that has been slightly simplified. These parallel alterations have contributed to giving the form a more popular appeal historically than the *muwashshahāt*, which are hard to memorize and whose difficulty lyrically and melodically is sometimes prohibitive, even for accomplished singers.⁴⁰

Lisa Iino, another scholar of the *qadd*, defines the form as “a short song with a secular quasi-colloquial text,” and notes that some of the songs “share the same melodies with *tawāshīh*,” the latter term often referring to a slightly simplified religious *muwashshah*, and used, Iino says, sometimes interchangeably with the term *qadd*.⁴¹ The interchangeability to which Iino refers, somewhat mirrored in the *qadd* concept, adds to the confusion because different well-informed musicians and scholars sometimes use the term interchangeably with terms not in themselves equivalent. In any case, the notion of substitution upon which the *qadd* form relies can refer to exchange, in either direction, between secular and religious lyrical text (or another thematic change), between colloquial and formal Arabic, or between melodic phrases or elements, as in musical paraphrasing.

Insofar as *qadd* works share conventional performance contexts with *muwashshahāt*, which they do in *dhikr*, they may mitigate against the importance of the individual author. According to Muhammad Qadri Dalal, in a book on the religious *qadd*, there are opponents of the form who point out that the *qadd* amounts to creative thievery and the loss of the possibility of tracing works to an author, while some of the form’s supporters claim the same process allows the adaptation of potentially objectionable works to Islamic culture.⁴² To complicate matters further, Dalal notes that some *qadd* are composed as original pieces from the start, and ascribed to their author as *qadd*, perhaps, I think, so that they might be presented alongside a genre which has a well-established base of appreciation.⁴³ The fact of the *qadd*’s historically comfortable existence within *dhikr* circles indicates a lack of attributive concern that, while problematic from the perspective of the modern, obsessive focus on creative authorship, presents little issue within that performance context itself.

Mnini’s status

Though the conventions discussed above would seem to mitigate against any change in the general lack of concern with musical authorship in *dhikr* circles, the

40 Dalal 2006b, p. 164. Mnini himself complained occasionally about one of the more commercially successful religious singers in Syria, who he said was not capable of memorizing some of the *muwashshahāt* he had composed, even after personally instructing him in their delivery. The singer, he said, inevitably abandoned their composed form in performance and reverted to a far simpler, more popular style of delivery.

41 Iino 2009, note 9, p. 277. The *tawshīh* form (pl. *tawāshīh*) is sometimes presented as the same as that of the *muwashshah*, but with exclusively Islamic lyrical themes, so that a work called a *tawshīh* could also be called a religious *muwashshah*, while Iino argues that the *tawshīh* is a form that is also musically slightly simplified. The term *tawshīh* only occasionally came up in my fieldwork, mostly as a synonym with religious *muwashshah* or sometimes religious *inshād* in general.

42 Dalal 2006a, p. 66.

43 Dalal 2006a, p. 66.

question of artistic status remains an important one for Mnini. While under the tutelage of the composer Umar al-Batsh, one of Mnini's colleagues was Sabah Fakhri, the now legendary *muṭrib*, or *ṭarab* singer, whose repertoire prominently features *muwashshahāt*. Fakhri, in his path to becoming one of the premier Arab singers of the century, took a very different relation than did Mnini to viable modes of artistic identity and success. In what follows, I describe Mnini's social status as an artist, and the ways social recognition has and has not played out, both within his local *dhikr* community and beyond. I show how the artistic identity he has forged works against the routes of artistic success that are potentially available.

Mnini sometimes mentioned how his name had been said on Syrian TV when his compositions were sung in early-morning broadcasts of religious *inshād*, and he warmly recalled receptions given him when his work had been performed or commissioned for performance elsewhere, including in Russia and Iran. Mnini was known by Arab connoisseurs of *dhikr* and *inshād* music in Syria and other Arab nations, including Saudi Arabia where a man brought him in 1989 for a private home performance and recording session. The Russian trip happened in 1957, and involved Mnini's participation in a music festival where Andalusian *muwashshahāt* were presented, as he said, "in a Western way, not Eastern, without quarter-tones." In general Mnini was averse to importing Western musical approaches into Arab music, and held strong opinions against the use of harmony in Arab music, which he felt destroyed the rich intonational nuances of the Arab *maqāmāt*. Perhaps because it was his first such trip abroad, he enjoyed the mutual appreciation of musics from different traditions, as well as exchanges he had with foreign musicians.

