

The New York Times Book Review

MAY 7, SECTION 7-PART I

Books by Idries Shah

THE SUFIS:
Essence of Mystical Philosophy.
451 pp. Doubleday.
(Anchor, paper). \$2.45.

THE DERMIS PROBE.
191 pp. Dutton. Paper, \$1.75

THINKERS OF THE EAST.
208 pp. Penguin. \$1.

WISDOM OF THE IDIOTS.
179 pp. Dutton. Paper, \$1.75.

REFLECTIONS.
160 pp. Penguin. Paper, \$1.25.

CARAVAN OF DREAMS.
208 pp. Penguin. \$1.

THE WAY OF THE SUFI.
288pp. Dutton. Cloth, \$6.95.
Paper, \$1.95.

**THE PLEASANTRIES OF THE
INCREDIBLE MULLA NASRUDIN.**
218 pp. Dutton. Paper, \$1.75.

TALES OF THE DERVISHES:
Teaching-stories of the Sufi Masters
Over the Past Thousand Years.
222pp. Dutton. Cloth, \$6.95.
Paper, \$1.75.

What Looks Like an Egg and Is an Egg?

There were the mice who, having learned not only to eat the poison put down for them, but to like it, ignoring the cheese in the traps, were caught because people learned to coat the cheese in the traps with poison.— Reported in The London Daily Mail, Feb. 2, 1967.

“Do you imagine that fables exist only to amuse or to instruct and are based upon fiction? The best ones are delineations of what happens in real life in the community, and in the individual’s mental processes.”— From “Reflections,” by Idries Shah.

Islamic mysticism, generally called Sufism, has a very large literature, covering several epochs in the past 1,400 years, and contained in the various cultures — Persian, Arab, Turkish and Indo-Islamic, not to mention Indonesian — in which Islam has been manifested. This literature may seem more accessible to us than other aspects of Sufism: but this is because of assumptions bred into us by our culture about “mysticism.” Sufism has always been

something of a mystery to Eastern scholars and Western orientalists alike. Why has it so many manifestations? How can so many people of apparently irreconcilable views belong to it? How can it be “Islamic” at all if so many apparent heretics, apostates even, have belonged to it? How can it be “mysticism” when it expresses itself so variously, in science, philosophy, literature, social organization?

Each student or school of thought has attempted to answer these problems by finding a “thread.” Each attempt has been unsatisfactory because it has involved leaving out certain material to make what is left in fit: when you are looking at Sufism you must look at who is telling you about it. Many modern commentators have tried to show that Sufism is “borrowed” from neo-Platonism, or Christianity, or Hinduism: this happens because they want to answer the question they have themselves framed: What is this derived from?

It is in fact the variety and lack of coherence — looked at from restricted points of view — which give the clue to the nature of Sufism. The answer is that each individual manifestation of Sufism is planned. It takes the shape and follows the pattern laid down by whoever is planning it. It is not an ideology, in which one starts with objectives, and then has to convince people of the need for them, and for rigid methods. Instead, it offers “social” contexts for local activity, creating hordes of apparent anomalies that most students will not face: for instance, the Naqshbandi Sufis are said to abhor music in ritual — the Chistis employ hardly anything else. How then can it have happened that important Sufi teachers have been initiated into both orders and several others as well? People have been amazed that Rumi had disciples from all local religions and did not convert them to the ideology in which he was supposedly rooted: Islam. But this could easily be seen to be because he did not need to do so in order to offer the action of Sufism. People find it impossible to explain how Hallaj (executed for apostasy for saying “I am God!”) could be revered as one of the great Sufis by devout Moslems down the centuries.

Both in science and in logical human thought in the “soft”

sciences the principle is universally accepted that the most likely explanation based on the facts is the hypothesis that should be taken as the probable truth about the matter being studied. This principle holds good in the study of Sufism. If Haji Bektash, a descendant of Mohammed and a Shiah (believer in the divine right to rule subsisting in the House of Ali), and Abdul-Qadir of Gilan, a descendant of Mohammed and a Sunni (believer in rulership subsisting in majority opinion of the whole body of believers), could both found Sufi systems and both be regarded as eminent Sufis — although Shiah and Sunnis have regularly shed one another’s blood — the basic connection is not in ideology at all, but in method.

