

ECSTATIC CONNECTION: SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE BACCHANALIAN RITES AND SUFISM

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This paper focuses on the parallels between Islamic Sufism and the Bacchanalian rites of ancient Greece. Very little has been said about the two subjects together, despite their similarities in ritual practices and forms of worship. Both practices developed in a time when certain individuals or societal groups felt disconnected from a major aspect of antiquity: religion. Despite both societies involving heavy influence from their distinct religious beliefs, influences which had a profound effect on daily life and societal practices, not everyone was able to worship in the same way. From the disparity between social classes which privileged the rich when religious rituals were performed, to the lack of opportunity for women to participate in religious ritual, Sufism and the Bacchanalian rites provided opportunities for disenfranchised members of society. The analysis is by no means exhaustive but touches on the major similarities between these two historic religious phenomena.

The rituals of Islamic Sufism and the Bacchanalian rites of the ancient Greek mystery cult of Dionysus have distinct parallels between them. Key commonalities include a reliance on ritualistic expression of emotion through physical action and performance. As well, both share common themes of death and rebirth in certain customs, along with practitioners facing discrimination from more mainstream cultural gatekeepers. These two practices, separated by time, distance, and culture, illustrate a shared human desire for spiritual and emotional connection above all else, even in the face of opposition and suppression.

In order to understand the contents of this essay, it is first necessary to have a basic grasp of the subjects. Sufism is the mystical branch of the Islamic religion and has been around since the early days of Islam. In the early years of its formation, Sufism

meant living an austere and pious life to the extreme. Due to the diversity of its rituals and practices, and the longevity of its history, Sufism is notoriously difficult to define.¹ Sufis were said to have “devoted extraordinary amounts of time to Qur’anic recitations and prayer,”² which led to a reputation of extreme piety in the form of asceticism. Yet at the heart of this seemingly austere practice were rituals of ecstatic dance and dramatic pageantry. From fire breathing to juggling, Sufi Masters and practitioners have used a wide variety of methods to express their devotion. The unconventional practices of Sufis were frequently viewed as heretical and blasphemous, and in direct opposition to religious order. At the time, one of the fundamental precepts of Islam included expressing one’s faith through prescribed actions and laws. Many Muslims would rely on the *Hadith*, anecdotes regarding the life of Muhammad, which offered guidance in understanding certain practices or laws. In contrast, Sufism emphasized inward piety and the uniqueness of each individual’s connection with the divine. This personal relationship with Allah was valued far more than following conventional expressions of devotion through imposed tenets of the faith. Conventional Islamic law held little to no value to a Sufi because it was seen as following an empty set of precepts, as opposed to devoting oneself to the guidance and love of God.³ Mystics followed Allah without finding it necessary to consult the Qur’an, although they still made reference to it, preferring to express their faith through a personal quest for inward piety. As a result, Islamic law, which relied heavily on its own Qur’anic interpretation, was far less important to a Sufi’s way of life. While Islamic law provided intellectual stimulation for the elite and formally educated, Sufism allowed the common Muslim to connect on an emotional level. Unlike the majority of Islamic practice, which was far more reliant on intellectual pursuits, Sufism’s unique pageantry and emotionalism establish a firm connection to the ecstatic rites of Dionysus.

When it came to a personal connection with the divine in ancient Greece, there was very little opportunity for the common citizen. Daily and communal rituals were a way to appease angry gods or goddesses, or an attempt to win their favour, but they did not provide a close spiritual connection. The closest one could come to communing directly with deities, was through an audience with one of the Oracles or participation in the mystery cults. The cults largely formed as a reaction to widespread fears of an unpleasant afterlife. In ancient Greece, the concept of life after death was largely understood as eternity spent in the Underworld, either wandering the dark lands of the dead, being tormented in Tartarus, or basking in the pleasures of Elysium. Because Elysium admitted very few, and only the extremely exceptional, many Greek citizens were faced with the unappealing

¹Lloyd V. J. Ridgeon, *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), xvi.

²Ibid, 3.

³Vernon Egger, *History of the Muslim World to 1405: the Making of a Civilization* (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2004), 123-124.

prospect of eternity in stagnation or suffering. Naturally, many searched for an alternative possibility, and the mystery cults were born. Focusing around gods, goddesses, and heroes who were related to a cycle of death and rebirth, the cults were extremely popular. Dionysus was one such god with a wide following, and the Bacchanalian rites were the ritual practices of his cult followers. The cycle of death and rebirth is largely represented through the seasons, and the resulting decline and regrowth of plant-life. Due to the cyclical nature of vegetation, in connection with rebirth and the appearance of immortality, and the easy accessibility citizens had to nature, it was plant-based gods and goddesses who inspired the most popular cults. A staple of the ancient Mediterranean world was wine, and its obvious connection to the grape vine and the god himself made Dionysus integral in the lives of Greeks and Romans. Centralized in the town of Eleusis, not far from Athens, the Bacchanalian rites spread rapidly throughout the ancient world.⁴ It was this major cult which made the town one of the foremost focal points of Greek religion.⁵ Unfortunately, the mystery cults were well named, and very little information about them was ever written down or even shared with outsiders. Scholars have long debated whether available sources portray these cults in a factual way, or if plays like Euripides' *Bacchae* are merely theatrical versions, distorted to appeal to ancient audiences.⁶