The 1996 trip to Tehran was more significant. There he presented a set of works commissioned for Ashura, the solemn Shia holiday marking the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the Prophet's grandson, at the Battle of Karbala by the forces of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid bin Muawiya. On one of my visits to his home, Mnini guided me through his photo album from the trip. As he talked about it his voice still held traces of the awe his reception had inspired. After being welcomed at the airport, he and his wife were driven towards their residence and shown a large calligraphic banner arching over a downtown street, welcoming him and his wife to Iran, and referring to him as "the composer Zuheir Mnini." In Damascus, Mnini had been provided with Shiite poetry of mourning and penitence, works known as *laṭmiyyāt*, to be melodized for performance. He held in great regard what he saw to be the Iranian government's attentive management of the event, where his compositions were performed by a group of over a hundred musicians, including a large chorus. The highlight from the event was a piece called *Karbalā' la zilti karban wa balā* ("Karbala, you are still a burden and tragedy"). Of the experience, Mnini said, "Their appreciation was very sweet, by God [*taqdīrhun kan ktīr hīlu wallāh*]," though I did not ask whether it included a payment of fees, as the word *taqdīr* ("appreciation") can sometimes imply.

As much as Mnini enjoyed recalling these events and others, they were instances of recognition received outside the local community of which he is part, and whose recognition remained much more important to him. Often when I walked with him, men and boys of different ages would approach and greet him. "I'm well-loved, thank God!"

he said to me once. “It’s because I compose songs without taking money for it.” On other occasions he was approached by younger men or older boys wanting to improve their religious *inshād* singing, but he always politely declined as he had stopped giving lessons, with the exception of instructing an occasional *inshād* group in a specific composition to be performed. Whenever I attended a *dhikr* event with him, I felt that a sort of honor was extended me by proxy, and no one seemed to pay any mind if he directed me to sit in a place not typically occupied by a new face. Once I went to meet him at the Umayyad Mosque in the Old City, where he was at a seated gathering of *inshād* singing, this time outside the context of the *dhikr* ceremony proper. He saw me as I approached the circle of about twenty-five to thirty men, which was flanked by onlookers and some boys and girls. He straightened up and waved to me, and about half the group turned on reflex in my direction. All this is to say that Mnini was visibly esteemed everywhere I went with him. A unique sort of honor was accorded him, not because he was a sheikh, imam, or religious scholar, and not like that extended to the older singers, many of whose voices had failed them years before.

However, in discussions with other participants at *dhikr* gatherings, even regulars at the al-Aita house, it became clear to me that few were sure which pieces were composed by Mnini, or by Sheikh Umar al-Aita for that matter. A good number were unaware that some of the pieces originated within the group itself. Such works included the melodic chant of contrasting metrical sections, the meter of which formed the object of Mnini’s attention during his epilepsy healing, composed by Sheikh Umar, and another *muwashshah*, entitled *aḥsin bi bāri’ika al-ẓunūn* (“Cultivate Good Thoughts about Your Absolver”), composed by Mnini. Most of those familiar with the authorship of these pieces were either *munshidūn* (praise-singers), or were among those more closely associated with the al-Aita family. In these cases we might ascribe the concern with authorship to an expert curiosity, or an interest in family history, trends which follow perhaps from the fact of Mnini’s being situated within a musical sort of community that simply does not identify itself as such, and that grants weak ontological status to musical works and their authors. Like naming the *maqām* in which one sung, knowledge of creative origin was instrumental neither to the performance nor reception of the works, and played no role in the socializing that occurred around *dhikr*—before, during smoke-breaks, or afterward at a late-night coffee-house. Participants were therefore more likely to know Mnini generally as a composer (*mulaḥḥin*) without knowing which pieces if any were his, or to know him as a trainer of *munshidūn*.

***Maṣlaḥa* and market**

Mnini’s dilemma, what causes him in moments of frustration to refer to his creative efforts as “nonsense” and “a waste of time,” has much to do with his rejection of market-oriented modes of recognition. One of his points of pride was that he accepted no remuneration for either his compositions or training of *munshids*. As we have seen, he attributes the recognition he receives to his rejection of personal financial interest. Commoditized forms of music, it will be remembered, were referenced in Mnini’s definition of *dhikr*, which he glossed as a sort of *ṭarab* that provides moral and spiritual

edification, unlike base songs [*aghānī hābiṭa*] circulated elsewhere. Mnini referred to as “*inshād* merchants [*tujjār fil-inshād*]” those singers he felt had sought to make lucrative careers out of religious praise-singing, and he expressed sharp criticism of the motivations behind the *inshād* CD’s and mp3-discs available in music stores and kiosks. Most of these recordings were releases by younger singers adopting more subdued, less demanding vocal styles and employing lots of studio production, or by local *inshād* groups available for hire to sing at weddings, *mawlid* (Prophet birthday) celebrations, or other events.

