

Visiting a Sufi Zikr

Late one Thursday evening our veteran spiritual explorer, Rosemary Cunningham, put on her nice pants and a long-sleeved blouse and grabbed a scarf before heading downtown. Her destination? The Masjid al-Farah, a mosque of the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Order in New York's Tribeca. That night was a weekly Sufi ritual of movement, chanting, and song called a Zikr, which translates as "a remembrance of God." Among many surprises, it turned out that the Shaykh of the Mosque was actually a Shaykha, a woman. — Eds.

It's 9:15 on a Thursday evening and I've walked past the bar crowds spilling into the streets of this trendy neighborhood to a modest building with only a small sign on the door to indicate that it is a mosque. I enter nervously and am blocked by a screen. Peeking around, I see a long rectangular room with brick walls and tin ceiling all painted white. About twenty people sit on the Persian rug, women along the left wall and men along the right. Some of the women are dressed in Middle Eastern wear, some in long skirts, several in pants. The men mostly wear jeans or khakis. Almost everyone's head is covered.

I cover my own head with my scarf, tying it in the back, and slip around the screen to claim a place on the rug. To my left against the far wall there is a freestanding rosewood staircase that I learn later is where the Qur'an is read. In the corner to my left is an alcove that points toward Mecca for those doing the daily prayers. On the walls are large green disks with Arabic letters painted in gold.

The group is focused on a middle-aged woman who has blond hair cascading over the front of her simple light sea-green garment. Her white cotton hat is identical to hats worn by other men and women

A Zikr: The Basics

Zikr (literally "remembering") is practiced by the Sufi Orders and offers the opportunity for conscious alignment with God. Zikr is ordered in the Qur'an, and most Sufi Orders recommend other Muslim practices such as daily prayer and fasting during Ramadan, but some do not require their dervishes to convert to Islam.

There are as many forms of zikr as there are Tariqats (Sufi Orders) and Shaykhs (leaders) within these orders. Usually a zikr is held in a space that is empty except for a prayer carpet on the floor. Sometimes there is a special rug or a sheepskin for the teacher or leader. In traditional settings the men are seated apart from the women.

Generally, following the leader, the group chants or recites evocative words, the names of God, and prayers. Movements may accompany the words. The whirling often associated with the dervish ceremony is done only in special situations.

Where and when is it held?

There is no prescribed place or time. The location is decided by the Tariqat, the Shaykh, and the followers.

in the room, and marks the dervishes of this order. But by the respect given her, this woman is clearly the group's spiritual leader, their Shaykha. Men appear with trays of figs and cheese and other dishes and place them on the carpet before her. She eats as she speaks on a variety of spiritual subjects. Witnessing a female spiritual leader with men serving her is as foreign to me as it is a cause of deep feminine delight. Then her gaze interrupts my thoughts. "Greetings, sister," she says, then asks my name. When I tell her she remarks, "Rosemary, the rose of Mary." She speaks to other new faces, as well.

Finally, at almost 10:30, it is time to begin the Zikr. Sheepskins are brought in and laid in a circle on the floor for us to sit on. The woman next to me tells me that I have taken a seat reserved for the most senior members of the order, but she says not to move. This place and its people seem so gentle that I don't even feel embarrassed.

At a word from the Shaykha a man lights incense in an ornate silver incense burner. In front of each sheepskin is a spiral-bound yellow-covered book that contains words to songs of praise, some in English, some in Arabic. A vial of liquid, which the Shaykha comments is "of the rose," is passed around the circle. I put a drop on my neck.

We sing songs with simple melodies in English. Then we chant in Arabic. I watch people reciting words and turning their heads rhythmically from left to right. We are chanting "Hu, Allah, Hu." I learn that "Hu" is the pronoun that evokes the divine presence. I know "Allah" is the Arabic word for God. The Shaykha recites names and attributes of familiar biblical figures, among them Adam, Abraham, Noah, Moses, Jesus, and Mary. We sing and sway. Soon I realize an hour has gone by. It doesn't seem possible.

May anyone attend?

Usually, everyone is welcome, but a few zikrs are held for the initiated only. Call ahead to confirm who can attend and also the exact time of the meeting.

What should I wear?

Modest, comfortable clothing that allows for movement. In many cases head covering is optional.

When may one enter and leave?

Enter before the ceremony starts, participate or observe it in its entirety, and then leave when everyone else takes leave of the Shaykh or teacher.

Is there a collection, or fee?

No. Donations are voluntary.

How can I find a zikr ceremony?

- Ask at your local mosque.
- Search for a particular order on the Internet.

Sources: Sufi Order International, Institute of Sufi Studies, As-Sunnah Foundation of America, Naqshbandi-Haggani Sufi Order

We stand, hold hands, and form a circle with men on one side and women on the other. In the center is the Shaykha along with two men with large drums. The Shaykha tells us to take one step to the left, and the circle begins to move. As we move she tells us to chant "Hu." She suggests that we close our eyes, but I am afraid I will fall. We circle rhythmically. Eventually I am able to close my eyes. When I open them I see the others moving left, left, left, eyes closed and smiles on their faces.

The Shaykha tells us she will read the 99 names of God, and I am surprised by how simple the sounds are, how easy they are for me to repeat, and how powerful this process is. My hands get sweaty and my scarf falls onto my shoulders, but I don't worry. For more than an hour we circle a step at a time and chant, but I have no experience of being

tired or wanting to stop. The chants change, people join and depart from the center, but nothing interrupts the gentle, repetitive motion of the circle. Twice we all pull into the center and form a cluster.

The chanting and singing end and we sit scattered on the floor. A man reads a list of names and after each we chant a single "Hu." These are prayers of concern for the dead, as well as for Palestine, Israel, the homeless, and all of humanity. Finally the Zikr is over. An aluminum bowl of carrots and celery and a tray filled with paper cups of hot tea make the rounds. The Shaykha asks if anyone has a dream to share. A woman begins to tell her dream, but I'm too far away to hear or to even care. I munch contentedly on some baby carrots and sip the tea. At 1:30 a.m. I leave to head uptown for a night of vivid dreams.