

Ambient Sufism

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Richard Jankowsky

Ambient Sufism

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Much writing on Sufism and music/sound has concerned “authentic” Sufi ritual and the ways in which Sufi music/sound becomes corrupted as nationalist propaganda, secular cosmopolitanism, popular commerce, and/or folk heritage. Richard Jankowsky’s *Ambient Sufism* bypasses such top-down discourses of authenticity and legitimacy through the work’s central concept of “ambient Sufism” – a frame that encapsulates and elucidates the distinct presences of and rich connections between a panoply of rituals and music/sound making in contemporary Tunisia. The foundation for this frame is a local spiritual ecology of saints and spirits and a topography of shrines shared by various ritualists, music/sound makers, and listeners. The study is also grounded in overarching principles relating to musical form, intensification, and timbre to which ritual music/sounds associated with these saints and spirits must adhere closely in order to be efficacious.

Jankowsky’s theoretical intervention comes as a response to the “Sufism” invented by Orientalist and French colonial-era scholars, and its afterlives in popular imaginations that romanticize individual and rarified mystical experience. Such accounts – rooted, again, in discourses of authenticity and legitimacy – construct the “problematic binaries of *confrérisme* [brotherhood Sufism]/*maraboutisme* [cult Sufism], serious/folk saints, or formal/informal Sufisms” (10). Jankowsky recasts “Sufism” to index the specifically Islamic and Islam-adjacent manner in which individuals

invoke the powers of saints for worldly intercession and forge personal connections to the Divine for eternal salvation. Jankowsky’s choice of the adjective “ambient” speaks to how this specific form of mysticism pervades all walks of contemporary life in Tunisia, specifically through the medium of sound. He thus replaces binary inventions of “brotherhood” and “popular Sufism” or “formal” and “informal Sufism” with “ambient Sufism” – a singular invention that allows for the possibility of its existence alongside the Sufisms that have come before it, however subtly audible it may be in the “background” (11). While the most “sober” and “reformist” Sufi ritualists of the Shādhuliyya order (the “earliest and most influential Sufi order in Tunisia” [33]) may vehemently reject Jankowsky’s decision to lump them together with trancing glass-eaters of the ‘Īsāwī order (63), I take the author’s cue in affirming that ambient Sufism brings our interrogation of Sufism and music much closer to what he identifies (in the words of Ahmed Shahab) as the “normative discursive traditions of Muslims” in which “explorative authority, in contrast to the orthodoxizing impulse of prescriptive authority, allows for and celebrates ambiguity, ambivalence, and a multiplicity of truths” (202).

What exactly are the stakes of Jankowsky’s choice to honor this (previously) normative discursive tradition? Foremost, by studying the strictest ritual observances and the most popular drinking songs under the shared framework of ambient Sufism,

Jankowsky sutures manifold links between groups and traditions that have been obscured, severed, and erased by traditional discourse on Sufism, the modernizing and secularizing state, and nationalist, Islamist, and Islamic reformist forces in the region. Such conceptual surgery puts these local Tunisian rituals and music/sounds on an equal footing. Black Tunisian practitioners of *ṣṭambēlī* are thus understood as Sufi ritualists par excellence to all Tunisians seeking help with spirit affliction (114), and these practitioners are seen to have played a significant role in the performance of Jewish *rebaybiyya* (154). Muslim women Sufis of the Mannūbiyya order share a vital connection to the Shāduliyya order through “song lyrics, architectural memory, and ritual performances” (73), and the Muslim women’s *rebaybiyya* tradition shares its name (not coincidentally) with that of the male Jewish practitioners’ *rebaybiyya* tradition (137). Jewish Tunisians, for their part, could be seen well into the twentieth century supplying much of the music in Tunis’s coffee houses and worshipping Muslim saints alongside their Muslim neighbors (142). In the ritual niches of each of these various communities, the *silsila* “cumulative musical form” featuring a succession of songs dedicated to a set of prophets, saints, and/or spirits (a song cycle of sorts) allows for a key figure or key figures most strongly associated with one ritual community to be incorporated into the rituals and musics of other communities. Such incorporation contrasts with the “extraction” (192) of spiritual and aesthetic resources by producers of the nationally broadcasted Sufi music show *el-Hadra*, who draw liberally from the musical traditions of various ritual niches to curate concert programs of Sufi music that model

“acceptable forms of religious citizenship emblematic of the nation at large” (198).