Some of Mnini’s assessments of more traditionally-styled singers were negative as well, and though he continued to be generally amicable with them, he had lost interest in several of the men whose technique he had helped fine-tune, after they had become in the end “merchants.” A general disapproval of this sort may be a factor behind the extremely limited role of the international world music market within local configurations of recognition. Mnini, like most of the singers and musicians I spoke with, was largely unaware of the Western availability of ethnographically-oriented recordings of the traditions of which he was part, recordings marketed as representative of the various traditions of Syrian *dhikr*, *inshād*, and otherwise. Mnini and his colleagues knew personally the singers featured in such works, but, beyond perhaps having heard that they had sung in Europe, had no idea they had been involved in those recordings. In fact, only a handful of secularly oriented, upper-class Syrians, whose conservatory training had facilitated entry into Arab-jazz fusion, had any awareness of the “traditional” recordings available on foreign labels, despite these musicians having nothing to do with *dhikr*, other than perhaps acknowledging it as a traditional method of musical learning.

Mnini clarified the term “*inshād* merchant” to me one afternoon in his workshop. “It’s all *maṣlaḥa* [personal interest],” he said, using a term that often plays an important role in Syrians’ interpersonal evaluations. He pulled from his shelf a cassette and handed it to me. The color-printed cover had a photograph of the Nuri Mosque of Homs, overlain in one corner with a picture of the singer’s face.⁴⁴ Mnini continued, “He was visiting from Homs three months ago, and gave it to me to listen to. So I would hear his voice, but I haven’t listened to it.” I asked why not. “I don’t like it. I hate *maṣāliḥ* [plural of *maṣlaḥa*].” I turned the cassette over in my hand, and must have made a sound of puzzlement. “What is it?” he asked. “On the inside of the cover it’s written by hand, ‘A gift to the major *ustādh*, may God protect him, Zuheir Mnini, with greetings.’ On the front cover it says, ‘The Number One *Munshid* of Homs,’ but on the back the ‘Number One’ is crossed out by hand, and on the cassette label too, so it just says ‘*Munshid* of Homs.’” Mnini chuckled, “Yes, I remember he did that in front of me. So I wouldn’t criticize him for it. Out of humility. But I never listened to it. You take it and listen to it. And here, this one, and these too—take them. They all come here and give me cassettes.”

Mnini’s history of involvement with some of the well-known traditional singers in Syria makes him a regular recipient of these demo tapes, but he refuses participation in their circulation. As he says, “The *munshidīn* don’t read music, so I teach them with my voice, and make them memorize the piece. When they learn from me, they go and record

44 The Nuri Mosque in Homs is named after Nur al-Din Zengi (d. 1174), the same Turkic Zengid ruler whose Damascus namesake is the Nuriyya Mosque where my use of the term *ṭarab* was corrected.

or perform and make money. If it's with the *idhā'a* [state media], then I get four thousand lira [about eighty dollars], but it's nothing. The singers won't go to a *mawlid* here in Damascus if you don't give them money, but at the *dhikr* they come without any recompense, just to remember God (*li-ythkurullāh*).⁴⁵ The social and economic circumstances of most Syrians have long forced people to seek out livings in whatever ways possible, to scrap together sources of income that despite best efforts may only provide the bare necessities. In this context, widely regarded as linked to official corruption, to cheating and fraud among the citizenry, and to people's declining religious and ethical commitments, Mnini holds artists accountable for the motivations behind their work. He does not like to be an element in the *maṣlaḥa*-calculations of aspiring singers, including those seeking vocal lessons, when in the end they seem to pay him little mind, either through public acknowledgment or simple visits.⁴⁶

Mnini's refusal to accept remuneration for his compositions and for the training of *munshidīn* is not without personal financial consequences, and is related to the role he ascribes to the state in funding art. He derives income from two sources, the calligraphy workshop and the state artists' union, and despite being seventy-nine at the time of my fieldwork, family circumstances still make him the primary breadwinner for his household of three generations. Calligraphy, Mnini says, "puts food on the table." He calls the arts of music and calligraphy, both of which he has learned since childhood, complementary and integrative [*mutakāmilīn*], and adds, using the Arab notion of the right hand being more useful, "I've got calligraphy in my right hand, and music in my left [*māsik al-khaṭṭ bi-īdi al-yamīn anā, al-mūsīqā bi-īdi al-shimāl*]. Music doesn't feed me at all, but as an art, it's got me gripped right here [*qābidni min hun*]."⁴⁷ He closes his fist tightly over his chest in the way a person might when describing a pain.

