

Arabic Sacred Phrases in Sufi Dhikr and the Dances of Universal Peace

by Saadi Shakur Chishti

"When we trace the secret of language in history we find that many languages known to us today have come from just a very few ancient languages. But if we go further than history takes us we shall find that all languages come from one language, a language that the human race knew in its cradle, a language that man learnt from intuition. The names he gave to everything were derived from what each thing suggested; he called things according to what he intuitively felt on seeing and feeling them. That is why the nearer we get to the ancient languages, the more we find the secret of psychological suggestion." (Hazrat Inayat Khan, "Suggestion by Word and Voice," in *Philosophy, Psychology, Mysticism*, vol. 11 of the Sufi Message series).

Questions occasionally arise about the pronunciation of Arabic sacred phrases in various Sufi dhikrs, chants and Dances of Universal Peace shared in the Ruhaniat and Dance communities. This article represents my own research into and experience with this question. It is not intended to represent the views of any organization or group.

Personally, I believe it is important to uphold proper respect for the traditions and languages we use in our practice, in order to avoid what I have previously called "cultural strip-mining." I wrote about the latter in The 1990 "Mission/Transmission Statement" of the Mentor Teachers Guild of the Dances:

"We say that our work with the Dances is more than a pastiche of folk movements and chants from around the world. We strive to avoid the 'sacred/cultural strip-mining' indicative of much of the recent "New Age" movement, which is the psychic counterpart to what Western society has done to the resources of native peoples and the earth. As such, it is important to tell the story of our own lineage, to uphold the value of sacred transmission and make common cause with other inheritors of native wisdom."

In relation to the history of Islam, however, there are problematic links between the insistence upon so-called "classical Arabic" and definitions of who is properly a Muslim or a Sufi.

During the period of the early spread of Islam (the first 100 years or so), a great debate arose within the community of Islam as to whether the religion was really universal, or whether it was linked to Arab cultural nationalism and the Arabic language. Of course, the Quran itself was spoken in Arabic and later written down in a form that came to define what we now

call "classical Arabic." Since the earliest times, however, many Muslims and Sufis have argued that attempts to impose Arabic language and culture on non-Arabic peoples were simply a form of colonialism and imperialism. These attempts had nothing to do with real Islam, which was seen as pure submission to the One Being. They quoted numerous passages in the Qur'an to show that Islam was not meant for one cultural or linguistic group (or even one species) and that it had, in its purest form, always existed as the "religion of the hanifs"--the ancestors who proclaimed that there was only One Reality. I have pasted examples of some of these passages below:

"So turn thy face and purpose towards the primordial religion of the upright (hanif)--the nature innately formed by Allah in which Allah created humanity. Let there be no change in the work created by Allah, the Religion that is self-subsisting, the standard (qayyim). But most among humanity do not understand." --Sura 30, 30

"God has opened to you the Way of Religion which He commended to Noah that he might follow in it. It is the same Faith which we have revealed to thee, and which we showed to Abraham, to Moses, to Jesus, to the end that true Religion might continue in the earth. Divide not yourselves into sects." Sura 42, 13.

"Each community has a messenger, and when their messenger comes, judgment is given between them with justice." Sura 10, 48

"For each community we have appointed a pious rite." Sura 22,35

"Thou art only a warner, and for every people there is a guide." Sura 13, 8

"There is not an animal on earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but they are communities like you. We have omitted nothing from the Book, and they shall all be gathered to their Nurturer and Sustainer in the end." Sura 6, 38.

Many Muslim scholars, on both the Sunni and Shiite sides, as well as Sufis encouraged people to pray in their own languages and to *freely* mix Arabic sacred phrases with their own language and culture. We find many such mixtures today in both Urdu (some of the phrases that come through Inayat Khan) as well as Turkish (phrases like "estaferallah"). On the non-Sufi side, the entire Ismaili tradition (a branch of Shiiism) has developed hundreds of beautiful "ginans" or prayers over hundreds of years, mostly in Urdu (www.ismaili.org). In addition, Urdu, Turkish, Indonesian and other languages have absorbed many words from Arabic, albeit with their own pronunciation. In fact, the large majority of Muslims today are not native Arabic speakers. The same goes for those who identify themselves as Sufis in some way.