The Sufis themselves seldom conceal that they are concerned with presentation and effectiveness, not indoctrination. Hence their writings are littered with phrases like “The color of the wine is the same as the color of the bottle,” or, “Right time, right place, right people are necessary.”

The importance of realizing these characteristics of Sufism is that otherwise local expressions of Sufism suited to one time or place might be taken as unalterable dogma; failure to observe the temporary nature of Sufi formulation forces scholars to

choose arbitrary categories and hence label certain Sufis as genuine and others as less so. Even more important, the mere imitation of Sufi organization and activity promotes the growth of false cults.

Widely recognized both in scholarly and in Sufi circles, the current Sufi exemplar is Idries Shah, who has homes in England as well as in the East. People able to look with even a minimum of impartiality at the history of Sufis and the multifarious ways they present themselves will recognize at least two things: one, that his reception has repeated the gamut of reactions evoked by past exemplars — everything from immediate recognition to hostility from a minority of scholastics; and two, that the “teaching” is in a phase of being offered quite openly: for sometimes it is not. Such periods have their dangers; one is the formation of a cult. As Shah himself, and other people writing and broadcasting about his activity have stressed, someone wanting to approach Sufism, even as an uncommitted observer of the contemporary scene, let alone as a would-be student, must remember that Idries Shah refuses to be projected as a “guru.”

Even in a casual glance through recent acknowledgements of his work, we find citations by an

Egyptologist, psychiatrists, historians, doctors, philosophers, mathematicians, quite apart from people in the fields of orientalism, Islamics, Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Sufism, history — Shah’s more formal specialities. If Shah had not kept the cult system at bay, it is likely that the people in so many disciplines far removed from “mysticism,” and the universities who use his books in courses, would have been put off. It is precisely in the breadth of the response to Shah’s work, the diversity of the reactions to it, that one can see his continuity with the living past: it has been a charge against the classic Sufis that they have been mere “popularizers,” until, of course, they died, when they were sainted by those who had criticized them. But it has taken 10 years, not much more, for the Sufi impact to become evident in the most respectable academic circles, in contemporary literature, in new patterns of thinking everywhere.

But what are the “teachings” of Sufism, if they are not what we have been led to expect?

“Wisdom is not in books — only some of the ways to search for it,” is a dictum.

But, while Sufis can teach and have taught without words, using gestures, atmospheres, decorations on carpets and ceramics, for us the

“vehicle” is words, since that is how our brains are programmed; it is hard for us, indeed impossible, to think in any other way.

Books must not be made into “idols” — but we can approach Sufism remembering that the teachings are partly contained in the lessons, the story-structures, the reports of human interchanges, which are part of this body of literature. Some people may care to treat this material, since they don’t need Shah as a guru, rather like the Sufi and the coconut in this tale: “A Sufi was passing by a tree from which a monkey threw a coconut at him. He stooped down, picked it up, broke it open, drank the juice, ate the meat, made a cup from the shell — and went on his way.”

Perhaps the best introduction to the body of Shah’s work is his first book — his first about Sufism: he has written on many subjects, from travel to magic, anthropology, music, geology. “The Sufis” remains the most comprehensively informative. And one is immediately forced to use one’s mind in a new way, because it is not written within our formulas for exegesis. It unfolds like a branch, and to accumulate factual information, let alone the deeper ranges of the material, means to expand one’s attention, to abandon the if-and-therefore, a, b, c,

d, way of thinking that is the way we have all been trained. There is no index; this demonstrates a good many different things about our memory, and certain dependencies of the mind.

“The Way of the Sufi” also sets out to cover ground; it contains everything from the use of contemplating materials to classical Persian literature chosen to compare its surface meaning with its deeper levels. I wish I could have the experience of reading this book again for the first time: it was like a door opening where one least expects it. But perhaps the most shocking to our assumptions about “mysticism” is “The Pleasantries of the Incredible Mulla Nasrudin,” the corpus of Nasrudin “jokes,” deliberately created to inculcate Sufic thinking, to outwit The Old Villain, which is a name for the patterns of conditioned thinking which form the prison in which we all live.

