

Sufi (Women) in Ritual: An Embodied Experience of Selfhood

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Abstract:

In *Sufi Women, Embodiment, and the 'Self': Gender in Islamic Ritual*, Jamila Rodrigues discusses the Sufi ritual *hadra* as an embodied experience of selfhood and religious symbolism. Taking the female members of the Naqshbandi community in Cape Town and Lefke as an ethnographic case study, the author considers – with mixed success – the gendered dimensions of the ritual. Ultimately, Rodrigues argues that *hadra* allows Sufi women not only to embody a pious identity, but also to learn about themselves through body movement expressions.

Die Sufi (Frauen) im Ritual: Eine verkörperte Erfahrung des Selbst

German Abstract:

In *Sufi Women, Embodiment, and the 'Self': Gender in Islamic Ritual* von Jamila Rodrigues wird die Sufi-Ritual-Hadra als verkörperte Erfahrung von Selbstsein und religiöser Symbolik anhand einer ethnografischen Fallstudie unter den weiblichen Mitgliedern der Naqshbandi-Gemeinschaft in Kapstadt und Lefke diskutiert. Die Autorin betrachtet mit gemischtem Erfolg die geschlechtsspezifischen Dimensionen des Rituals und argumentiert, dass Hadra den Sufi-Frauen nicht nur ermöglicht, eine fromme Identität zu verkörpern, sondern auch durch den Ausdruck von Körperbewegungen etwas über sich selbst zu erfahren.

How to cite:

Bacanak Sahin, Burcu: "Sufi (Women) in Ritual: An Embodied Experience of Selfhood [Review of: Rodrigues, Jamila: *Sufi Women, Embodiment, and the 'Self': Gender in Islamic Ritual*. London and New York: Routledge, 2023.]." In: KULT_online 69 (2024).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2024.1432>



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Rodrigues, Jamila: *Sufi Women, Embodiment, and the 'Self': Gender in Islamic Ritual*. London and New York: Routledge, 2023. 170 pages, 120 GBP. ISBN: 978-0-36-737400-6.

In *Sufi Women, Embodiment, and the 'Self': Gender in Islamic Ritual*, Jamila Rodrigues takes her readers on an exploration – not merely through arguments but through lived experiences – of the *hadra* ritual: a religious practice that seeks an intimate encounter with God through a combination of body movement, recitation, and music. The book is an ethnographic case study conducted among the female members of the Naqshbandi community in Lefke and Cape Town in 2013 and 2014. Rodrigues, who is Portuguese on her father's side and was raised in a Christian community, explains her academic interest in Sufi rituals in terms of her curiosity about her Islamic roots on her Moroccan mother's side. Combining her background as a professional dancer with academic research, the author is interested in the movement of bodies not only in relation to aesthetics but also religion, explaining her choice of embodied ethnography as a methodology.

Together with an introduction, the book consists of seven chapters, arranged thematically according to the chronology of the *hadra* ritual itself. In the first chapter, "The Salikun Journey Begins," which elaborates on the introduction and outlines the following chapters, the author provides a brief history of Sufism and the Naqshbandi Tariqa in Cyprus and South Africa. The second chapter, "From Theory to Practice," discusses Rodrigues' choice of a 'neutral' research position, encompassing both insider and outsider roles, and the details of the data collection process. In the third chapter, "The Inner Islam," the author gives the reader the main components and definitions of spiritual practices in Sufism, as well as introducing the relevant academic discussions on the concepts of mysticism and corporeality. In the fourth chapter, "Dancing with God," Rodrigues emphasizes the performative aspect of the body, through which one can meet God via religious ritual, which in the Sufi context is described as a "sacred dance" (p. 68). In the fifth chapter, "'De-code' Hadra," the author paints a lively picture of when, where, with whom and how *hadra* rituals are practiced. In the sixth chapter, "Symbolic Embodied

Practice,” the reader finds further personal accounts from Sufi women about their bodies in relation to the *hadra* and what this ritual means to them in a symbolic sense. In the seventh chapter, “Let the Bird Fly,” Rodrigues discusses both the Sufi women’s accounts and her own embodied experience, explaining that the *hadra* has somatic elements beyond its religious symbolism. The author concludes the book with the chapter entitled “The Salikun Journey Ends,” which offers a summary of the conclusions drawn from the previous chapters.

