

TRANSES AND HYPNOSIS AT THE DERVISHES OF KURDISTAN *

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In Kurdistan, the land of choice for the great mystics of Islam from the 10th century to the 16th century, on the borders of Iraq and Iran, we met the Dervishes of the Nachmandi and Nemathoulai sect.

Hunted down, disowned and disowned by the Iranian authorities and the Koranic School, these sects have taken refuge in the mountains of Kurdistan where they secretly perpetuate their unusual collective trance ceremonies.

We had to overcome many obstacles and prohibitions before we could relate to them and attend their meetings.

Dervishes are mystics who trace their origin back to Hasan Barzi, friend of Imam Ali, successor of Muhammad about twelve centuries ago. The basis of their doctrine, Sufism, is that a man sufficiently purified by meditation, ecstasy and rigorous observance of discipline, can rise to and identify with divinity. Some of their practice provokes a state of hypnosis and trance during which the Dervishes engage in exhibitions which are often miraculous: piercing their body with daggers, licking iron reddened with a flame ...

According to their words they do not feel any pain; God alone allows them to perform these feats without suffering.

Inaccessible and mysterious, the Dervishes will never reveal all their secrets. Their history has entered the legend of the centuries ... But our documents bear witness ...

Origin :

Sufism: mystical current of Islam within which the various dervish sects have developed.

His influence is particularly great in Iran, where he has inspired a whole literature. He found particularly favorable ground in Turkestan and in the Seldgoukid Empire. It was the chosen land of the great mystics of Islam for more than five centuries, from the 10th to the 16th century.

Some Muslims trace the origins of Sufism back to Muhammad, which would be against his doctrine. It is probable that the sect of the Sufis was formed towards the end of the 2nd century AH under the influence of Sheikh Abu Said Ibn Abu Said Ibn Aboul Kleir.

The Dervishes currently fall into three main groups :

1 / The NEHMATTOLAH (pronounced Nematoulai) belong for the most part to the Shiite branch of Islam, founded in the 15th century by the Sufi Shah Na 'Matollah Vali. He was buried in Mahan near Kerman, a city famous for its tulips, in south-eastern Iran, where you can admire his beautiful mausoleum. Its current supreme leader is Dr Nouchbach, professor at the University of Tehran. Perfectly possessing our language, he held numerous conferences in France on mysticism.

2 / The GHADRIEH (pronounced Gadrié) belong to the Sunni branch and form a group of two million inhabitants in western Iran. Its leader is Sheikh Al Hadji (Hadj: pilgrimage to Mecca; Hadji designates the one who performs the pilgrimage) Seyed Mohamed Hadi-e-Hashe Mi, born in Baghdad, grandson of the famous Seyed Razoul of Baghdad.

3 / The NAHKS BANDI (pronounced Narckmandi) also attached to the Sunni branch and living in Iraq.

There is no leader for all Dervishes. Each group has its leader appointed by heredity or by election, the required qualities then being holiness and wealth. The Dervishes do not live in community although they live together: they form whole villages where each one keeps his position. They get together, meet to perform their ceremony. They perform wonders which impress non-dervish Muslims and thus make them feel the power of God. Women can also be dervishes. They perform the same ceremonies as men, but do not pierce each other. On the other hand, never does a female dervish participate in ceremonies performed by men and vice versa. Their emblems are: the goatskin, a metal pike curved like a cane, a prayer support and the cachegoul.

In Iran, the vast majority of Iranian dervishes are Nehmatollahis. They strive to achieve perfection through ecstasy through not only spiritual but physical means that lead them into a state of hypnosis and trance during which they engage in exercises that are often miraculous: themselves piercing the body with daggers, licking iron reddened in the flame... they feel no pain... According to their words, God alone allows them to accomplish these feats without suffering.

Very exceptionally, as these meetings are absolutely secret and exclusively reserved for cult members, we were able to attend and even photograph / film some of these meetings.