A wag met Nasrudin. In his pocket he had an egg. “Tell me, Nasrudin, are you any good at guessing games?” “Not bad.” “Very well then, tell me what I have in my pocket.” “Give me a clue then.” “It is shaped like an egg, it is yellow and white inside, and it looks like an egg.” “Oh I know,” said Nasrudin, “it is some kind of cake.”

“The Tales of the Dervishes” is a

collection spanning 1300 years. The teaching story is a speciality of Sufic communication. "The teaching story was brought to perfection as a communication instrument many thousands of years ago. The fact that it has not developed greatly since then has caused people possessed by some theories of our current civilizations to regard it as the product of a less enlightened time. They feel that it must surely be little more than a literary curiosity, something fit for children, the projection, perhaps, of infantile desires, a means of enacting wish fulfillment So little is known to the academics, the scholars and the intellectuals of this world about these materials, that there is no word in modern languages which has been set aside to describe them. But the teaching story exists, nevertheless. It is a part of the most priceless heritage of mankind. Real teaching-stories are not to be confused with parables, which are adequate enough in their intention, but still on a lower level of material, generally confined to the inculcation of moralistic principles, not the assistance of interior movement of the human mind. What we often take on the lower level of parable, however, can sometimes be seen by real specialists as teaching-stories; especially when experienced under the correct conditions." (From an

essay in "The Caravan of Dreams".) This collection also gives information on Islam, its relation to Christianity, Sufism's relation to both.

"The Dermis Probe" develops the theme of patterns of material-arrangements: it is necessary in this study to remember that the position of a story, its relation with others — which may be in other volumes — can be important. To fit together a proverb, the story it is attached to, and the notes, is a mind-stretcher in itself. It is in this collection, which as much as any other uses the relationship of pieces of material, that is found the important story about the new-married couple and the man's father-in-law, "an unbearably pious and literal-minded cleric" who gave them as a wedding present a leather-bound box with "The Holy Recital" on the cover. The newly-weds did not open the box. Months later the young man was broke and asked his father-in-law for help. The old man came to the young couple's house with the judge and some scholars — a panel, as it were, of officialized reproach, for if the young man had opened the box he would have found it full of money.

The youth explained that he had not opened the box because he knew the Koran by heart. Collapse of the old man, admiration from the scholars because of the "piety" of

the son-in-law. But the judge said to the old man, thus changing his life and turning him into "a Sufi whose life illuminates and still suffuses the thoughts and deeds of the People of the Way": "You and your fellow intellectuals read the Koran. The young man knows it by heart. But your daughter, his wife, she thinks and lives in accordance with it, although she can neither read, nor write, nor dispute, nor recite." To which is attached: "Nobody comes to the home of a dervish asking for land-tax and house levies."

"Thinkers of the East" has much straightforward practical information; in its claims and statements about the role of contemporary Sufism it is more open than any of Shah's books. There is also explanation of some mystifying religious language: "worship," "the fear of God," and so on, can be seen as technical terms, with a precise meaning, that have slipped out of context. It contains The Legend of Nasrudin, a description of the function of the Nasrudin tales, and an allegory of mental processes. "Mulla Nasrudin broke out of the net which had been cast by the old villain. For how can one burn a book which is not a book? How can one name a fool who is no fool? How can one punish a man who is a multitude? How can

one strike a man who is oneself?"

"Wisdom of the Idiots" is a collection which rightly illustrates the phrase "the rough and tumble of a Sufi school," a phrase that puzzles many students until they actually find themselves involved in it. But you have to tune your mind to a special use of language.

"Reflections" is composed of short pieces, mostly contemporary: witty, tart, and instructional — they tend to come into your mind at appropriate moments.

"Stand aside!" said the lightning to the oak-tree, "or take what is coming to you."

"History is not usually what has happened. History is what some people have thought to be significant."

Consider the Western caterpillar: If you could say to it: "You were an egg, and you will become a butterfly" he would reply: "Foul beast!" Or else, "You are imagining things, or seek to unhinge me!" or, again: "I want to be one now, this instant." Or he might say: "Who are you to tell me such things?" Or, yet again: "Yes, show me, while I crawl up this tree."