Mnini's shows a relative lack of concern with the state's ties to the market and to *maṣlaḥa*, either in terms of the state's role in the market, or in the ways *maṣlaḥa* might be said to play out in the state's negotiations of its relation with artists. For Mnini, the state stands, among other things, as a power having the authority to dispense a degree of artistic recognition, and the financial resources to patronize art in a way morally untainted by the market. When recounting his Iran trip for the Ashura commissions, he noted how "everything was paid for by the Iranian government," and made similar remarks about the organization of the festival in the Soviet Union. The same held for his membership in the Syrian Artists' Union, which in addition to providing him a stipend, sanctions him as an artist and provides recognition whenever his works are performed on state television or radio broadcasts. Doubtless influenced by the Syrian state and Bath party's strong historical ties with the Soviet Union and Russia, and their particular adoption of

45 Mnini's association with singers involves both instruction in technique and oral, phrase-by-phrase transmission of works for memorization. George Sawa identifies the latter as a method of song-learning established in lieu of a strong notational tradition. Sawa 1989, p. 255. The method is still widespread among religious *munshids*, while many other types of musicians have adopted notation.

46 I have been asked about where I might fit into this evaluative scheme of Mnini's, and though I think caution should be exercised in hearing statements by informants as coded comments, I have been motivated by Mnini's expressions of disappointment in others to call once in a while to check in.

47 Mnini's use of the distinction of right and left does not seem to involve the other connotation of the right being morally superior.

socialism, he does not see the state as a market actor, though like many Syrians he holds the state accountable for Syria's difficult economic circumstances.

He describes the situation of the arts:

I'm despondent [*yā 'is*] about it, because there's no encouragement here, not from the State. But it's better that I notate all this than having it just be forgotten or escape from me. I get about seven thousand lira a month as *taqdīr* [stipend, appreciation], but it's not enough if I want to leave calligraphy and just do music. The talent I have, I compose and compose until I get the piece right, then I teach the group of *munshidīn*. I don't get anything for it, but they mention my name on TV, and at the Umayyad Mosque.

Another musician of Mnini's generation, a violinist visiting from Aleppo, agreed with Mnini's assessment when he made it, and himself referred to artists in Syria as beggars [*shahhādīn*]: "Take, for example, Muhammad 'Abdel Karim, a *buzuq* player who was called 'Emir of the Buzuq.' He composed the most beautiful melodies, and died a beggar. There's no support here. Just support for the army, for battling Israel." The lack of state support was felt most acutely in traditional or classical Arab genres, Mnini added: "They only fund classical music [*mūsīqā 'ālamīyya*, or 'world music'], like in the High Institute [*ma'had al-'ālī*], which they spend a lot of money on."⁴⁸

Status and recognition

High up on a side wall of the courtyard of the al-Aita house hangs a framed, water-stained image of a Sheikh wearing a woolen cloak and small white turban. His eyes are white, he has a short beard, and the bottom edge of the hand-detailed print reads, "The Late Scholar and Sheikh Umar al-Aita."⁴⁹ A few weeks after I first noticed it, the picture came up in a conversation in Mnini's workshop, where I sat as Sadiq al-Aita, Mnini, and another man talked. Sadiq had mentioned the framed image in passing, that it had become dirty, and Mnini interjected "I want to to come to the house and clean it." Sadiq responded, "Yes, it needs to be put in order [*taḍbīf*]." "I want to be the one to clean it," Zuheir repeated, "I'm going to do it." "Inshallah," the younger Sadiq concluded. The conversation then returned to the health problems of one of their mutual friends, and soon later I left, thinking about the sheikh's image. For the remainder of my fieldwork visits to the *dhikr* meetings in the al-Aita courtyard, the picture remained in its dusty and skewed state. Mnini's insistence on being the one to set it right is important, though, and triangulates the vacant position of social authority and status left by Sheikh Umar, as well as the recognition that Mnini, as the most likely successor to Sheikh Umar's compositional role, feels has not been forthcoming.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Mnini enjoyed telling the story of how Sheikh Umar named him, visiting his house upon his birth in 1929. He entered the room carrying a mortar and pestle, and beat a slow, triple rhythm while intoning, "*sammaytuka ahmadu zuheir* [I have named you Ahmad Zuheir]." The Sheikh, who composed extensive poetry

48 For more on twentieth-century trends in Arab state support of music, especially the priority granted Western classical music and training, see el-Shawan 1985.