Ceremony 1 - Group of Nehmatollahi Dervishes :

It takes place at the home of Sheikh Khaskar Seyed Hussain Mir Taher Djahaberi of the Khanaga Khaksara (1) in Kermansha in the Sabouni district, near the town cemetery.

Every Thursday evening, from 9 am, there is a meeting. We first drink tea and discuss things and other things. Around 11:30 am, the lights are turned off; only a thin stream of light comes from the next room.

Then all the assistants squatting cross-legged or kneeling start rocking back and forth, always singing the same phrase: "Allah Khub" (Allah is good). A man among them acts as conductor, chanting and singing, gesturing his hands, then gets up and goes to look for long swords that he will clash with a loud metallic noise.

The more and more excited assistants repeat tirelessly "Allah Khub ... Allah Khub ..."
Their foreheads touch the ground at the word "Allah", then rise sharply and lean back like a blade of steel slackening at the word "Khub".

The dervishes who wore the turban took it off and their long hair can be seen flowing out over their heads, (they wear their hair long to look like Ali who himself had it that way).

A man gets up and writhes in startling convulsions. He is in a daze. The swords clash with an infernal noise, the bodies are unleashed, the hair lashes the air, the voices thunder louder, the pace quickens. Another assistant gets up and goes into a trance; his neighbors grab him by the arms and try to calm him down.

For an hour and a half, tirelessly, the dervishes will continue this frenzied trance.

Suddenly, I realize that my chest is swinging to the rhythm of the assembly; it would take little for me not to sink into this collective exaltation as well.

Then everything suddenly stops. The convulsor collapses to the ground, weeping bitterly (we will learn later that it was an army colonel). Her sobs can be heard in the sudden silence that followed the incredible uproar. Om wins the swords and we turn on the light. The dervishes (those who wore the turban) comb their hair, carefully rolling their long hair under the turban. Little by little the faithful leave, kissing their hands. There are only a dozen people left who continue to chat as calmly as possible, drinking tea until three in the morning.

(1) Khaksar means "dust": The Sheikh is like the dust of the path which leads to God. "Seyed) indicates that he is a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.

Ceremony 2 - Group of Nahksbandi Dervishes :

On the other hand, the Ghadrieh or Nahksbandi sects engage in much more violent practices. Very few people attended. These practices are legendary and if by chance a foreigner tries to find these ceremonies, the Security of Iranian territory (SAVAC) tries to dissuade him by affirming that they no longer exist and strongly advise him to abandon his project.

I attended a ceremony of the Nahksbandi group in Shatouti village, lost in the mountains on the Iran-Iraq border.

When we got there around 7 p.m., a man in a long black robe, white shirt, black turban greeted us on the doorstep. It has in its general appearance, the austerity of a Jesuit.

The house is large, in dried earth like all the houses in the villages. He receives us in a large room with only a splendid carpet.

About ten men are sitting on the ground, chanting their rosaries. Cups of tea are passed from hand to hand, waiting for the meal to be ready. During this time, the room gradually fills; young, old, all arrive with daggers in their belts, pricks in their hands, kneeling to greet their leader, kissing his hands and feet. Suddenly, outside, a voice rises singing prayers; all assistance is gathered. The melody is throbbing and shrill. My nerves are on edge. Suddenly, like a devil out of his box, one of them in a masterful leap, crashes on his legs and lets out a terrifying roar to which others respond. A man begins a chanting on two notes. In a full body motion, he rocks his head back and forth, eyes bulging. Then, in a sudden relaxation of the muscles, he throws himself towards us, his turban falls at our feet and his abundant hair covers his shoulders. In one of his hands, I notice a tea glass. Without hesitation, he bites a piece of it and still roaring, chews it conscientiously. He clicks his tongue, breaths very hard as if he were hungry for this food; he swallows the first piece, crunches a new one and at the same time pronounces words that are translated to me: "It's sweet, it's sweet ..."