In the introduction, Rodrigues states that her main political motivation for this research is to challenge – mainly Western – assumptions that Muslim women have no subjective agency beyond their religious and cultural identities. Drawing on observations from her own participation in the *hadra*, as well as data collected through in-depth interviews, she argues that this ritual allows Sufi women to develop a self-reflexive understanding of their experience by engaging in a somatic process of body-mind relationship. As a precaution, however, she points out that this work does not propose a feminist account of Sufi rituals, but is concerned with the “concepts of gendered embodied selfhood and body movement expression” in these rituals (p. xi).

Nevertheless, the conversations do not feature experience of the ritual as gendered, as Rodrigues had expected, due to the internal social dynamics of the Sufi community, which Rodrigues sees as a limitation to her research. For instance, Rodrigues mentions that she collected data through archived film of the *hadra* ritual. In all these videos, the focus is on the male members, while the Sufi women are barely visible in the background, if at all. This lack of archival material on Sufi women’s participation in the ritual made it necessary for Rodrigues to conduct her research in an embodied way among the Sufi women. Yet, she neither takes a critical approach to this ‘limitation’, nor links it to her own self-reflexive research methodology.

In the fifth chapter, she gives further details of how the ritual’s design is gender specific. The ritual spaces are segregated by gender, taking place on different floors or rooms in the same apartment, or as separate circles within a single space. Sufi women do not have an active role in the ritual, such as playing instruments. Rather, women have to listen to the instructions and the recited texts from a certain distance or through a speaker and are required to skip certain parts of the ritual, like the salutation ceremony because they are not allowed to have direct contact with the main leader (*sheikh*). Moreover, Sufi men experience the climax stage with

more intense body movements such as jumping, speeding up or locking arms, while the women stand still holding hands.

In her interviews with the women, Rodrigues does not specifically refer to this spatial and procedural gender segregation. Only one of the women hints at what it means to practice *hadra* specifically as a woman. A Sufi woman called Filipa says that “it represents oneness [...it] kind of feels like there’s no separation between us and the men, on a spiritual level,” which prompts Rodrigues to ask herself: “Is *hadra* the only place for gender empowerment in Sufi praxis” (p. 103)? Rodrigues considers the possible answers to this question to be beyond the scope of her research, which appears as a missed opportunity, as I would consider this to be one of the most important research questions revealing the extent to which *hadra* is a bodily expression of the Sufi women’s subjectivity.

In the interviews, the women describe the climax of *hadra* as an “outside of the body” experience, and the body as a mere vessel, container or shell from which the true self, the spirit, is released as a result of the ritual (p. 128). However, some of the women’s accounts suggest that the *hadra* is also used in a way that goes beyond a strictly religious purpose, and is seen as a platform for releasing not only one’s spirit but also one’s physical tensions. Based on the value placed on the body in these accounts, Rodrigues concludes that the *hadra* ritual provides a space for both a cultural and religious expression of Sufi symbolism and an embodied experience of selfhood through a somatic process. However, all of the accounts – with the exception of Filipa’s – raise the question of what is different about experiencing *hadra* as a woman compared to their male counterparts. Therefore, the absence of male accounts makes it difficult to explore a specifically gendered aspect of this embodied experience.

In the conclusion, Rodrigues mentions two other limitations that prevented her from carrying out a comparative analysis. The first is the unexpected death of the Sheikh during her fieldwork, which meant that the Sufi women avoided talking about their relationship with this important male spiritual figure while they were still in mourning. Second, she was unable to interview the Sheikh or other male members due to the gender segregation. In my opinion, it would have been very productive for Rodrigues’ argument to critically discuss these obstacles and thereby include them in her research findings, since the limitations she encountered are, after all, an integral part of this embodied experience. Nevertheless, it takes considerable courage and

commitment to implement such an emerging methodology. Notwithstanding the mentioned criticisms, this book brings a new dimension to the religious studies of Sufi rituals and is inspiring, in particular for the fields of anthropology, performance studies, and somatic studies.