The whole field is made more complex by the fact that there is no one "standard" for spoken colloquial Arabic today. Really there are multiple Arabic languages (Moroccan, Egyptian, Syrian) in which not only the pronunciation but the actual vocabulary differs.

A further factor is that for hundreds of years, since the rise of the classical Sufi orders in the 10th century, various tariqas and lineages have developed their own ways of using sacred phrases, including the Asma ul Husna and dhikr. These include not only the Turkish and Urdu-speaking orders, but also those based in Afghanistan, Indonesia and Africa. Having done dhikr with many of these groups, one clearly sees the influence of the indigenous languages on the pronunciation of Arabic sacred phrases as well as the use of regional languages, movements and music. This is well documented in recorded Sufi music of the present day. For these Sufis, passing on practices the way the "ancestors" have done it becomes a matter of sacred transmission and adab (sacred respect). Was no one offended when, a thousand years ago, Sufis began to use sacred phrases in Urdu, Turkish, Indonesian or other languages, including various regional pronunciations of Arabic or Arabic-derived words? Of course, some people may have been offended, but the transmission survived anyway, because heart-blessing of baraka is more powerful than any form of nafs-driven behaviour, which includes taking offense and self-aggrandizement.

When we come to our own lineage, we find similar influences. Hazrat Inayat Khan and the Urdu/Chishti stream is one. Hazrat Inayat Khan clearly insisted his mureeds use the pronunciation "El Allah Hu" for reasons of vibration, as you can see from the excerpt of the paper in the Sufi Movement archives that I have pasted below this article.

In addition, Murshid Samuel Lewis studied with various other Chishti and Indian/Pakistani Sufi Pirs, who spoke mixtures of Urdu, Hindi and other languages. He also worked in Egypt with Rifai and Shadhilli Sheikhs, in which one finds the pronunciation influence of other Semitic languages, including Aramaic and Hebrew (for instance, "Ellah" instead of Allah). Murshid SAM notes this in his diaries. I heard it again when I attended the International Association of Sufism conference in January 2008 in Cairo, which was hosted by a branch of the Shadhilli tariqa.

Further, in our own Ruhaniat Sufi teaching circle, we find sheikhs and murshids who have themselves studied deeply with teachers of other Sufi traditions. Their way of sharing wasaif and dhikr have been influenced by these experiences, as a genuine transmission. So when an original dhikr comes to a mureed on retreat or in vision, it may be part of a genuine stream of transmission that has all of the above influences and history behind it. This type of transmission is *not* at all limited to our

Ruhaniat/Inayati/Dance circles. It has been recognized for more than a thousand years in the tradition of Sufism.

This is not the same, however, as a person casually, without deep meditation and practice, taking a sacred phrase out a book or from another Zikr or Dance, and adding it to a piece of pre-existing music to "create" a new Dance or Zikr. The latter case simply uses a sacred phrase to decorate some pre-existing piece of music, and is usually not the result of fana, or effacement. This type of nafs-driven behaviour is the antithesis of the devotion that leads to real vision and service.

It goes without saying that neither every "scholar" of Arabic nor every imam or "representative" of Islam may know the above historical background, or if they do know it, want to acknowledge that the issues it raises are still very much debated in the world community of Islam. The issue of "correct Arabic" never arose within Arabic-speaking Christianity, because after St Paul, Western Christianity took Greek as its "classical language" and became very flexible about translating its prayers and practices into other languages. In the case of Western Christianity, it was primarily *European* language and culture that was exported along with religion during the European colonial era. Aramaic Christianity (as it expressed itself in "Silk Road" religions for a thousand years) was much more flexible about pronunciation and about mixing with other languages than some forms of imperial Islam. Judaism never had a colonial enterprise, although present-day synagogue Hebrew almost certainly is not the Hebrew spoken by the Biblical prophets and has accretions of both Persian and Germanic intonation.

Having said all this, I do not feel that everything is relative, and that Arabic sacred phrases can simply be pronounced in any way one chooses. First, one must know the lineage and background of the phrase in question. For instance, the darood prayers that Murshid Samuel Lewis received from Sufi Barkat Ali of Pakistan are in several Dances. These phrases are in Urdu and Arabic.