49 See Figure 13 for a photograph of the image.

and musical pieces for the *dhikr* ceremonies he directed, was a model for Mnini, and was intimately involved in his early life and his later sense of continuity with the past. As in the healing memory discussed in the previous chapter, where Mnini wondered at the meter of the phrase that Sheikh Umar's son, Hashim, was using to treat him (a piece itself composed by Sheikh Umar), the mortar-and-pestle memory serves as a document rooting his identity and musical authenticity. Like the other memory, it is a narrative punctuated by a melodized, rhythmic phrase. The fact that the sonic form—the melody, the rhythm, the tone—of his naming formula must have been passed on to him from someone else, perhaps by his parents or someone in the al-Aita family, points to the prominence of sound and vocal art in the social milieu of which he was part.

Sufi sheikhs have played formative roles in Mnini's development, both musically and in the respectable status he occupies within the Damascene *dhikr* community, but his hybridized approach has been forged outside the sheikh role. There is little precedent for the religious *inshād* composer for whom music has been isolated from the traditionally related pursuit of religious scholarship and authority, other than as part of a more commercially-oriented modern musical career. The narrowing of the once multiple authoritative purview of the neighborhood sheikh, which a hundred years ago encompassed arbitration, healing, and sometimes poetic and musical composition, is symbolized by Sheikh Umar's vacated role. As far as composition is concerned, that role has been made obsolete in part by the same transformations in the conception of musical art that Mnini has himself embraced, namely the isolation of the sonic arts of *dhikr* as music proper, and the attendant specialization of the dedicated music expert. Similarly, the training he received within the state musical institution, where as I have suggested he was exposed to art-ideologies, acted to siphon away a portion of the implicit musical-training function that *dhikr* ceremonies fulfilled. In lieu of the possibility for the type of non-commercial social recognition that Sheikh Umar received, even if not as a composer proper, Mnini grants the state a broad mandate and even duty to fund artists and dispense artistic recognition, but does not hold the state morally accountable for its motivations in the way he does artists themselves.

On the utterances that an apparatus makes possible, Deleuze and Guattari write, "But whether petition, revolt, or submission, the statement always undoes an assemblage of which the machine is a part; it is itself part of the machine that will form a machine in turn in order to make possible the functioning of the whole or to modify it or to blow it up."⁵⁰ Though Mnini often represents his social situation as an artist in less-than-ideal terms, he nonetheless feels it his purpose to preserve the art of religious *inshād*, despite material challenges and despite, as he says, the prevalence of *maṣlaḥa* among singers and musicians. That art, as he articulates it, acts against the effects of commoditized, mediated forms of music offering no sustenance to the listener. While at times feeling his work is futile and insufficiently appreciated, he returns to the sites of what grips him, to his notation pad, *'ūd*, and *kāsio*:

I consider it better for myself that instead of sitting here with nothing to do, I put this [staff paper] in front of me. I put down some words, I notate and notate, and go over it again and again [*bnawwiṭ bnawwiṭ, b 'īd wa biftil*] until it becomes

50 Deleuze and Guattari 1986, p. 82.

ingrained in my head. Then I give it to some group to perform. There are a lot of difficult circumstances here among us. I have more than two hundred religious *muwashshahāt* here that I've done, but I give them to the *munshidīn*. Better than if they were to descend with me to the grave.

The lack of concern with creative authorship in Mnini's immediate community may make the respect he receives fall short of recognition as such, but his degree of local renown, his "being loved," are nonetheless steps in that direction, as is the albeit private satisfaction he gets from the incorporation of his compositions into various repertoires. Jessica Winegar makes an observation concerning modern fine artists that quite aptly suggests the impasse Mnini faces: "A person has to learn what art is and how to do it. What an artist makes has to be considered as art by a larger community of artists and critics, and the art and the artist usually have to be integrated into this community and credentialed by its institutions."⁵¹ As I witnessed it, and in what he shared with me, Mnini's engagement with music seemed full of joy, and even his most stringent critiques were interspersed with the singing of phrases that "drive one crazy," whether his own or those of others.