Ambient Sufism avoids reproducing the decontextualized and undifferentiated mass of music and Sufism that results from *el-Hadra* performances and instead leans into long-standing, local means of marking and reinforcing distinct differences between groups, while simultaneously accommodating Others and honoring the sharing of spiritual and musical resources. Jankowsky elucidates this “boundary work” (71; a term borrowed from Marc Gidal) of Tunisian ritual and Sufi music/song with rich music historical, theoretical, and analytical work. For instance, we learn that *ṣṭambēlī* is closely associated with the *gumbri* (a buzzing string instrument) and *shqāshiq* (iron clappers), Mannūbiyya *silsila* performance calls for large tambourines, and *rebaybiyya* music gets its signature stamp from the *mizwid* (double-reed goatskin bagpipe) and *bendīr* (a drum with gut snares) (144). These associations are significant enough that a ritual community may adopt a nonnative instrument (93), so to speak, or avoid utilizing a native instrument (154) to accommodate a nonmember of the community. Regarding the shared musical property of intensification, it is notable that the three-part *ḥaḍra* cumulative musical form of ‘Īsāwi ritual features, first, discrete intensification (largely involving pitch and tempo increases); second, sequential intensification (largely involving modulations in rhythm); and third, global intensification (largely involving gradual changes in timbre through changes in instrumentation). This differs from the *silsila* form utilized by *ṣṭambēlī* practitioners, the Mannūbiyya, and *rebaybiyya* practitioners in that it features only two of the three forms of intensification. On the subject of rhythm,

‘Īsāwis can be unmistakably identified by their distinctive five-beat rhythm, while the same is true of the rhythmic elasticity or “nonisochronous tendencies” (119) of *ṣtambēlī*. Thus, while the properties of musical form, timbre, and intensification have comparable effects in these various musical traditions, the exact rhythms, melodies, and lyrics that feature in recitations, chants, and songs of each tradition are distinct (147). The simultaneous marking of difference and spirit of collaboration that characterize ritual observance and music/sound making in contemporary Tunis thus mirror the simultaneous boundary blurring and reinforcing ethos of Jankowsky’s historical, ethnographic, and musical study.

Finally, Jankowsky demonstrates through the frame of ambient Sufism that Tunisian Sufi ritual and music/sound go far beyond what traditional scholarship on Sufism has emphasized—that is, individual devotion and healing. He insists that “trance is a social act that requires witnessing as part of the therapeutic process” and that the crises that lead to calls for trance ceremonies “affect the family, not just the individual” (85). Jankowsky also demonstrates how spirit-possession rituals “do the grand social work of exercising the historical imagination” and that “spirit possession is as much about sociopolitical encounters as it is about spiritual interventions” (108). A case in point is the way in which *ṣtambēlī* performance allows the alterity of sub-Saharan Africa to become familiar to ritual participants and audiences through the assimilation of sounds and entities of sub-Saharan African origin into the *ṣtambēlī silsila* (song cycle). Moreover, *ṣtambēlī* performances offer “a space for the mixing of genders, age cohorts, and

ethnicities,” and expectations for the efficacy of ritual generate “the pressures of mastering an extensive repertoire” that establish standards for aesthetic excellence and enjoyment. Much of this work beyond individual devotion and healing can similarly be located in the other ritual niches Jankowsky surveys.

Just as *el-Hadra*’s national broadcasts of Sufi music give way to the “resacralization of public space” (182; emphasis in original), Jankowsky’s work resacralizes our understanding of a large swathe of music/sound and social relations in contemporary Tunis through exploring ignored and forgotten histories of shared origins, collaboration, and exchange. At the same time, the concept of ambient Sufism sonicizes our understanding of Sufism in Tunisia and beyond by demonstrating that “it is through musical sound that many ideas and feelings related to Sufism circulate so widely throughout Tunisian society” (12). It also shows that Tunisian Sufi music/sound—specifically, its properties of sonic constancy, timbral specificity, discrete, sequential, and gradual intensification, and cumulative musical form—is not merely “epiphenomenal” but rather “of central importance to ritual efficacy” (13). Sufism, then, need not exclusively entail the study of esoteric doctrines, the stringent observance of rituals at shrines by ordained Sufis, or an individual’s long-range quest in unveiling the heart and achieving union with the Divine. Rather, ambient Sufism teaches us that Islamic mysticism might instead be centrally defined by the ways in which people—ordained Sufis, hard-drinking laborers, and everyone in between—come together to observe rituals and make music/sounds rooted in a shared spiritual ecology of

saints and spirits and a topography of shrines that collectively grant them access to power, healing, heritage, identity, love, and jouissance.

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