Throughout human history, groups and individuals alike have fought to express themselves. It is a fundamental aspect of human nature that if we lack outlets we will create them. In antiquity, the Greeks and the followers of Islam were no different. When their religion and societal structures began to feel too constricting, and the common citizen felt they had little power and even less connection with their deity, Sufism and the Bacchanalian rites gave those individuals freedom of expression and the ability to reconnect with divine power. In each society, religion had become a staple of daily life, entailing repetitive actions which appeased deities but did not provide the emotional connection many craved. Though separated by space and time, both alternative religious practices drew followers through the promise of intense religious ecstasy and a direct, individual experience which conventional rituals had not provided. Both Maenads and Sufis would chant and dance, and lose themselves in the passion of worship, in order to connect with the divine beings they revered. Through their rituals, practitioners would enter into a state of extreme emotion known as religious ecstasy, which is, in essence, a euphoric connection with the divine. Individuals in the midst of religious ecstasy experienced an altered state of being, in which visions and extreme emotional states

⁴Edith Hamilton, *Mythology Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1942), 53.

⁵A. G. P. Lang and H. D. Amos, *These Were the Greeks* (Chester Springs, Pa: Dufour Editions, 2006), 77.

⁶Vassiliki Panoussi, *Brides, Mourners, Bacchae: Womens Rituals in Roman Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 117.

were common. What is especially fascinating is the shared aspect of death and rebirth. The Mevlevi order of Sufism was founded by the son of Rumi, a renowned Sufi Master and mystical poet. Within their ritual, called the Sama, are specific symbolic representations of shedding ego and gaining the simplicity of truth and perfection via the love of and for Allah.⁷ It is this shedding of the ego which is akin to death, and rebirth connects to the acceptance of God's love suffusing every aspect of their lives. The eventual goal of being one with Allah, leaving individuality behind and becoming a part of the whole of God's love, thereby connecting with the eternal, is its own form of immortality. The Bacchantae and followers of Dionysus similarly desired immortality through their connection with the god, although the understanding of the end result is quite separate. Maenads and male followers of Dionysus paid homage to the cyclical aspect of his power, which allowed plants to die and be reborn each year. It was the awe-inspiring power of the plant's rebirth, the return of such an integral aspect of human survival, which first led the Greeks to worship Dionysus as a figure linked to immortality, and it was their hope that he would provide them the same benefits.

Both the mystery cult of Dionysus and Sufism provided a rare opportunity for their followers to go against societal norms. For women, especially, the Bacchanalian rites were a chance to shed the constricting Apollonian values of Greece, which favoured the logical and rational, and embrace the Dionysian aspects of human nature. Through wild, careless displays of passion and revelry, the Maenads had a chance to experience life outside the narrow confines of their daily lives. Sufism, too, had a strong female influence from its early days. Though textual evidence is rare, women clearly had the opportunity to participate in, and shape, Sufi practices and ideology. Rabi'a was one such historical figure, an early Sufi mystic who made integral contributions to Sufism. Of course, neither practice was limited to women, and men too were afforded the opportunity to enjoy profound connections, both spiritual and social.

Unfortunately, as a result of their unconventional behaviour, practitioners faced suppression. Sufis were discriminated against for their disregard for Islamic law, and the followers of Dionysus were feared due to their adherence to Dionysian values and behaviour. Interestingly, the growing numbers of influential and wealthy individuals within the religious groups meant very different things for the two practices. While Sufism was ultimately accepted by everyday society after high status Muslims converted and began practicing, Dionysus' cult was seen as too

⁷Shems Friedlander and Nezih Uzel, *The Whirling Dervishes: Being an Account of the Sufi Order Known as the Mevlevi and Its Founder the Poet and Mystic Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), xix.

much of a threat to Greek society, and was suppressed completely.⁸ Both social movements gave voice to discontent among individuals who felt powerless and disconnected, and their resulting visibility made governments and religious leaders afraid.

While there were distinct differences between the two, namely the ascetic lifestyle of the Sufis in opposition with the more hedonistic tendencies of the Bacchantae, the mystery cult of Dionysus and Sufism were fundamentally similar in their search for spiritual connection and freedom from strict societal structures. Although Islamic law and Greek society both created stricture on the individual, the unique practices of both Sufism and the Bacchanalian rites provided the opportunity to step outside the confines of daily life and create a more individualistic, emotional connection with Allah or Dionysus respectively. Not only did they provide integral group dynamics in cultures where community and family meant everything, but both practices also supplied a liberating opportunity for self-expression.

⁸Tesse Stek, *Cult Places and Cultural Change in Republican Italy a Contextual Approach to Religious Aspects of Rural Society after the Roman Conquest* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 19-21.

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