51 Winegar 2006, p. 46.

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FIGURES



Figure 1. A *dhikr* ceremony's standing portion, sometimes called a *ḥaḍra*. This movement of steps in place, alternating left and right, is accompanied by rhythmic exhalations.



Figure 2. Photograph lent to me by a member of the family who has led the Mawlawi Sufi order in Damascus for many generations. This is a folklorically-oriented performance in the city's Umayyad Mosque from the 1960's. Note the onlookers, whose attention is largely focused on the camera.



Figure 3. Another photograph lent to me along with the one in the previous figure. This photo, from the 1920's, shows the leadership and disciples of the Damascus Mawlawi order, including on the sides percussionists and *ney* (reed flute) players.



Figure 4. A performance of Mawlawi *dhikr*, folklorically oriented. The event is being filmed by an Iranian TV crew (one of them standing on the chair at the left), and includes a few dancers who perform primarily for money.



Figure 5. The *dhikr* ceremony at the al-Aita house in Old Damascus, on the night of *laylat al-qadr* during the last few days of Ramadan. The family has hired a video crew to record the event for their own consumption, and to create an archive for future generations. The *dhikr* at this house is held weekly, and usually proceeds as shown only without the video cameras and lighting.



Figure 6. Another moment during the al-Aita *dhikr* on the night of *laylat al-qadr*. The prominence of cell-phone cameras is slightly exaggerated here (I count four), but shows the relatively unproblematic incorporation of photography into events that are not staged for an audience per se.



Figure 7. A photograph hung on the wall of Zuheir Mnini’s calligraphy workshop, showing Mnini and the calligraphy master under whom he studied. Mnini is on the left. The text above the figures reads, “The late calligrapher Badawi Dirani” and “His student, the calligrapher Zuheir Mnini.”



Figure 8. Photograph showing a new electric trolley, and the house in which Mnini would be born two years later in the background. The text reads, “Damascus—Midan, as-Sweiqah, the year 1927.”

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Figure 9. Magazine advertisement announcing the Casio VL-1, also known as the VL-Tone.



Figure 10. Zuheir Mnini (center), with the *munshid* (right) whose singing inspired my description of the repetition of lines of lyrical text with melodic improvisation. At left is an unidentified sheikh.

كلمات : أبو الهدي الصادي رفعت يدي

FIN

Figure 11. A scan of Mnini's skeletal notation for "*rafa'tu yadī* ['I raised my hand']." Top right reads: "Words: Abu al-Huda al-Sayadi."

إيقاع: واحدة كبيرة
مقام: رات: مالهو

كلمات ابو الهادي الصيادي
لحن: زهير منيني

رفعت يدي والقلب راع مناجيا
أنت يا عظيم الطول واقبل دعائيا
لجأت إليك ارحم صميم ضراعتي
وما شاك ما خيبت يا رب لا هيبا
وهذا بيدي يا كاشف الضراعتي
جعلتك لي ذخرًا أوليا وواليا
وأنتاني كربي وضائق مناجهي
وانك يا رباه تعلمها لي
اعلم الأسرار العباد تولني
رضيتك يا رباه مولًا ولهاديا
الذي تداركني بلطفك إنني
ضعيف وقد حملت ضعفي المساويا
ونور هياي بالخشوع وبالسقى
وأكل على دية النبي مماتيا
ولا تقصني عمدا ثم أشرفي مرسل
لاؤقضي وألقى المصطفى الطهر راضيا
عليه صلاة الله طالع بارئ وعطر مسكي الروابي البواريا

Figure 12. A scan of Mnini's transcription of the lyrical text for "rafa'tu yadī ['I raised my hand']." Top right reads: "Words: Abu al-Huda al-Sayadi, Melody: Zuheir Mnini." Top left reads: "Rhythm: wāḥidah kabīrah, Maqām: rāst māhūr."



Figure 13. A photo of the picture of Sheikh Umar al-Aita hung in the courtyard of the al-Aita house, where *dhikr* ceremonies have been held since the family's arrival in the city in 1914.



Figure 14. Standing portion of a *dhikr* ceremony, in a courtyard open to the sky.



Figure 15. Men enjoy tea while singing the religious songs (*inshād*) of *dhikr*. They use a small lavalier microphone, and one man plays tourist model frame drum to the left while another to the right checks the video he has just recorded.



Figure 16. Several generations at a *dhikr* ceremony, the youngest wandering in and out, and observing.