Screams erupted from all sides, soon he only had the bottom of the glass in his hands. Then another man walks up and takes his last bite. Immediately a second rushed forward holding a large spike about an inch thick and about two meters long. Another dervish grabs the metal point and without batting an eyelid, pricks it inside his gum. He braces himself on the pike, the "tortured" continues to utter cries of exaltation but not of pain and suddenly, thanks to a last effort piercing the tense flesh, the point appears under the chin. Then the gossip lets go and abandons the hero strolling among the audience, his jaw pierced.

Man is no longer one with God, we are told, he is in a daze and feels no pain, his mind is focused on Ali and nothing else can act in any way on him. body or mind. The chief signals him to go away; before leaving the room, he tears off the instrument of torture himself.

The chant continues still, cadenced cries resound. A third stands out from the group, he is older and wears a white turban: it is therefore a Kalif (a dervish becomes Kalif after long years, it is in a way the consecration of a dervish). Long gray hair protrudes from his turban, a thick beard makes it even more terrifying. To testify to his faith, he grabs hot embers with both hands and is presented to him in a shovel. He licks them and approaches us as if to share his meal with us.

He is so close to me that I have to step back so as not to be burned by the cinders. I can see the taste buds of his tongue all black, his burnt lips, but like the previous one, he doesn't seem to feel any pain. He has become one of those extraordinary beings who cannot be believed without seeing them. Yet it is true, they are there, in front of the eyes; about thirty men praying, singing, screaming, waving like devils, punctuating their breathing to the sound of the zarb (tambourine). This ceremony continued until daybreak.

Ceremony 3 - Group of Ghadrieh Dervishes :

We also attended a ceremony in the Khanaga of Khanileh near Ravensar, headed by Sheikh Mohamed Hadi-E-Hasmehi, of the Ghadrieh sect.

After interviewing him for a whole afternoon when it is time for prayer, he allows us to attend. At the signal of the Sheikh, the ceremony begins. We are in a huge room where a hundred men, some on their knees, others standing, singing prayers. Words keep coming back: "Allah Khub, Allah Khub, (Allah is good).

The older one stands in the middle of the assembly, paces the hall, brandishing a large cane with which he beats time. As the pace picks up, the spirits heat up, the breaths get louder, the screams shrill, the movements sharper, this is the moment the dervishes go into a trance. Suddenly, screams are unleashed: then the entire room sinks into a collective delirium. Everyone rushes over the glowing embers and swallows them greedily. The pieces of glass crunch under the teeth and the razor blades disappear like wafers.

Some dervishes tear off their shirts; others wielding pikes or sabers ram the steel blades into naked bodies. The men thus pierced in the stomach, cheek or jaw, continue their frantic dances.

The Sheikh's son, a little boy of about 4, sits next to him and sings quietly.

Ceremony 4 - Group of Nahksbandi Dervishes :

After Shonghor, we plunged 40 kilometers into the mountain, we were able to attend another ceremony in a khanaga of the Nahksbandi sect.

The zarb (tambourine) suddenly sounds and draws the whole village from its nap. The peasants arrive in small groups on the sun-drenched square. Already among them a group of men, their hair loose from their turban, some with bare chests, begin the ritual dance.

All, forming a circle, after having relaxed back, suddenly swing their torso forward until touching their knees with the forehead, the hair spreads above the heads to gather on the ground in the center of the circle; their expiration, always more rhythmic with each swing of the bust, becomes more powerful, Allah comes into possession of his faithful.

At first fascinated and paralyzed by fear, I soon no longer see the gaping wound of the one who pierced his stomach or his cheeks, I no longer think of the one whose head is bleeding because he is I hit the scalp with a reddened shovel, like a good Western "voyeur", I shoot with camera and camera: I am the barbarian.

After about an hour, the dervishes gradually calm down, regaining consciousness. So, with their arms outstretched, they sing a hymn to the glory of Ali. me, arms dangling, I don't know what to do.

It was only during this last ceremony that we were able to film, photograph and record these forbidden rites. We have not mentioned any names out of respect for those who, because they have helped us, are at risk of severe retaliation.

Inaccessible and mysterious, the dervishes will never reveal all their secrets. Their story is legendary.

* Author's note: This report (text, photo, film) was produced in the 1970s.

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