Second, In terms of the mysticism of sound, many phrases are much stronger when pronounced with the proper direction of breath and with an awareness of the root of the sound, in its larger Semitic context. The note below by Hazrat Inayat Khan on zikr reflects this and similar direction is given throughout the writings of Murshid Samuel L. Lewis. When I teach from The Sufi Book of Life in various settings, I give a pronunciation that attempts to get the best of both of the above factors--the direction of breath and the authentic Semitic root. This does *not* necessarily mean what some people call a "classical Arabic" pronunciation. Some ancient Semitic words change dictionary meaning and intonation over time, but this does not diminish the underlying meaning, energy or direction of breath dictated by

the root. One example of this is the Arabic equivalent of the Aramaic *lachma* (bread, knowledge), which is now understood to mean simply "meat."

Third, "classical Arabic" is itself a human creation. No one really knows exactly how Muhammad pronounced his Arabic, and the Quran was not written down until after Muhammad's passing. There was no standard of "classical" Arabic before the Quran, so the definition of "classical" became the way the poetry in the Quran came through Muhammad, as determined by a consensus of those who remembered it. Finally, there are many foreign words in the Quran itself, including transliterations into Arabic script of some form of Aramaic. I have found some of these myself, and one can consult Jeffery's *Foreign Vocabulary of the Quran* (1937) for a complete list.

Personally, I do not agree with people who say that the pronunciation is unimportant and only the experience matters. People often cite the Sufi story of the dervish on the desert island who walks on water after saying the *zikr* backwards to prove their point. However, the point of the story is that the *devotion* of the dervish allowed him to perform a miracle, not his mispronunciation. If one truly loves a prayer, one will want to learn more about it. One can communicate with Allah/Ram simply with a breath, but that doesn't lessen the effect of using the mysticism of sound to connect more deeply with those in the caravan ahead of us.

I am in favor of what I call "good enough" pronunciation of Arabic *wasaf*. I've seen mureeds become so tangled up in trying to get every last nuance of pronunciation correct that they never actually do the practice. What is "good enough" is actually not very difficult, even for a layperson, and I indicate most of this in *The Sufi Book of Life*. I feel the same way about Aramaic and Hebrew, so this is not a matter of separate rules for Arabic. Given that many of the same sacred phrases were shared in the Semitic languages for thousands of years, one will join a larger caravan, so to speak, by a basic awareness of a) the proper direction of breath and b) the two or three-letter Semitic root of the phrase.

Both of these, I believe, connect us more firmly to the spiritual/mystical side of the caravan, the one in which the mystical rabbis, monks and Sufis are traveling arm-in-arm. We clearly cannot please everyone when we chant any sacred phrase. Some Jews will object to a non-synagogue pronunciation of Hebrew (even if the synagogue Hebrew clearly has foreign influences and is different from that of Moses or Solomon). Some Muslims will object to non-classical Arabic pronunciation (especially if they were raised as a native speaker of one of the Arabics). Some Christians will object to anything that "sounds foreign," including Aramaic. If speaking a sacred language perfectly--whether Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic Sanskrit, Pali or any other--made a person a mystic or even a peacemaker, we would have had heaven on earth long ago. But unfortunately, this is not the case.

I choose for myself to be in the above company of mystics rather than in the company of those, of any tradition, who have tried to impose culture and language in the name of religion.

=== From the archives of the International Sufi Sufi Movement

Summerschool 1925 Zikr Hazrat Inayat Khan

"The words of the Zikar are 'La ella ha el Allah hu."

"The most essential part is 'EL,' the central word, which has an action, an influence upon the solar plexus, when rightly done. If wrongly done, for years can practice without any result. If rightly done, one must profit in six weeks. Its motion strikes upon the nervous center, which then is put into action. If not this center is still, is not active. The intuitive faculties and high aspirations are closed. If it is stricken, joy arises, joy that is not dependent on outer things. It is opened by the striking of 'El' upon it. Among hundred person one says it correctly. It must come from the heart. One can put ones hand there and feel the action. Every day for five minutes one must say that one word. When the center is awakened, inspiration comes and healing becomes easy. Tuning a person's life becomes easy. The whole being is to become in tune. When one says 'La ella ha' it prepares the breath to 'EL.'"